THE STORY BOOK GIRLS

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The STORY BOOK GIRLS

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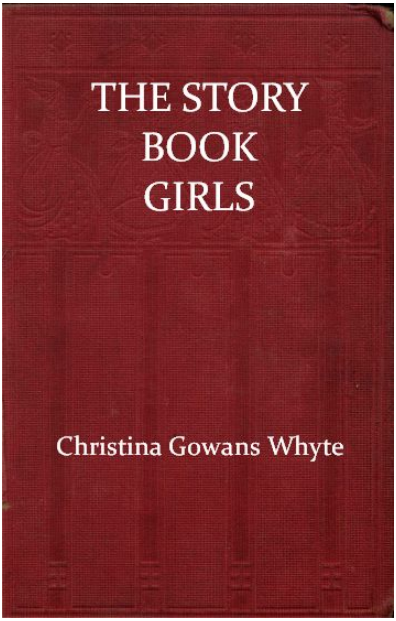

Cover

GOWANS
WHYTE

LONDON
HENRY FROWDE
HODDER & STOUGHTON
1906

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CHAPTER I
Elma Leighton

In a pink and white bedroom where two beds, Elma's and Betty's, seemed the only pink and white things unspotted by multitudinous photographs, Elma Leighton sought sanctuary. Pursued by a tumultuous accusing conscience, which at the same time gracefully extended the uncertain friendliness of hope, for who could say–it might still be "embarr*ass*ment," she opened her little own bright red dictionary.

She prayed a trifling prayer that her self-esteem might be saved, as she turned shakingly the fine India paper of the 50,000 word compressed edition of the most reliable friend she at that moment possessed in the world. Parents commanded. Relations exaggerated. Chums could be spiteful. But friends told the truth; and the dictionary–being invariably just–was above all things a friend.

She wandered to "en," forgetting in the championship of her learning that "m" held priority. She corrected herself with dignity, and at last found the word she wanted.

It was emb*arr*assment.

Woe and desolation! A crimson shameful blush ran up the pink cheeks, her constant anxiety being that they were always so pink, and made a royal progress there. The hot mortification of despair lent it wings. She watched the tide of red creep to the soft curls of her hair as she viewed herself in her own little miniature cheval between creamy curtains, and she saw her complexion die down at last to an unusual but becoming paleness.

She had said "embarr*ass*ment."

Nothing could have been more fatal. It was like a disease with Elma, that instead of using the everyday words regarding which no one could make a mistake–such as "shyness" in this instance–she should invariably plunge into others which she merely knew by sight and find them unknown to herself as talking acquaintances. Cousin Dr. Harry Vincent, Staff Surgeon in His Majesty's Navy, eyeglass in eye, merry smile at his lips ("such a dashing cousin the Leightons have visiting them" was the comment), the sort of person in short that impressed Elma with the need of being very dashing herself, here was the particular of all particulars before whom she had made this ridiculous mistake.

"Now," had said Dr. Harry in the drawing-room when visitors arrived, "come and play something."

Any other girl overcome by Elma's habitual fright when asked to play, would have said, "I'm too shy." Elma groaned as she thought how easy that would have been.

But Dr. Harry's single eyeglass fascinated her as with a demand for showing some kind of culture.

She blinked her eyelids nervously and answered, "My embarr*ass*ment prevents me."

Dr. Harry never moved a muscle of his usually mobile and merry countenance. But the flaming sword of fear cut further conversation dead for Elma. She became subtly conscious that the word was wrong, and fled to her room.

"While I'm here," she said dismally, "I may as well look up 'melodramic.'" This was a carking care left over from a conversation in the morning.

It proved another tragedy.

Being really of a cheerful sunny nature, which never for long allowed clouds to overshadow the bright horizon of her imagination, she acquainted herself thoroughly with the right term.

"One consolation is, I shall never make that mistake again as long as I live. Melodramatic," she repeated with the swagger of familiarity.

Then "emb, emb–Oh! dear, I've forgotten again."

Concluding that embarrassment was a treacherous acquaintance, she decided to drop it altogether.

"After this I shall only be shy," she said with a certain amount of refined pleasure in her own humour.

She regarded her figure dismally in the cheval. Her chubby face had regained its undistinguished pink. She was sorry she could not remain pale, it was so much more distinguished to be pale.

"How long I take to grow up–in every way." She sighed in a reflective manner.

What she was thinking was how long she took to become like one of the Story Book Girls.

It is probable that she would never have run to long words, had it not been her dearest desire to grow up like one of the Story Book Girls. It was the desire of every sister in the Leighton family. Each worked on it differently however. Mabel, the eldest, now seventeen, in the present delights of hair going up and skirts letting down, took her ideas of fashion straight from "Adelaide Maud" the elegant one. "Adelaide Maud" wore her hair in coils and sat under heliotrope parasols. Mabel surreptitiously tried that effect as often as five times a day with the family absent.

Jean threw all her ambitions on the sporting carriage of "Madeline" who was a golfer.

Betty determined to wear bangles and play the violin because "Theodora," the youngest of the lot, did that. And Elma based her admiration of "Hermione" on the fact that she had "gone in" for science. Long ago they had christened their divinities. It did not do to recognize latterly that the Dudgeons were known in society by other names altogether. One can do these dreamy, inconsequent things with the most superb pleasure while one's family remains between certain romantic ages; in the case of the Leightons at the moment when Elma ran to her bedroom–between the ages of ten and seventeen. Betty was ten, Elma twelve, Jean fifteen and Mabel seventeen.

It was an axiom with the girls that their parents need not know how they emulated the Story Book Girls. Yet the information leaked out occasionally.

It was also considered bad form to breathe a word to the one elder brother of the establishment. Yet even there one got into trouble.

"Why on earth do you call her Adelaide Maud when her name is Helen?" asked Cuthbert one day bluntly. "Met her at a dance–and she nearly slew me. I called her Miss Adelaide!"

"O–o–o–oh!"

It is impossible to explain the thrill that the four underwent. Cuthbert had met Adelaide Maud!

"Did she talk about us?" asked Elma breathlessly.

"Doesn't know you kids exist," said Cuthbert.

Here was a tumbling pack of cards.

However the idylls of the Story Book Girls soon were built up again.

Four girls at the west end of a town dreamed dreams about four girls at a still further west. They lived where the sun dropped down behind blue mountains in the sunny brilliant summer time. The Story Book Girls were grown up, of "county" reputation, and "sat in their own carriages." The others invariably walked. This was enough to explain the fact that they never met in the quiet so-

ciety of the place. But one world was built out of the two, and in it, the younger girls who did not ride in carriages, created an existence for the Story Book Girls which would have astonished them considerably had they known. As it was, they sometimes noticed a string of large-eyed girls with a good-looking brother, going to church on Sunday, but it never dawned on one of them that the tallest carried a heliotrope parasol in a manner familiar to them, nor that another exhibited a rather extraordinary and highly developed golfing stride. Grown-up girls do not observe those in the transition stages, and just at the fiercest apex of their admiration, the Leightons were certainly at the transient stage. They reviewed their own growing charms with the keenest anxiety. Everybody was hopeful of Mabel who seemed daily to be shedding angularities and developing a presence which might one day be compared with Adelaide Maud's. The time of her seventeenth birthday had drawn near with the family palpitating behind her. Mrs. Leighton remembered that delicious period of her own youth, and was indulgently friendly, "just a perfect dear."

"We are going to make a very pretty little woman of Mabel," she informed her husband. He was a tall man, with a fine intellectual forehead, and handsome, clear-cut features. He stooped slightly, giving an impression of gentleness and great amiability. He answered in some alarm.

"You don't mean that our little baby girl is growing up."

"Elma declares that Mabel reaches her 'frivolity' in May," said Mrs. Leighton sedately. A quiet smile played gently over a face, lined softly, yet cleared of care as one sees the mother face where happy homes exist.

Mr. Leighton groaned sadly and rubbed his finger contemplatively along the smoothed hair which made a gallant attempt at hiding more than a hint of baldness.

"Why can't we keep them babies!"

"Betty thinks we do," said his wife.

"One boy at College, and one girl coming out! It's overwhelming. We were only married yesterday, you know," said poor Mr. Leighton.

It troubled Mrs. Leighton that Mabel insisted on wearing heliotrope. She had white of course for her coming out dress, and among other costumes the choice of colours for a fine day gown. The blue eyes of the Leightons were gifts handed down by a beneficent providence through a long line of ancestors, and one wise mother after another had matched the heavenly radiancy of these wide orbs as nearly as possible in sashes and silks for the children. Therefore Mrs. Leighton begged Mabel to have at least that one day gown in blue.

"I begin to be sorry I said you might have what you liked," she said dismally. "Heliotrope will make you look like your grandmother."

"Oh no it won't," clamoured Jean. "It will only make her look like Adelaide

Maud."

"Traitor," was the expression on three faces.

Sporting Jean had really rather a dislike to the garden-party smartness of Adelaide Maud, and occasionally prejudice did away with honour.

"I'm joking," she said penitently. "Do let her wear heliotrope, mummy."

Mrs. Leighton sighed amiably yet disappointedly, but at last gave Mabel permission to wear heliotrope. They had patterns from Liberty's and Peter Robinson's and Woolland's in London, and a solid week of rapture ensued while Mabel saw herself gowned in a hundred gowns and fixed on none.

They sat over the patterns one day with Mrs. Leighton in attendance. Mabel's choice lay between fifteen different qualities of heliotrope.

"I shall have this," she said one minute, and "No, this" the next.

"Patterns not returned within ten days will be charged for," quoted Jean.

Just then a certain rushing sound of light wheels could be heard. Each girl glanced quickly out of the window. The clipity-clop of a pair of horses might be clearly distinguished; and through the green trees skirting the bottom of the garden, appeared patches of colour.

Two Story Book Girls drove past, Adelaide Maud and Theodora. Theodora was sitting in any kind of costume–what did *her* costume matter?

Adelaide Maud was in blue.

The girls gazed breathlessly at one another.

"I think you must really now make up your mind," said Mrs. Leighton patiently, whose ears were not attuned so perfectly to distinction in carriage wheels.

Mabel glanced round for support.

"Oh, mummy," said she very sweetly, "I do believe you were right. I shall have blue after all."

That was a few weeks before the great day when Mabel attained her "frivolity" and put up her hair. Cousin Harry's being with them gave an air of festivity to the occurrence, and curiously enough, Mrs. Leighton's drawing-room filled with visitors on that afternoon as though to celebrate the great occasion.

Throughout her life Elma never forgot to link the delight of that day, when for the first time they all seemed to grow up, with the despair of her sallies in Cousin Harry's direction.

When she did trail back to the drawing-room, crushed yet educated, she found Mabel with carefully coiled hair standing in a congratulatory crowd of people, looking more like Adelaide Maud than one could have considered possible.

"Such excitement," whispered Jean, "Mrs. Maclean has brought her nephew and he knows the Story Books."

It put immediate thoughts of having to explain to Cousin Harry out of

Elma's mind.

"Oh, do you know," she said excitedly to him, "I want one thing most awfully. I want to know Mr. Maclean so well in about five minutes as to ask him a fearfully particular question."

Dr. Harry, who, as he always explained to people, was continually nine hundred and ninety-nine days at sea without meeting a lady, could be counted on doing anything for one once he had the chance of being ashore. Even a half-grown lady of Elma's type.

"Mr. Maclean shall stand on his head inside of three minutes," he promised her.

Elma noticed a new twinkle in his eye. It enabled her to take her courage in both hands and confess to him.

"I'm always trying to use long words, Cousin Harry. It's like having measles every three minutes. It was awfully nice of you not to laugh. I went to look it up, you know."

Nothing pleased Elma so much as the naturalness with which she made this confession. She felt more worldly and developed than she could have considered possible.

Cousin Harry roared.

"Try it on the Maclean man," he said.

But Mr. Leighton had that guest in tow, and they talked art and politics until tea appeared. Elma did all she could in connection with the passing of cups to get near him, but Cuthbert and Harry and Mr. Maclean were too diligent themselves. She saw Mr. Maclean's eyes fixed on Mabel when she at last gained her opportunity. Mabel had gone in a very careful manner, hair being her chief concern, to play a Ballade of Chopin, and this provided an excellent moment for Elma to sidle into a chair close to Mr. Maclean. It was pure politeness, she observed, which allowed anyone to stare as much as one liked while a girl played the piano. Mr. Maclean was quite polite.

Mabel had the supreme talent which already had made a name for the Leighton girls. She could take herself out of trivial thoughts and enter a magic world where one dreamed dreams. Into this new world she could lift most people with the first touch of her fingers on the keys of the piano.

Elma's thoughts soared with the others, and Mabel played till a little rebellious lock of the newly arranged plaits fell timorously on her neck. She closed with a low beautiful chord.

Mr. Maclean sighed gently.

Elma leant towards him.

"You know the–er–Dudgeons, don't you? Do you know the eldest?"

He nodded.

"Is Mabel like her?" she asked anxiously.

"Mabel," said Mr. Maclean.

"Yes, Mabel. Is she–almost–as pretty, do you think?"

"Mabel is a thousand times more pretty than Miss Dudgeon," said Mr. Maclean.

"Oh, Mr. Maclean!" said Elma.

He could not have understood her sigh of rapture if he had tried to. At that moment his thoughts were not on Elma.

She was quite content.

She sank back on the large easy chair which she had appropriated, and she felt as though she had brought up a large family and just at that moment seen them settled in life.

"Oh, I do feel heavenly," she whispered to herself. "Mabel is prettier than Adelaide Maud."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Mr. Maclean.

"Oh, nothing–nothing," said Elma. "I don't even care about emb–emb–Do you mind if I ask you?" she inquired. "Is it embarr*ass*ment or emb*arr*assment?"

"Emb*arr*assment," said Mr. Maclean.

"Thank you," said Elma. "I don't care whether I'm embarrassed now or not, thank you."

CHAPTER II
Miss Annie

Of course one had to go immediately and tell all this to Miss Annie.

Miss Annie lived with her sister in a charming verandahed house, hidden in wisteria and clematis, and everything was delightful in connection with the two sisters except the illness which made a prisoner of Miss Annie. Miss Annie lay on a bed covered with beautiful drawn thread work over pink satinette and wore rings that provoked a hopeless passion in Elma.

Whenever she considered that one day she might marry a duke, Elma pictured herself wearing Miss Annie's rings.

From the drawn thread work bed Miss Annie ruled her household, and

casually, her sister Grace. It never appeared that Miss Annie ruled Miss Grace however; nothing being more affectionate than the demeanour of the two sisters. But long ago, the terrifying nature of Miss Annie's first illness made such a coward of poor, sympathetic Miss Grace, that never had she lifted a finger, or formed a frown to reprove that dear patient, or prevent her having her own way. The nature of Miss Annie's illness had always been a source of great mystery to the Leighton girls. It was discussed in a hidden kind of way in little unintelligible nods from grown up to grown up, and usually resolved itself into the important phrase of "something internal." Old Dr. Merryweather, years ago, had landed himself into trouble concerning it. "A poor woman would get on her feet and fight that tendency of yours," he had said to Miss Annie. "Money simply encourages it. You will die on that bed if you don't fight a little, Miss Annie." Miss Annie had replied that in any case her bed was where she intended to die, and forthwith procured quite sweetly and pathetically, yet quite determinedly, another doctor. That was over twenty years ago; but Miss Grace still passed Dr. Merryweather in the street with her head down in consequence. She did all she could to provide the proper distraction for Miss Annie, by encouraging visitors and sacrificing her own friends to the leadership of her sister. Miss Annie had always shone in a social sense, and she let none of her talents droop merely because she was bedridden. It was considered a wonderful thing that she should manage the whole household, to the laying down or taking up of a carpet in rooms which she never saw. Gradually, on account of this wonderful energy of Miss Annie's, Miss Grace acquired a reputation for ineptitude to which her sister constantly but very gracefully alluded. "Poor Grace," she sighed. "Grace takes no interest in having things nice."

It was Miss Grace however who, in her shy old-fashioned manner, showed interest in the blue-eyed, fair-haired Leighton children, and introduced them to her sister when they were practically babies. She decoyed them into the house by biscuits covered with pink icing, which none of them ever forgot, or allowed themselves to do without. Even Mabel, with her hair up, accepted a pink biscuit at her first tea there after that great occasion. They always felt very small delicious children when they went to Miss Annie's. They had acquired, through Miss Annie, a pleasant easy manner of taking the nervous fussy attentions of Miss Grace. It was astonishing how soon they could show that in this establishment of magnificence, Miss Grace did not count. She was immaterial to the general grandeur of the verandahed palace belonging to Miss Annie. They were always on their best behaviour in the house where not only a footman, but an odd man were kept, and Elma, at the age of seven, had been known to complain to Mrs. Leighton when a housemaid was at fault, "We ought to have a man to do this!" Indeed there seemed only one conclusion to it with Elma: that after know-

ing exactly what it was to call on people who had men servants, in her youth, when she grew up she should be obliged to marry a duke. The duke always met her when she waited for Miss Grace in the drawing-room. He had a long curling moustache, and wore his hair in waves on either side of a parting, very clamped down and oily, like Mr. Lucas, the barber. It was years before she sacrificed the curling moustache to a clean-shaven duke, and shuddered at the suggestion of oil in his hair.

The despair of her life stood in the corner of the white and gold drawing-room. It was an enormous Alexander harmonium. Once, in an easy moment, on conversing affably with her duke in a whisper, she had suggested to him that Miss Grace might let her play on this instrument. Miss Grace, coming in then, was in time to see her lips moving, and considered that the sweet child worked at her lessons. Elma was too sincere to deceive her. "I was talking to myself and wondering if you would let me play on the harmonium."

She should never forget the frightened hurt look on Miss Grace's face.

"Never ask me that again, dear child. It was hers–when she was able to–to—-" Miss Grace could go no further.

The blue eyes filling with frightened tears in front of her alarmed the gentlest soul in the world.

"But, my pet," she said very simply, "there's my own piano."

Could one believe it? Off came all the photograph frames, and the large Benares vases on China silk, brought years ago from the other side of the world by Miss Grace's father, and Elma played at last on a drawing-room grand piano. Mrs. Leighton's remained under lock and key for any one below a certain age, and only the schoolroom upright belonged to Elma. What joy to play on Miss Grace's long, shiny, dark, ruddy rosewood! She must have the lid full up, and music on the desk. Miss Grace made a perfect audience. Elma regretted sincerely the fact that her legs stuck so far through her clothes, so that she could not trail her skirts to the piano and arrange them as she screwed herself up on the music stool. However, what did a small thing like that matter while Miss Grace sat with that surprised happy look on her face, and let her play "anything she liked"? Anything Elma liked, Miss Grace liked. In fact, Miss Grace discovered in her gentle, amiable way, a wonderful talent in the child. It formed a bond between the two which years never broke. Miss Grace would sit with her knitting pins idle in her lap, and a far-away expression in the thin grey colour of her eyes. Elma thought it such a pity Miss Grace wore caps when she looked so nice as that. She would think these things and forget about them and think of them again, all the time her fingers caressed the creamy coloured keys, and made music for Miss Grace to listen to. Then exactly at four o'clock, Miss Grace seemed to creep back to her cap again, and say that tea would be going in and they must "seek Miss

Annie."

Miss Annie poured tea from the magnificent teapot, which the footman carried in on a magnificent silver tray. She reclined gracefully in bed, reaching out a slender arm covered with filmy lace to do the honours of the tea table. Crumpets and scones might be passed about by Miss Grace. In a very large silver cake basket, amongst very few pieces of seed cake (Miss Annie took no other) Elma would find a pink biscuit. After that the ceremony of tea was over. It was wonderful to see how Miss Annie poured and talked and managed things generally. Elma could play to Miss Grace, but politeness somehow demanded that she should talk to Miss Annie.

Elma had always, more than any of the Leighton children, amused Miss Annie. The little poses, which Miss Grace, with wonderfully sympathetic understanding, had translated into actual composition in music, the poses which caused Elma to be the butt of a robustly humorous family, crushing her to self-consciousness and numbness in their presence, Miss Annie had the supreme wisdom never to remark upon. Had not Miss Grace and she enjoyed secretly for years Elma's first delightful blunder?

"My father and mother are paying a visit to the necropolis. They are having a lovely time. Oh! is that wrong? I'm sure it is. It's London I mean."

They had known then not to laugh, and they never did laugh. The little figure, with two fierce pigtails tied radiantly with pink bows, the blue eyes, and very soft curling locks over the temples, how could they laugh at these? Instead they took infinite pains over Elma's long words. Miss Annie herself invariably either felt "revived" or "resuscitated" or polished things of that description. It pleased her that such an intensely modern child should be sensitive to refinement in language. For a time Elma became famous as a conversationalist, and was known in her very trying family circle as Jane Austen or "Sense and Sensibility." The consequences of her position sent her so many times tearful to bed, that at last she put a severe curb on herself, and never used words that had not already been sampled and found worthy by her family. The afternoons at Miss Annie's, however, where she could remove this curb, became very valuable. The result was that while things might be "scrumptious" or "awfully nice" or "beastly" at home, they suddenly became "excellent" or "delightful" or "reprehensible," in that cultured atmosphere. Only one in the world knew the two sides to Elma, and that was her dear and wonderful father. She was never ashamed of either pose when completely alone with that understanding person. Her mother could not control the twitching at the lips which denotes that a grown-up person is taking one in and making game of one. Elma's father laughed with the loud laugh of enjoyment. It was the laughter Elma understood, and whether or not a mistake of hers had caused it, she ran on to wilder indiscretions merely that she might

hear it again. Oh! there was nobody quite so understanding as her father.

He invariably sent his compliments to Miss Annie, and one day, to explain why she went there continually, she told him how she played on Miss Grace's piano. He was greatly pleased, delighted in fact, and immediately wanted her to do the same for him. Elma's sensitive soul saw the whole house giggling at herself, and took fright as she always did at the mere mention of the exhibition of her talents.

"I can't, when Miss Grace isn't there," she had exclaimed, and neither she nor anybody else could explain why this should be, except Mr. Leighton himself, who looked long and with a new earnestness at his daughter, and never omitted afterwards in sending his compliments to the two ladies to mention Miss Grace first.

Mabel was entirely different in the respect of playing before people. She played as happily and easily to a roomful as she did alone. She blossomed out with the warmth of applause and admiration as a rose does at the rising of the sun.

"Mabel is prettier than Miss Dudgeon," said Elma to Miss Annie on the day when she described the great "coming out" occasion.

Miss Annie arrested the handsome teapot before pouring further.

"What! anybody more pretty than Miss Dudgeon?" she asked. "That is surely impossible."

"Mr. Maclean said so," said Elma.

"And who is Mr. Maclean?" asked Miss Annie.

"Oh–Mr. Maclean–Mr. Maclean is just Mrs. Maclean's nephew. But he knows Miss Dudgeon, and he looked a long time at Mabel and said she was prettier."

"You must not think so much of looks, Elma," said Miss Annie reprovingly. "Mabel is highly gifted, that is of much more consequence."

"Is it?" asked Elma. "Papa says so, though he won't believe any of *us* can be gifted. He thinks there's a great deal for us to learn. It's very de–demoralizing."

"Demoralizing?" asked Miss Annie.

"Yes, isn't it demora-lizing I mean, Miss Annie?" Elma begged in a puzzled manner.

Miss Annie daintily separated half a slice of seed cake from the formal pieces lying in the beautiful filigree cake basket.

"I do not think it is 'demoralizing' that you mean, dear. 'Demoralizing' would infer that your father, by telling you there was a great deal to learn, kept you from learning anything at all, upset you completely as it were."

Miss Annie was as exact as she could be on these occasions, when she took the place of the little bright red dictionary.

This time her information seemed to please Elma immensely. Her eyes immediately shone brilliantly.

"Oh, Miss Annie," she said, "it must be 'demoralizing' after all. That's just how I feel. Papa tells me, and I see the great big things to be done, and it doesn't seem to be any use to try the little things. Like Mozart's Rondos! They *are* so silly, you know. And when you see people like Mr. Sturgis painting big e–e–elaborate pictures, I simply can't draw at school at all."

Miss Grace leant forward on her chair, pulling little short breaths as though not to lose, by breathing properly, one word of this. She considered it marvellous that this young thing should invariably be expressing the thoughts which had troubled her all her life, and never even been properly recognized by herself, far less given voice to. It enabled her on many occasions to see clearly at last, and to be able, by the light of her own lost opportunities, to give counsel to Elma.

Miss Annie's eyes only looked calmly amused. It was an amusement to which Elma never took exception, but to-day she wanted something more, to prevent the foolishness which she was afraid of experiencing whenever she made a speech of this nature. Miss Annie only toyed with a silver spoon, however, looking sweet and very kindly at Elma, and it was Miss Grace who finally spoke.

She had recovered the shy equanimity with which she always filled in pauses for her sister.

"You must not allow the fine work of others to paralyze your young activities," Miss Grace said gravely. "Mr. Sturgis was young himself once, and no doubt at school studied freehand drawing very diligently to be so great as he is now."

"Oh, no," said Elma, "that's one of the funny parts. Mr. Sturgis doesn't approve of freehand drawing at all. He says it's anything but freehand, he says it's–it's–oh! I mustn't say it."

"Say it," said Miss Annie cheerfully.

"He says it's rotten," said Elma.

There was something of a pause after this.

"And it's so funny with Mabel," said Elma. "Mabel never practises a scale unless mamma goes right into the room and hears her do it. But Mabel can read off and play Chopin. And papa takes me to hear Liszt Concertos, and I can't play one of them."

"You can't stretch the chords yet, dearie," said Miss Grace.

"No, but it's very demor–what was it I said?" she asked Miss Annie anxiously.

"Demoralizing," said Miss Annie.

"And there's paralyzing too," said Elma gratefully. "That's exactly how I feel."

She sat nursing one of her knees in a hopeless manner, until it struck her that neither Miss Annie nor Miss Grace liked to see her in this attitude. Nothing was ever said on these occasions, but invariably one knew that in order not to get on the nerves of Miss Annie, one must sit straight and not fidget. Elma sat up therefore and resumed conversation.

"Mabel says it is nothing to play a Liszt Concerto," said Elma hopelessly.

"Is Mabel playing Liszt?" asked Miss Grace in astonishment.

"Mabel plays anything," sighed Elma.

"That is much better than being prettier than Miss Dudgeon," said Miss Annie.

She took up a little book which lay near her. It was bound in white vellum and had little gold lines tooled with red running into fine gold clasps. Two angel heads on ivory were inserted in a sunk gold rim on the cover. Miss Grace saw a likeness in the blue eyes there to the round orbs fastened on it whenever Elma had to listen to the wisdom of the white book. The title, *The Soul's Delineator*, fascinated her by its vagueness. She had never cared to let Miss Annie know that in growing from the days when she could not even spell, the word "delineator" had remained unsatisfactory as a term to be applied to the soul. There was The Delineator of fashions at home–a simple affair to understand, but that it should be applied to the "ivory thoughts" of Miss Annie seemed confusing. Miss Annie moved her white fingers, sparkling with the future duchess's rings, in and out among the gilt-edged pages. Then she read.

"The resources of the soul are quickened and enlivened, not so much by the education of the senses, as by the encouragement of the sensibilities, i.e. these elements which go to the making of the character gentle, chivalrous, kind; in short, the elements which provoke manners and good breeding."

Miss Annie paused. Her voice had sustained a rather high and different tone, as it always did when she read from the white book.

"Mabel has very nice manners, hasn't she?" asked Elma anxiously.

"Do you know that you have said nothing at all about the Story Book Girls to-day, and everything about Mabel," said Miss Annie. "I quite miss my Story Books."

Elma's eyes glowed.

Miss Annie had marked the line where the dream life was becoming the real life. Elma, in two days, had transferred her *mise en scene* of the drama of life from four far-away people to her own newly grown-up sister. It was a devotion which lasted long after the days of dreaming and imagining had passed for the imaginative Elma, this devotion and admiration for her eldest sister.

In case she should not entertain Miss Annie properly, she ran back a little, and told her how it was that Mabel had got a blue gown after all. It was delightful

to feel the appreciation of Miss Annie, and to watch the wrinkles of laughter at her eyes.

Exactly at five o'clock however Miss Grace began to look anxiously at Miss Annie, and Miss Annie's manner became correspondingly languid.

"You tire your dear self, you ought not to pour out tea," said Miss Grace in the concerned tone with which she always said this sentence at five o'clock in the afternoon.

Saunders came noiselessly in to remove, and Elma bade a mute good-bye.

"You tire yourself, dear," said Miss Grace to Miss Annie once more, as she and Elma retired to the door.

"I must fulfil my obligations, dear," said Miss Annie.

She nodded languidly to Elma, and Elma thought once again how splendid it was of Miss Annie to be brave like this, and wondered a trifle in her enthusiastic soul why for once Miss Grace did not pour out tea for her sister.

CHAPTER III
The Flower Show Ticket

"I call it mean of Mabel."

Jean sat in a crinkled heap on her bedroom floor, and pulled bad-temperedly with a wire comb at straight unruly hair. It had always annoyed Mabel that Jean should use a wire comb, when it set her "teeth on edge even to look at it."

Mabel however was out of the way, well out of it, they decided, and Elma and Betty had invaded the room belonging to the elder two in order to condole with Jean.

"Mabel could easily have got another ticket–and said she didn't want it! Didn't want it, when we're dying to go! And then off she goes, looking very prim and grown-up, with Cousin Harry."

Jean threw her head back, and began to gather long heavy ends in order for braiding.

"Just wait till I grow up! I shall soon take it out of Mabel," she said.

"Oh, girls, girls!"

Mrs. Leighton's voice at the door was very accusing.

"Well, mummy, it was mean. We've always gone together before, and now

Mabel won't go with one of us."

"Not if you behave in this manner," said Mrs. Leighton. "I do not like any of my girls to be spiteful, you know."

"Spiteful!" exclaimed Jean. She ran rapid fingers in and out the lengthening braid of hair, till long ends were brought in front. She put these energetically in her mouth, while she hunted for the ribbon lying by her.

"Oh, Jean," said Mrs. Leighton, "I've asked you so often not to do that."

"Sorry, mummy," said Jean, disengaging the ends abruptly.

Mrs. Leighton sat down rather heavily on a chair.

"You didn't say you were sorry for being spiteful," she remarked gravely.

"Well, mummy, are we spiteful, that's the question?"

Elma sat on a bed, looking specially tragic.

"It's *awful* to be left out of things now by Mabel," she said.

Betty looked as though she meant to cry.

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Leighton. "You must take your turn. You don't come wherever your father and I go, or Cuthbert. You know you don't."

"I think that Cuthbert might occasionally take us, however," said Jean.

"We all went to the flower show last year," wailed Elma.

"Yes, with the parasols papa brought us from London," said Betty. "And Mabel said it was like carrying four bassinettes in a row, and snapped hers down and wouldn't put it up till she got separated from us."

"She was growing up even then," said Jean in a melancholy manner.

"Come, come, girls," interrupted Mrs. Leighton. "You may be just the same when you grow up. I won't allow you to be down on poor Mabel. Especially when she isn't here to speak for herself."

"When we grow up there will always be one less to tyrannize over," said Jean. "Honestly, mother, I never would have thought that Mabel could be so priggish. Do you know why she wouldn't have us? I'm too big and gawky, and Elma is always saying silly things, and Betty is just a baby. There you are."

"Well, it isn't very nice of Mabel, but you mustn't believe she means that," said Mrs. Leighton. "And after all, Mabel must have her little day. She was very good, let me tell you, very sweet and nice when you were babies and she just a little thing. She nursed you, Elma and Betty, often and often, and put you to sleep when your own nurse couldn't, and she has looked after you all more or less ever since. You might let her grow up without being worried."

"It's hateful to be called a nuisance," said Jean, somewhat mollified.

"Why do you waste time over it, I wonder," said Mrs. Leighton. "Instead of moping Jean might be golfing, and Elma and Betty having tea at Miss Annie's; with nobody at all being nice to your poor old mother."

It dawned on them how selfish they might all be.

"Oh, mummy," cried three reproachful voices.

"Well, Elma likes Miss Grace much better than she does me, and Betty likes her rabbits, and Jean despises me because I don't play golf. I lead a very lonely life," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Oh, mummy!"

"My idea, when I came into your room," said Mrs. Leighton, "was to propose that we might walk into town and get Jean's new hat, and take tea at Crowther's, and drive home if my poor old leg won't hold out for walking both ways. But we've wasted so much time in talking about Mabel—-"

"Oh, mummy–Your bonnet, your veil, and your gloves, and do be quick, mummy," cried Elma. "We're very sorry about Mabel."

They flew in self-reproachful manner to getting her off to her room and making their own things fly.

"After all, we are a beastly set of prigs," called out Jean to Elma. "And I think I ought to have a biscuit-coloured straw, don't you?"

It was one of a series of encounters with which the new tactics of Mabel invaded the family. Mrs. Leighton's gentle rule was sorely tried for quite a long time in this way. Although she reasoned with the younger girls on the side of Mabel, she took Mabel severely to task for her behaviour over the flower show.

"It wasn't nice of you," she told her, "to cut off any little invitation for your sisters. You must not begin by being selfish, you know. There are few enough things happening here not to spread the opportunities. Jean wouldn't have troubled you. She may be at the gawky stage, but she makes plenty of friends."

Mrs. Leighton could be very impartial in her judgments.

But Mabel was hurt. She preserved a superior air, which became extremely annoying to the girls.

The greatest crime that she committed was when Jean, amiably engaging her in conversation in the old way, asked, "And how was Adelaide Maud dressed?"

Mabel turned in a very studied manner and stared past Jean and every one.

"I don't think I observed Adelaide Maud," she said.

This was more than human beings could stand.

"I think it's most ir–ir—-"

"Oh, find the word first and talk afterwards," said Mabel grandly. "You kids get on one's nerves."

"Kids–nerves," cried Jean faintly. "I think Mabel is taking brain fever."

Elma left the room abruptly, much on the verge of tears, and she tried to find solace in her dictionary. The word was "irrelevant"–yet did not seem to fit the occasion at all. What would Miss Annie or Miss Grace do, if a sister had turned old and strange in a few days like that? What would mother have done?

Mother's sisters always complimented each other when they met. They never quarrelled. Of course they never could have quarrelled. "Forgive and forget," Aunt Katharine once had said had always been their motto. Forgiving seemed very easy–but forgetting with Adelaide Maud in the question–what an impossibility! Miss Annie had an axiom that when you felt worried about one matter the correct thing to do was to think about another. Elma thought and thought, but everything worked round to the traitorous remark of Mabel's about Adelaide Maud. It seemed as though her head could hold nothing else but that one idea about Adelaide Maud, until suddenly it dawned on her that it was really rather fine and grand of Mabel that she should talk in this negligent manner of any one so magnificent. This reflection gave her the greatest possible comfort. To be condescending, even in a mere frame of mind, to the Story Book Girls seemed like the swineherd becoming a prince. Elma began to think how jolly it would be to hear Mabel saying, "You know, my dear Helen, I don't think you ought to wear heliotrope, it hardly suits you." There was something very delicious in having Mabel starchy and proud after all. Elma heard her coming upstairs to her bedroom to dress for dinner just then. The fall of the footsteps seemed to suggest that some of the starchiness had departed from Mabel. Much of the quality of sympathy which had produced such a person as Miss Grace, was to be found in Elma. Jean and Betty had hardened their two little hearts to the consistency of flint over the behaviour of Mabel, but the mere fact that Elma thought her footsteps seemed to flag and become tired roused her to chivalrous eagerness towards making it up. She went into Mabel's room and sat on the window seat. It was a long, low, pleasant couch let into a wide window looking on the lawn and gardens at the front of the house. The sun poured in on Elma, who forgot the habits of upright behaviour which she exhibited at Miss Annie's, and sprawled there with her fingers on the cord of the blind.

Mabel drew her hatpins out of fair braids in an admiring yet disconsolate manner. She took a hand glass and had first a side view, then a back view of the new effect, patted little stray locks into place, and ruffled out others.

"What's up, Mabs? You don't look en–thusiastic," asked Elma.

"It's papa. After my lovely day too. He wants me to play that Mozart thing with Betty to-night. Mozart and Betty! Isn't it stale? I hate Mozart, and I hate drumming away at silly things with Betty." A very discontented sigh accompanied these remarks.

"I really don't see why I should always be tacked on to Betty or to Jean or you. I haven't a minute to myself."

"Oh, Mabs, you've had a lovely day!"

The words broke out in an accusing manner. Elma had certainly intended to comfort Mabel, yet immediately began by expostulating with her.

Mabel turned round, with her seventeenth birthday present, a fine silver-backed brush, in her hand.

"*Have* I had a lovely day, have I?" she asked. "I've had simply nothing of the kind. Jean went on so about not going that Cousin Harry seemed to think I had injured her. He made me feel like a criminal all afternoon. These navy men like lots of girls round them. One or two more don't make the difference to them that it makes to us. At least it's a different kind of difference. A nice one. I think it was abominable of him. My first chance–and to spoil it, all because of Jean! It wasn't fair of her."

Elma began to feel her reason rocking with the sudden justice of this new argument.

"A minute ago, I thought it wasn't fair of you," she said reflectively. "I can see it will be awfully hard to get us all peacefully grown up. Betty will have the best of it. I shall simply give in to her right along the line. I can see that. I really couldn't stand the worry of it."

"I suppose you wouldn't have gone to the flower show without Jean?" asked Mabel in rather a scornful way.

"Good gracious, no," said Elma simply. "I should have presented her with the one and only ticket, just for the sake of peace."

"That's a rotten, weak way to behave," said Mabel, with a touch of Cuthbert's best manner.

"I know. I don't mean that you should have given her the ticket. You weren't made to be bullied. I was. I feel it in my bones every time any one is horrid to me."

"I'm getting tired of giving up to others," said Mabel, still on her determined tack. "You can't think what it has been during these years. I mustn't do this and that because of the children. It's always been like that. And now when I'm longing to go to dances and balls, I've got to go right off after dinner and play Mozart with Betty. It's all very well for papa, he hasn't had the work I've had. If I play now, I want to play something better than a tum-tum accompaniment."

"Mozart isn't tum-tum," said Elma, "and papa has been listening to us all these years. It must have been very trying."

"Well, all I can say is that, at his time of life, he ought to be saved from hearing Betty scrape on her fiddle every night as she does nowadays. Instead, you would think he hadn't had one musical daughter, he's so keen on the latest."

"Miss Annie says it never does to be selfish," said Elma gravely. "I think that's being selfish, the way you talk."

Mabel stopped at the unclasping of her waist-belt.

"Miss Annie! Well, I like that! Don't you know there isn't so selfish a person in the world as Miss Annie. I've heard people say it."

She nodded with two pins in her mouth, then released them as she went on.

"Miss Annie made up her mind to lie on a nice bed and have Miss Grace wait on her. And she's done it. There's nothing succeeds like success." Mabel nodded her head with the wisdom of centuries.

"Oh, Mabs, how can you?" Elma was dreadfully shocked. A vision of poor martyred Miss Annie, with "something internal," being supposed to like what was invariably referred to in that household as "the bed of pain," to have conferred on herself this dreadful thing from choice and wilfulness, this vision was an appalling one.

"How can you say such things of Miss Annie? Who would ever go to bed for all these years for the pleasure of the thing?"

"I would," said Mabel. "Yes, at the present moment, I would. I should like to have something very pathetic happen to me, so that I should be obliged to lie in bed like Miss Annie, and have somebody nice and sympathetic come in and stroke my hand! Cousin Harry, for instance. He can look so kind and be so comforting when he likes. But, oh! Elma, he was a beast to-day."

The truth was out at last. Mabel sat suddenly on the couch beside Elma, and burst into tears.

"I think I hate being grown up," she said, "if people treat you in that stiff severe way. Nobody ever did it before–ever."

Elma stroked and stroked her hand. "The Leighton lump," as they interpreted the slightly hysterical quality which made each girl cry when the other began, rose in riotous disobedience in her throat, and strangled any further effort at consolation.

"Why don't you say something," wailed Mabel.

"I'm trying not to cry too," at last said Elma.

Then they both laughed.

"I should go right to Cousin Harry and tell him all about it," Elma managed to counsel at last. "I thought you were a beast–but it's awfully hard on you. It's awfully hard on all of us–having sisters."

"Yes, isn't it," groaned Mabel.

"Harry is very understanding. Almost as understanding as papa is."

"Papa! *Do* you think papa understands?"

"Papa understands everything," said Elma. Then a very loyal recollection of the afternoon they had spent in the cheery presence of Mrs. Leighton beset

her. ”Also mamma, I think she’s a duck,” said Elma.

CHAPTER IV
Cuthbert

There was a tremendous scurry after this to allow of the four getting ready in time for dinner. Mabel and Elma regained high spirits after their confidences, and everybody seemed in a better key.

Mrs. Leighton came in to inquire of Mabel why Cuthbert had not returned. Cuthbert, by some years the eldest of the family, had attained great brilliance as a medical student, and now worked at pathology in order to qualify as a specialist. His studies kept him intermittently at home, but to-day he had been down early from town and had gone out bicycling with George Maclean.

”Cuthbert!” exclaimed Mabel. ”Why, I can’t think–why, where’s Cuthbert?”

”Why, yes, where’s Cuthbert?” said Jean.

Their minute differences had engaged their minds so fully, that no one had really begun to wonder about Cuthbert until that moment.

”He is always in such good time,” said Mrs. Leighton in a puzzled way. ”Didn’t he say to any one that he would be late?”

No one knew anything about him. They speculated, and collected at the dinner-table still speculating. Even Cousin Harry knew nothing of him, but that, of course, was because of the flower show. While the meal was in progress, Mr. Maclean appeared quietly in the room. He had prepared a little speech for Mrs. Leighton, but it died on his lips as he saw her face. It was a curious thing, as they afterwards reflected, that Mr. Maclean went on speaking to Mrs. Leighton as though she knew of everything that had happened to Cuthbert.

”He is all right, Mrs. Leighton, but he wouldn’t let me bring him in until I told you that he was all right.”

”Bring him in—-”

It seemed to the Leightons that Mr. Maclean had been standing all his life in their dining-room saying that Cuthbert was all right, but wouldn’t be ”brought in.”

Mr. Leighton put down his table napkin in a methodical manner.

”You’d better come with me and see him, Lucy,” he said to his wife.

Nothing could have more alarmed the girls. On no occasion had Mr. Leighton ever referred to his wife as Lucy.

"Oh, Cuthbert must be dead," cried Betty.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Leighton, with a white face. "Where is Harry?"

Harry had slipped out after a direct glance from Mr. Maclean, and was at that moment assisting two doctors to lift Cuthbert from a carriage.

"Look here, you kids," sang out Cuthbert, "I've only broken a rib or two. You needn't look scared. I shall allow you to nurse me. You won't be dull, I can tell you."

Mrs. Leighton gave a sharp little gasp. Her face looked drawn and only half its size.

"Oh, Cuthbert," she said.

"I won't move," said Cuthbert, "till you stop being anxious about me. Maclean, you are a bit of an idiot–look how you've frightened her!"

Elma found Betty in partial hysterics in the dining-room with Jean hanging over her in a corresponding condition.

"I say, you two," she said in a disgusted manner. "You'll frighten mother more than ever. Get up, and don't be idiots."

"You're as pale as death yourself," cried Jean hotly.

"Oh–am I," said Elma in almost a pleased voice. She longed to go and see the effect for herself, but the condition of Betty prevented her.

"Well, it's our first shock," she said in an important manner. "I never felt *awful* like this before."

"I'm sure Cuthbert will die," cried Betty.

"Oh, don't." Elma turned on her fiercely. "Why do you say such dreadful things."

"If you think he will die, Betty, he will die," sobbed Jean.

"Oh, Jean, Jean, do brace up," said Elma. "I don't want to cry, and every minute I'm getting nearer it. Harry says it's just a knock on the ribs, and the navy men don't even go to bed for that."

"Liar," sobbed Betty, "Cuthbert isn't a softy."

"Well, of course, if you want him to be bad, I can't help it," said Elma. "I'm off to see where Mabel is."

Mabel–well, this was just where the magnificence of Mabel asserted itself. She had done a thing which not one of the people who were arranging about getting Cuthbert upstairs and into bed had thought of. At the first sight of his white face and some blankets with which he had been padded into a carriage, after the accident which had thrown him from his bicycle and broken three ribs, Mabel turned and went upstairs. She put everything out of the way for his being carried across the room, and finally tugged his bed into a convenient place for

his being laid there. She dragged back quilts and procured more pillows, so that when Cuthbert finally reclined there he was eminently comfortable.

"You'll have to haul out my bed, it's in a corner," he had sung out as they carried him in, and there was the bed already prepared for him, and Mabel with an extra pillow in her arms.

"Good old Mabs," said Cuthbert. "I promote you to staff nurse on the spot."

Mabel was more scared than any one, not knowing yet about the ribs or Cousin Harry's tale of the navy men who went about with broken ones, and rather enjoyed the experience. She was so scared that it seemed easy to stand quiet and be perfectly dignified.

"Come, Mabs dear, and help me to look for bandages. The doctor wants one good big one," said the recovered voice of Mrs. Leighton.

Mr. Leighton went about stirring up everybody to doing things. He was very angry with Betty and Jean. "Any one can sit crying in a corner," he declared, "and we may be so glad it's no worse."

"It's our first shock," said Betty, who had rather admired the sentiment of that speech of Elma's.

Mr. Leighton could not help smiling a trifle.

"Well," he exclaimed kindly, "we don't want to get accustomed to them. I should really much rather you would behave properly this time. You might take a lesson from Mabel."

Nobody knew till then what a brick Mabel had been. To have their father commend them like that, the girls would stand on their heads. Lucky Mabel! There was some merit after all in being the eldest. One knew evidently what to do in an emergency. The truth was that Mabel's temperament was so nicely balanced that she could act, as well as think, with promptitude. She had always admired dignity and what Mr. Leighton called "efficiency," whereas Jean and Betty believed most in the deep feelings of people who squealed the loudest.

"Nobody knows the agony this is to me," Jean exclaimed in a tragic voice. "Feel my heart, it's beating so."

"Go and feel Mabel's," said Elma. "I expect it's thumping as hard as yours. And she got Cuthbert's bed ready. She really is the leader of this family. There's something more in it than putting up one's hair."

The doctors came down much more merrily than they went up, and joined in the dining-room in coffee and dessert while Harry stayed with the patient.

Mr. Leighton seemed very deeply moved. The thing had hurt him more than he ventured to say. A remembrance of the white look on his son's face, the appearance of the huddled figure in the cab, and the anxiety of not knowing for a few moments how bad the injury might be, had given him a great shock. His children were so deeply a part of his life, their welfare of so much more

consequence than his own, that it seemed dreadful to him that his splendid manly young son had been suddenly hurt–perhaps beyond remedy. Mrs. Leighton used to remark that she had always been very thankful that none of her children had ever been dangerously ill, her husband suffered so acutely from even a trifling illness undergone by one of them. Now she gazed at him rather anxiously.

Mr. Maclean told them at last how it had happened. Cuthbert had done something rather heroic. Mr. Maclean recounted it, it seemed to Elma, in the tone of a man who thought very little of the reckless way in which Cuthbert had risked his life, until she discovered afterwards that he as well as Cuthbert had made a dash to the rescue.

It was a case of a runaway bicycle, with no brakes working, and a girl on it, terror-stricken, trying to evade death on the Long Hill. Cuthbert had rushed down to her. Cuthbert had gripped the saddle, and was putting some strength into his brakes, and actually reaching nearly a full stop, when the girl swayed and fainted. They were both thrown, but the girl was quite unhurt. Something had hit Cuthbert on the side and broken three ribs.

Mabel stared straight at Mr. Maclean.

"Where were you?" she asked.

Mr. Maclean looked gravely at her. "I was somewhere about," he said with unnecessary vagueness.

"Then you tried to save the girl too," said Elma with immediate conviction. She greatly admired Mr. Maclean, and resented the manner of Mabel's question. "How beautiful of you both," she exclaimed enthusiastically.

Mr. Maclean seemed a little annoyed.

"I nearly ran into them," he growled. "Cuthbert was the man who did the clean neat thing."

Mabel stirred her coffee with a dainty air, and then she looked provokingly at Mr. Maclean. In some way she made Elma believe that she did not credit that he could be valorous like Cuthbert.

"I think it was most grand-iloquent of you," Elma said to Mr. Maclean by way of recompense.

The word saved the situation. Where doctors' assurances had not cleared anxiety from the brow of Mr. Leighton, nor restored the placidity which with Mrs. Leighton was habitual, the genuine laugh which followed Elma's effort accomplished everything.

"I shall go right up and tell Cuthbert," said Jean.

"No, you won't! Cuthbert mustn't laugh," said Mrs. Leighton hurriedly.

"Oh, mummy," said poor Elma.

Nobody laughed later, however, when all four girls were tucked in bed and not one of them could sleep. Betty in particular was in a nervous feverish con-

dition which alarmed Elma. She would have gone to her mother's room to ask advice, except for Mabel's great indication of courage that afternoon, and the certainty that Mabel and Jean were both sensibly fast asleep in the next room. She took Betty into her own bed and petted her like a baby. On windy nights Betty never could sleep, and had always gone to Elma like a chicken to its mother to hide her head and shut out the shrieking and whistling which so unnerved her. But to-night, nothing could shut out the fear which had suddenly assailed her that everybody died sooner or later, and Cuthbert might have died that day. She lay and wept on Elma's shoulder.

At last the door moved gently and Mrs. Leighton came in. The moon shone on her white hair, and made her face seem particularly gentle and lovely.

"I've been scolding Mabel and Jean for talking in bed," she said, "and now I hear you two at it."

"Oh, mummy," replied Elma, "I'm so glad you've come. You don't know how empty and dreadful we feel. We never thought before of Cuthbert's dying. And Betty says you and papa might die–and none of us could p–possibly bear to live."

She began to cry gently at last.

"I can't have four girls in one house all crying," said Mrs. Leighton; "I really can't stand it, you know."

"What–are Mabel and Jean crying?" asked Elma tearfully, yet hopefully. "Well, that's one comfort anyway."

Mrs. Leighton sat down by their bed. Long years afterwards Elma remembered the tones of her mother's voice, and the quiet wonderful peace that entered her own mind at the confident words which Mrs. Leighton spoke to them then.

"I thought you might be feeling like that," she said; "I did once also, long ago, when my father turned very ill, until I learned what I'm going to tell you now. We aren't here just to enjoy ourselves, or that would be an easy business, would it not? We are here to get what Cuthbert calls a few kicks now and again, to suffer a little, above all to remember that our father or our mother isn't the only loving parent we possess. What is the use of being taught to be devoted to goodness and truth, if one doesn't believe that goodness and truth are higher than anything, higher than human trouble? If you lost Cuthbert or me or papa, there is always that strong presence ready to hold you."

"Oh, mummy," sobbed Betty, "there seems nothing like holding your hand."

Mrs. Leighton stroked Betty's very softly.

"Would you like a little piece of news?" she asked.

"We would," said Elma.

"The only person who is asleep in this household–last asleep, is–Cuthbert."

"O–oh!"

Elma could not help laughing.

"And another thing," said Mrs. Leighton. "Didn't you notice? Not one of my girls asked a single question about the girl whom Cuthbert saved."

"How funny!"

Betty's sobs became much dimmer.

"Do you know who she was?" asked Mrs. Leighton.

"No," chimed both.

"Well, I don't know her name," said Mrs. Leighton. She rose and moved towards the door. "But I know one thing." She opened the door softly.

Elma and Betty sat up dry-eyed in bed.

"Remember what I said to you to-night," Mrs. Leighton said, "and don't be very ungrateful for all the happiness you've known, and little cowards when the frightening time comes. Promise me."

They promised.

She prepared to draw the door quietly behind her.

"She is staying with the Story Books," whispered Mrs. Leighton. Then she closed the door.

CHAPTER V
"The Story Books" Call

Mabel was sitting with Cuthbert when the Story Books called.

They really did call.

And nothing could have been more unpropitious.

First, they called very early in the afternoon, just when Betty, with her arms full of matting for her rabbits, rushed out at the front door. She nearly ran into them. The matting slipped from her arms, and she stood spell-bound, gazing at the Story Books. Mrs. Dudgeon was there, looking half a size larger than any ordinary person. An osprey waved luxuriantly in a mauve toque, and her black dress bristled with grandeur. She produced a lorgnette and looked through it severely at Betty. Betty became half the size of an ordinary mortal.

Adelaide Maud was with Mrs. Dudgeon.

Adelaide Maud was in blue.

Adelaide Maud seemed stiff and bored.

"Is your mamma at home?" Mrs. Dudgeon asked.

Betty kicked the matting out of the way in a surreptitious manner.

"Oh, please come in," she said shyly.

It was tragic that of all moments in one's life the Dudgeons should have come when Betty happened to be flying out, and they had not even had time to ring for Bertha, who, as parlour-maid, had really irreproachable showing in manners.

Betty tripped over a mat on her way to the drawing-room. Betty showed them in without a word of warning. Jean was singing at the piano–atrociously. Jean might know that she oughtn't to sing till her voice was developed. Elma was dusting photographs.

Nothing could have been more tragic.

The girls melted from the room, and left Mrs. Dudgeon and Adelaide Maud in the centre of it, stranded, staring.

"What an odd family," said Mrs. Dudgeon stiffly.

Adelaide Maud never answered.

The Leightons rushed frantically to other parts of the house.

The second tragedy occurred.

Mrs. Leighton utterly refused to change her quiet afternoon dress for another in which to receive Mrs. Dudgeon. She went to the drawing-room as she was.

They ran to Cuthbert's room to tell him about it. Cuthbert seemed rather excited when he asked which "Story Book." Elma said, "Oh, you know, *the* one," and he concluded she meant Hermione, who did not interest him at all.

"Why couldn't you stay and talk to them?" he asked. "They wouldn't eat you. Who cares what you have on? The mater is quite right. She is just as nice in a morning costume as old Dudgeon in her war paint. You think too much of clothes, you kids."

"Yet you like to see us nicely dressed," wailed Jean.

"Of course I do. Mabel in that blue thing is a dream."

Mabel looked at him gratefully.

"Oh, if only Mabel had been sitting there embroidering, in her blue gown, and Bertha had shown them ceremoniously in! How lovely it would have been!" said Elma.

"I couldn't have worn my blue," said Mabel with a conscience-stricken look. "You know why."

"Oh, Mabel–the rucking! How unfortunate!"

"It never dawned on us that we should ever know them."

Cuthbert looked from one to another.

"What on earth have you been up to now?" he asked suspiciously.

"Mabel got her dress made the same as Adelaide Maud's," said Betty accus-

ingly. She rather liked airing Mabel's mistakes just then, after having been so sat upon for her own.

"Well, it's a good thing that Adelaide Maud, as you call her, won't ever come near you," Cuthbert remarked in a savage voice.

"But it's Adelaide Maud who's in the drawing-room," said Elma.

Cuthbert drew in his breath sharply.

"Oh, Cuthbert, you aren't well."

"It's the bandage," he said. "Montgomery is a bit of an idiot about bandaging. I told him so. Doesn't give a fellow room to breathe."

He became testy in his manner.

"You oughtn't to have all run away like that, like a lot of children. Old Dudgeon will be sniffing round to see how much money there is in our furniture, and cursing herself for having to call."

"Adelaide Maud was awfully stiff," sighed Elma.

"Our furniture can bear inspection," said Mabel with dignity. "The Dudgeons may have money, but papa has taste."

"Yes, thank goodness," said Cuthbert. "They can't insult us on that point. This beastly side of mine! Why can't we go downstairs, Mabel, and tell them what we think of 'em?"

"I'm longing to, but terrified," said Mabel. "It's because we've admired them so and talked about them so much."

"Adelaide Maud wouldn't know you from the furniture," said Jean. "You may spare yourself the agony of wanting to see her. I think they might be nice when we've been neighbours in a kind of way for so long."

"Well–they're having a good old chat with the mater at least," said Cuthbert.

"I haven't confidence in mummy," said Jean. "I can hear her, can't you? Instead of talking about the flower show or the boat races, or something dashing of that sort, she will be saying—-"

"Oh, I know," said Mabel. "When Elma was a baby–or was it when Betty was a baby–yes, it was, and saying how cute Cuthbert was when he was five years old—-"

"If she does," shouted Cuthbert. "Oh, mother mine, if you do that!" He shook his fist at the open door.

A sound of voices approaching a shut one downstairs came to their ears. Each girl stole nimbly and silently out and took up a position where she could see safely through the banisters. First came the mauve toque with its white osprey quite graciously animated, then a blue and wide one in turquoise, which from that foreshortened view completely hid the shimmering gold of the hair of Adelaide Maud. Mrs. Leighton was weirdly self-possessed, it seemed to the excited onlookers. She had rung for Bertha, who held the door open now in quite the

right attitude. Good old Bertha. Mrs. Dudgeon was condescendingly remarking, "I'm so sorry your little girls ran away!"

"Little girls!" breathed four stricken figures at the banisters.

Adelaide Maud said, "Yes, and I did so want to meet them. I hear they are very musical."

"Musical!" groaned Mabel.

"She just said that to be polite–isn't it awful?" whispered Jean.

"Hush."

"Once more, our best thanks to your son."

Mrs. Leighton answered as though she hadn't minded a bit that Cuthbert had been nearly killed the day before.

"So good of you to call," said she.

"Oh," cried Elma, with her head on the banister rail, after the door shut, "I hate society; don't you, mummy?"

"I think you're very badly behaved, all of you, listening there like a lot of babies," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Come and tell your little girls all about it," cried Jean sarcastically.

Mrs. Leighton smiled as she toiled upstairs.

"It ought to be a lesson to you. Haven't I often told you that listeners hear no good of themselves," she exclaimed.

"Oh, mummy, we are musical," reminded Mabel, softly. "Think of that terrific compliment!"

Their mother seemed to have more on her mind than she would tell them. She puffed gently into Cuthbert's room.

"These stairs are getting too much for me," she said.

"Well, mater?" asked Cuthbert in an interrogating way.

"Well, Cuthbert, they are very grateful to you," she said.

He lay back on his pillows.

"Don't I know that patronizing gratitude," he said. It seemed as though they had all suddenly determined to be down on the Dudgeons. His face appeared hard and very determined. He had the fine forehead which so distinguished his father, with the same clear-cut features, and a chin of which the outline was strong and yet frankly boyish. He had a patient insistent way of looking out of his eyes. It had often the effect of wresting remarks from people who imagined they had nothing to say.

This time, Mrs. Leighton, noting that familiar appeal in his eyes, was drawn to discussing the Dudgeons.

"Mrs. Dudgeon was very nice; she said several very nice things about you and us. She says that Mr. Dudgeon had always a great respect for your father. He knew what he had done in connection with the Antiquarian Society and so

on. Miss Dudgeon was very quiet."

"Stiff little thing," said Jean, with her head in the air.

"She was very nice," said Mrs. Leighton. There was a softness in her voice which arrested the flippancy of the girls. "I don't know when I have met a girl I liked so much."

"Good old Adelaide Maud," cried Jean.

A flush ran up Cuthbert's pale determined face. It took some of the hardness out of it.

"Did she condescend to ask for me?" he asked abruptly. "Or pretend that she knew me at all?"

"She never said a word about you," said his mother; "but—-"

"But–what a lot there may be in a but," said Jean.

"She looked most sympathetic," said Mrs. Leighton lamely. Cuthbert moved impatiently.

"What silly affairs afternoon calls must be," said he.

"Miss Steven–the girl you ran away with–isn't well to-day, and they are rather anxious about her. She is very upset, but wanted to come and tell you how much she thanked you."

"Oh, lor," said Cuthbert, "what a time I shall have when I'm well. I shall go abroad, I think."

Elma gazed at him with superb devotion. He seemed such a man–to be careless of so much appreciation, and from the Story Books too! Cuthbert appeared very discontented.

"Oh, these people!" he exclaimed; "they call and thank one as they would their gardener if he had happened to pull one of 'em out of a pond. It's the same thing, mummy! They never intend to be really friendly, you know."

Elma slipped downstairs and entered the drawing-room once more. A faint perfume (was it "Ideal" or "Sweet Pea Blossom"?) might be discerned. A Liberty cushion had been decidedly rumpled where Mrs. Leighton would be bound to place Mrs. Dudgeon. Where had Adelaide Maud, the goddess of smartness and good breeding, located herself? Elma gave a small scream of rapture. On the bend of the couch, where the upholstering ran into a convenient groove for hiding things, she found a little handkerchief. It was of very delicate cambric, finely embroidered. Elma's first terror, that it might be Mrs. Dudgeon's, was dispelled by the magic letters of "Helen" sewn in heliotrope across a corner. It struck her as doubtful taste in one so complete as Adelaide Maud that she should carry heliotrope embroidery along with a blue gown. She held her prize in front of her.

"Now," said she deliberately, "I shall find out whether it is 'Ideal' or 'Sweet Pea.'"

She sniffed at the handkerchief in an awe-stricken manner. The enervating

news was thus conveyed to her–Adelaide Maud put no scent on her handkerchiefs.

This was disappointing, but a hint in smartness not to be disobeyed. Mrs. Dudgeon must have been the "Ideal" person. Elma rather hoped that Hermione used scent. This would provide a loophole for herself anyhow. But Mabel would be obliged to deny herself that luxury.

Elma sat down on the couch with the handkerchief, and looked at the dear old drawing-room with new eyes. She would not take that depressing view of the people upstairs with regard to the Story Books. She was Adelaide Maud, and was "reviewing the habitation" of "these Leighton children" for the first time.

"Dear me," said Adelaide Maud, "who is that sweet thing in the silver frame?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Leighton, "that's Mabel, my eldest."

Then Adelaide Maud would be sure to say with a refined amount of rapture, "Oh, is that Mabel? I have heard how pretty she is from Mr. Maclean."

Then mother–oh, no; one must leave mother out of this conversation. She would have been so certain to explain that Mabel was not pretty at all.

Elma sat with her elbows out and her hands presumably resting on air. "Never lean your elbows on your hips, girls," Miss Stanton, head of deportment, informed them in school. "Get your shoulder muscles into order for holding yourself gracefully." One could only imagine Adelaide Maud with a faultless deportment.

Elma carried the little handkerchief distractedly to her lips, then was appalled at the desecration.

Oh–and yet how lovely! It was really Adelaide Maud's!

She tenderly folded it.

How distinguished the drawing-room appeared! How delightful to have had a father who made no mistakes in the choice of furniture! Cuthbert had said so. She could almost imagine that the mauve toque must have bowed before the Louis Seize clock and acknowledged the Cardinal Wolseley chair. It did not occur to her to think that Mrs. Dudgeon might size up the whole appearance of that charming room in a request for pillars and Georgian mirrors, and beaded-work cushions. It is not given to every one to see so far as this, however, and Elma–as Miss Dudgeon for the afternoon–complimented her imaginary hosts on everything. As a wind-up Miss Dudgeon asked Mrs. Leighton particularly if her third daughter might come to take tea with Hermione.

"So sweet of you to think of it," said the imaginary Mrs. Leighton, once more in working order.

Out of these dreams emerged Elma. Some one was calling her abruptly.

"Coming," she shrieked wildly, and clutched the handkerchief.

She kept it till she got to Cuthbert. It seemed to her that he, as an invalid, might be allowed a bit of a treat and a secret all to himself.

"Adelaide Maud left her handkerchief," she said. "We shall have to call to return it."

He gazed at the bit of cambric.

"Good gracious, is that what you girls dry your eyes on?"

He took it, and looked at it very coldly and critically.

"Thank you," he said calmly.

"Oh, Cuthbert," she exclaimed with round eyes, "you won't keep it, will you?"

"I shall return it to the owner some day, when she deserves it," said the hero of yesterday, with a number of pauses between each phrase.

"Don't say a word, chucky, will you not?"

"I won't," said Elma honourably, yet deeply puzzled.

Imaginary people were the best companions after all. They did exactly what one expected them to do.

It seemed rather selfish that Cuthbert should hang on to the handkerchief. But of course they would never have even seen it had it not been for the accident.

She surrendered all ownership at the thought, and then gladly poured tea for the domineering Cuthbert.

"You are a decent little soul, Elma," said he.

"And you are very extraasperating," said Elma.

CHAPTER VI
The Mayonnaise

The girls gave a party to celebrate the recovery of Cuthbert. They were allowed to do this on one condition, that they made everything for it themselves.

This was Mr. Leighton's idea, and it found rapturous approval in the ranks of the family, and immediate rebellion in the heart of Mrs. Leighton. It was her one obstinacy that she should retain full hold of the reins of housekeeping. Once let a lot of girls into the kitchen, and where are you?

"Once let a lot of girls grow up with no kind of responsibility in life, and where are you then?" asked Mr. Leighton. "I don't want my girls to drift. No man

is really healthy unless he is striving after something, if it's only after finding a new kind of beetle. I don't see how a girl can be healthy without a definite occupation."

"They make their beds, and they have their music," sighed Mrs. Leighton. "Girls in my day didn't interfere with the housekeeping."

"I've thought about their music," said Mr. Leighton. "I'm glad they have it. But it isn't life, you know. A drawing-room accomplishment isn't life. I want them to be equipped all round. Not just by taking classes either. Classes end by making people willing to be taught, but the experiences of life make them very swift to learn. We can't have them sitting dreaming about husbands for ever. Dreams and ideals are all very well, but one scamps the realities if one goes on at them too long. Elma means to marry a duke, you know. Isn't it much better that in the meantime she should learn to make a salad?"

"The servants will be so cross," said Mrs. Leighton. She invariably saw readily enough where she must give in, but on these occasions she never gave in except with outward great unwillingness.

"Oh, perhaps not," said Mr. Leighton. "They have dull enough lives themselves. I'm sure it will be rather fun for them to see Mabel making cakes."

"Mabel can't make cakes," exclaimed Mrs. Leighton. Her professional talents were really being questioned here. Throughout the length and breadth of the country, nobody made cakes like Mrs. Leighton.

Mr. Leighton grew a little bit testy.

"You know, my dear, if this house were a business concern it would be your duty to take your eldest daughter into partnership at this stage. As it is, you seem to want to keep her out for ever."

Mrs. Leighton sighed heavily.

"That's just it, John," said she; "I want to keep her out for ever. I want them all to remain little children, and myself being mother to them. Since Mabel got her hair up–already it's different. I feel in an underhand sort of way that I'm being run by my own daughter–I really do."

"More like by your own son," said Mr. Leighton. "The way you give in to that boy is a disgrace."

"Oh, Cuthbert's different," said Mrs. Leighton brightly.

"Poor Mabel," smiled Mr. Leighton.

It was an old subject with them, thrashed out again and again, ever since Cuthbert as a rather spoiled child of seven had had his little nose put out of joint by the first arrival of girls in the imperious person of Mabel. Mrs. Leighton had always felt a little grieved with the absurdly rapid manner in which Mr. Leighton's affections had gone over to Mabel.

"In any case, try them with the party," said he. "The only thing that can

happen is for the cook to give notice."

"And I shall have to get another one, of course." Mrs. Leighton's voice dwelt in a suspiciously marked manner on the pronoun.

"Now there's another opportunity for making use of Mabel," said her husband.

Mrs. Leighton let her hands fall.

"Engage my own servants! What next?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said he. "Cuthbert does heaps of things for me. You women are the true conservatives. If we had you in power there would be no chance for the country."

"Well, you might have persuaded Cuthbert to succeed you as Chairman of your Company, with a steady income and all that sort of thing," she exclaimed, "instead of rushing him into a profession which keeps him tied night and day, and gives him no return as yet for all his work."

"I should never stand in the way of enthusiasm," said her husband. "Cuthbert has a real genius for his profession."

"Then why not find a profession for Mabel?"

"I have thought of that. It seems right, however, that a man ought to be equipped for one profession, and a girl for several. I can always leave my girls enough money to keep the wolf from the door at least. I have an objection to any girl being obliged to work entirely for her living. Men ought to relieve them of that at least. But we must give them occupation; work that develops. Come, come, my dear; you must let them have their head a little, even although they ruin the cakes. A good mother makes useless daughters, you know."

"Well, it's a wrench, John."

"There, there," he smiled at her.

"And the servants are sure to give notice."

She regretted much of her pessimism, however, when she gave the news to the girls. Not for a long time had they been so animated. Each took her one department in the supper menu prepared under the guidance of Mrs. Leighton.

First, chicken salad inserted into a tomato, cut into water-lily shape, reposing on lettuce leaves–one on each little plate, mayonnaise dressing on top.

The mayonnaise captured Mabel.

"But you can't make it, it's a most trying thing to do–better let cook make it," interjected Mrs. Leighton.

"What about our party?" asked Mabel.

"Very well," said an abject mother.

So that was settled.

Then fruit salad, immediately claimed by Jean, who knew everything there was to be known of fruit, inside and out, as she explained volubly. Mrs.

Leighton's quiet face twitched a trifle and then resolved itself into business lines once more.

Meringues! they must have meringues! Nobody seemed to rise to that. Elma felt it was her turn.

"They look awfully difficult," said she, "but I could try a day or two before. I'll do the meringues."

This cost her a great effort. Mother didn't appear at all encouraging, She snipped her lips together in rather a grim way, and it had the effect of sending a cold streak of fear up and down the back of the meringue volunteer.

"Are they very difficult, mummy?" she asked apologetically.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Leighton airily. "After mayonnaise, one may do anything."

"I can whip cream–beautifully," explained Elma. "It's that queer crusty thing I'm afraid of."

"I shall be ruined in eggs, I see that very distinctly," said Mrs. Leighton.

After this, there seemed to be no proper opportunity for Betty.

"Couldn't I make a trifle?" she asked modestly. "A trifle at ten." Mrs. Leighton looked her over. "Oh! very well–Betty will make trifle."

Betty looked as though she would drop into tears. Elma put her hand through her arm and whispered while the others debated about cakes, "I can find out all about trifles. Miss Grace knows. She made them cen–centuries ago, and Miss Annie never lets the new cooks try."

Betty turned on her a happy face.

"Oh, Elma, you're most reviving," she said gratefully.

Then they had cakes to consider. Now and again they had been allowed to bake cakes, and they felt that here they were on their own ground. Betty revived in a wonderful manner, and immediately insisted on baking a gingerbread one.

"Nobody eats gingerbread at parties," said Mabel in a disgusted voice. "This isn't a picnic we're arranging, or a school-room tea. It's a grown-up party, and we just aren't going to have gingerbread."

"Yet I've sometimes thought that gingerbread at a party tasted very well," remarked Mrs. Leighton.

"Oh, mummy!" Mabel seemed very sorry for her mother.

But Betty had regained her confidence.

"I shall bake gingerbread," she exclaimed in her most dogged manner.

"There are always the rabbits, of course," said Jean, with her nose in the air.

"Girls, girls," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Gingerbread one, walnut cream cake another. What will you bake, Jean?"

"Orange icing," quoth Jean.

"And sponge cake cream for Elma," she added in a thoughtful way.

"I do like the way you fling all the uninteresting things at me," exclaimed Elma. "I think sponge cake cream is the moistest, flabbiest, silliest cake I know. We're putting cream in everything. Everybody will be sick of cream. Why can't I bake a coffee cake?"

"Why can't she?" asked Mrs. Leighton severely.

"Coffee cake, Elma," said Mabel. She had taken to paper and pencil. "I only hope we shall know what it is when it appears!"

"And you'd better all begin as soon as you can," said Mrs. Leighton; "so that we find out where we are a few days before the party occurs."

She still looked with foreboding on the whole arrangement.

Cook preserved a hauteur on the subject of the invasion, through which the girls found it very hard to break.

"Never seed such a picnic," she informed the housemaid. "My, you should have been here when Miss Betty burned her gingerbread!"

That was a sad occasion, and after all, there was nothing for it but the rabbits. Betty moaned over the lost raisins, the "ginger didn't count." "I stoned every one of them," she sighed. Mr. Leighton found some brown lumps in the rabbit hutches. "That's not the thing for these beasts," he said; "what is it?" And Betty explained that it would be quite safe for them, for (once more) hadn't she stoned every raisin herself?

"I'm glad you're a millionaire, John," said Mrs. Leighton grimly when she heard about it.

Elma made Betty try again. Elma's heart was in her mouth about her own performances, but she hung over Betty till a success was secured to the gingerbread. Then she couldn't get the kitchen for her coffee cake, because Mabs, in a neat white apron and sleeves, was ornamenting a ragged-looking structure of white icing with little dabs of pink, and trying to write "Cuthbert" in neat letters across the top. She had prepared a small cake–"just to taste it." They all tasted. It seemed rather crumply.

"Isn't there a good deal of walnut in it?" asked Mrs. Leighton humbly.

"It's nearly all walnut," said Mabel. "I like walnut."

Jean worried along with her piece.

"Nobody will survive this party," said she.

At last Elma's coffee cake got its innings. She was so nervous after the gingerbread fiasco that only the ultimate good humour of Cook saved her.

"Don't hurry over it, Miss Elma; it's coming nicely. I'll tell you when to stop beating."

Nothing else would have guaranteed the existence of the cake. Cook also saw to the firing. This gave Elma such a delightful feeling of gratitude that she opened out her heart on the subject of meringues. Cook said that of course it was

easy for them "as had never tried" just to rush in and make meringues the first thing. The likes of herself found them "kittlish" things. You may make meringues all your life, and then they'll go wrong for no reason at all. It was "knack" that was wanted principally.

"Do you think I've got knack, Cook?" asked Elma humbly.

Cook gave her a clear night in the kitchen for the meringues, as a reward for her humility. It was marvellous that nearly all of them came fairly decently. Cook found the shapes "a bit queer," but "them as knew" who was providing the party wouldn't think they were "either here or there."

"I'll make it up with the cream," quoth Elma happily. A great load was off her mind.

She now devoted herself to Betty's trifle. As a great triumph they decided to provide a better trifle than even Cook knew how to prepare. Miss Grace entered heartily into the plan. They were allowed to call one morning when she was ensconced in the parlour. Saunders brought in solemnly, first, several sheets of white paper. These were laid very seriously on the bare finely-polished table. Then came a plate of sponge cake in neat slices, a thin custard in a glass jug, several little dishes, one of blanched almonds cut in long strips, another of halved cherries, one of tiny macaroon biscuits, and so on. Miss Grace set herself in a high chair, and proceedings began. Elma wondered to the end of her days what kind of a cook Miss Grace would have made if she had been paid for her work. Everything was prepared for Miss Grace, but she took an hour and a quarter to finish the trifle. She added custard in silver spoonfuls as though each one had a definite effect of its own, and she several times measured the half glassful of cordial which was apportioned to each layer of sponge cake. The ceremony seemed interminable. Elma saw how true it was what her father often said, that one ought always to have a big enough object in life to keep one from paying too much importance to trifles. She immediately afterwards apologized to herself for the pun, which, she explained in that half world of dreaming to which she so often resorted, she hadn't at all intended.

Elma and Betty, however, to the end of their days, never forgot how to make trifle.

Betty's trifle was a magnificent success.

Jean engaged a whole fruiterer's shop, as it seemed, for her salad, and found she made enough for forty people out of a fourth of what she had ordered. This put Mrs. Leighton back into her old prophetic position. Had she not told Jean a quarter of that fruit would be enough?

Mabel arranged everything in good order for her chicken concoction, and at last had only the mayonnaise to make. That occurred on the afternoon of the party. Cuthbert and Harry and Mr. Maclean were all about–supposed to be

helping. May Turberville, Betty's great friend, and her brother Lance, a boy of fourteen, brought round various loans in the way of cups and cream and sugar "things." The table in the dining-room was laid for supper with a most dainty centre-piece decked with roses and candelabra. Most of their labours being over, the company retreated to the smoke-room, where "high jinks" were soon in process. Lance capered about, balancing chairs on his nose, and doing the wild things which only take place in a smoke-room.

In the midst of it appeared Mabel, wide-eyed and distressed, at the door. The white apron of a few days ago was smeared with little elongated drops of oily stuff. She held a fork wildly dripping in her hand.

"Oh–oh, isn't it awful," she cried, "the mayonnaise won't may."

It was the last anxiety, and, in the matter of the pints of the Leighton girls, quite the last straw. Just when they had begun to be confident of their party, the real backbone of the thing had given out.

Dr. Harry removed a cigarette from his lips.

"Hey–what's that?" he asked. "Mayonnaise–ripping! I knew an American Johnnie who made it. Bring it here, and we'll put it right."

Mabel spread her hands mutely. "In this atmosphere?" she asked.

Oh! They had soon the windows open. Harry insisted he could make mayonnaise. "You don't meet American men for nothing, let me tell you," he said. It was fun to see him supplied with plate, fork and bottles. He looked at Mabel's attempt at dressing.

"Good gracious!" he said, "where's the egg?"

Mabel turned rather faint. "I put in the white," said she.

Dr. Harry roared. Then he explained carefully and kindly.

"Mayonnaise is an interesting affair–apart from the joys of eating it. A chemical action takes place between the yoke of an egg and the oil and vinegar. You could hardly expect the white to play up."

"It was Cook," exclaimed Mabel. "She said something about yokes for a custard and whites for–for—-"

"Meringues, you donkey," said Jean.

Dr. Harry made the mayonnaise.

Lance Turberville cut the most shameful capers throughout. He decorated Harry with paper aprons and the cap of a chef, and stuck his eyeglass in the wrong eye while Harry worked patiently with a fork in semicircles. He was sent off with Betty and May, only to reappear later dressed out as a maid-servant. Nobody except Dr. Harry could take the mayonnaise seriously while Lance was about. At that moment the outdoor bell rang. With the inspiration born of mischief, and before any one could stop him, Lance rushed off and opened it.

Three ladies stood on the doorstep.

He showed them solemnly into the drawing-room, tripping over his skirt merely a trifle, and nearly giving Bertha, who had primly come to attend to the door, hysterics. He advanced to the smoke-room, where the mayonnaise was nearly completed.

"Mrs. and Miss Dudgeon and Miss Steven are in the drawing-room," said Lance.

CHAPTER VII
Visitors Again

By itself an occurrence like this would have been unnerving enough. Visitors on the afternoon of a party, and such visitors! But that the Leightons should all be more or less in a pickle in regard to the mayonnaise and Lance's foolery seemed to take things altogether over the barrier of ordinary life, and land everybody in a perfect fizzle. The Dudgeons must have called to see Cuthbert, who had never been down yet on these occasions when Mrs. Leighton and Mabel and Jean with perfect propriety had received them. Mabel had had her innings as the eldest of the house, but had retained an enormous reserve when speaking to Miss Dudgeon. Not so Jean, who believed in getting to know people at once. Elma and Betty had never ventured near them since that dreadful day when they all did the wrong thing at the wrong moment.

"Anyhow, the drawing-room is a perfect dream with flowers. They can look at that for a bit," said Jean, as they began to remove the regiment of bottles. Dr. Harry's mayonnaise was creamy and perfect, and Mabel was in high fettle correspondingly.

"Do you know," she said, "I don't care tuppence for the Dudgeons just now. Let's go in and give them a decent reception for once." It reflected the feeling of all, that nothing could disturb their gaiety on this day.

Elma was reminded again how right her father was in declaring that once one had an absorbing object in front of one, trifles dwindled down to their proper level. Why should any of them be afraid of the Story Books? Certainly not at all, on a day when they were about to have a ripping party, and the mayonnaise at last had "mayed." Cuthbert gave a big jolly laugh at Mabel's speech.

"Come along, all of you," he said. "What about those oily fingers of yours, Harry? What a jewel of a husband you'll be! You, Lance, get off these togs and

behave yourself."

Lance promised abjectly to be an ornament to the household for the rest of the afternoon. Something in his look as he went off reminded Mabel of other promises of Lance.

"Be good," she called out to him.

"Yes, mother," exclaimed Lance, evidently at work already tearing off the skirt, and looking demure and mournful. He seemed very ridiculous still, and they went off merrily to the drawing-room.

"Cuthbert," whispered Elma, "I'm so frightened. Take me in."

"I'm frightened too," whispered Cuthbert.

This made her laugh, so that as she held on to his arm she approached Adelaide Maud in admirable spirits. The party invaded the drawing-room as a flood would invade it–or so it seemed to the Dudgeons, who were talking quietly to Mrs. Leighton. The whole room sprouted Leightons. Mrs. Dudgeon resorted entirely to her lorgnette, especially when she shook hands with Cuthbert. He stood that ordeal bravely, also the ordeal of the speech that followed.

"You see the two very shy members of the family," he said, bowing gravely and disregarding some sarcastic laughter from the background. "May I introduce my young sister Elma."

Here was honour for Elma. She shook hands with crimson cheeks. Then came Adelaide Maud. She gave her hand to Cuthbert without a word, but when Elma's turn came she said with rather sweet gravity, "This is the little lady, isn't it, who plays to Miss Grace?"

Elma was thunderstruck; but Cuthbert, the magnificent, seemed very pleased.

"Oh–Miss Grace didn't tell you?" asked Elma.

"No, I heard you one day, and Miss Annie told me it was you."

Adelaide Maud sat down on a low chair, and drew Elma on to the arm.

"What was it you were playing?" she asked.

"One is called 'Anything you like,' and one is 'A little thing of my own,' and the others are just anything," said Elma.

Adelaide Maud laughed.

The room was filled with chattering voices, and Mrs. Dudgeon had claimed Cuthbert, so that it became a very easy thing for them to be confidential without any one's noticing.

"It's quite stup–stup—-" Elma stopped.

"Stupid?" asked Adelaide Maud.

"No, stup-endous," said Elma thankfully, "for me to be talking all alone with you." Her fright had run away, as it always did whenever any one looked kindly at her. The sweet eyes of Adelaide Maud disarmed her, and she worshipped on

the spot. "I've always been so afraid of you," she said simply. "It ought to be Hermione, but I know it will always be you."

"Who is Hermione?" asked Adelaide Maud.

Elma suddenly woke up.

"Oh, I daren't tell you," said she.

Adelaide Maud looked about her in a constrained way.

"I wish you would play to me, dear," she said.

Was this really to be believed!

"I could in the schoolroom," said Elma, "but not here."

"Take me to the schoolroom," said Adelaide Maud.

Elma placed her hand in that of the other delicately gloved one without a tremor.

"Don't let them see us go," she begged.

Three people did, however: Cuthbert with a bounding heart, Mabel with thankfulness that the house was really in exhibition order, and Jean with blank amazement. Elma had walked off in ten minutes intimately with the flower that Jean had, as it were, been tending carefully for weeks, and had not dared to pluck. There was something of the dark horse about Elma.

They were much taken up with Miss Steven however. She was very fair and petite, and had pretty ways of curving herself and throwing back her head, and of spreading her hands when she talked. She seemed to like to have the eyes of the room fixed on her. Quite different from the Dudgeons, who in about two ticks stared one out of looking at them at all. Mr. Leighton came in also, and what might be called her last thaw was undergone by Mrs. Dudgeon in the pleasure of meeting him. If she had her ideas on beaded cushions, she had certainly no objections to Mr. Leighton. In five minutes he was explaining to her that sea trout are to be discovered in fresh water lakes at certain seasons of the year.

Unfortunately, just then Mrs. Dudgeon happened to look out of the windows. There were three long ones, and each opened out on that sunny day to the lawn at the side of the house. If Mrs. Dudgeon had kept her eye on the Louis Seize clock or the famous Monticelli, all might have gone well, but she preferred to look out of the window. In spite of the general hilarity of the party around her, her action in looking out seemed to impress them all. Everybody except Mr. Leighton looked out also, and then came an ominous silence.

Mr. Maclean giggled.

This formed a link to a burst of conversation. Jean turned to Miss Steven and engaged her in a whirlwind of talk. Cuthbert vainly endeavoured to move the stony glance of Mrs. Dudgeon once more in the direction of his father. Dr. Harry wildly asked Mabel to play something.

Mabel never forgave him.

Mrs. Dudgeon immediately became preternaturally polite, said she had often heard of the musical proclivities of the Misses Leighton, and Mabel had really to play.

"Oh, Harry," she exclaimed, "I never played with a burden like this on my mind, never in all my life. The party to-night–and that mayonnaise (it will keep maying, won't it?)–and Elma goodness knows where with Adelaide Maud, and those kids in the garden–couldn't Cuthbert go and slay them?"

She dashed into a Chopin polonaise.

The kids in the garden were what had upset Mrs. Dudgeon. There were two–evidently playing "catch me if you can" with one of the maid-servants–the one who had shown them in. She rushed about in a manner which looked very mad. This exhibition on the drawing-room side of the house! Really–these middle class people!

Mrs. Dudgeon extended the lorgnette to looking at them once more.

A horizontal bar was erected in a corner of the lawn. Towards this the eccentric maid-servant seemed to be making determined passes, frantically prevented every now and again by the two young girls. The chords of the "railway polonaise" hammered out a violent accompaniment. Mabel could play magnificently when in a rage. Little Miss Steven was enchanted.

Nearer came the maid-servant to the horizontal bar. At last she reached it. May and Betty sat down plump on the lawn in silent despair. Lance pulled himself gently and gracefully up. Not content with getting there, he kissed his hand to the unresponsive drawing-room windows. To do him justice, there was little sign for him that any one saw him, and Mabel's piano playing seemed to envelop everything. He did some graceful things towards the end of the polonaise, but with the last chords became violently mischievous again. With a wild whirl he turned a partial somersault. Mrs. Dudgeon shrieked. "Oh, that woman," said she. Just then Lance stopped his whirlings and sent his feet straight into the air. His skirts fell gracefully over his face. Dr. Harry laughed a loud laugh, and at last Mr. Leighton asked what was the matter.

"It's Lance," said Jean. "He has been playing tricks all the afternoon."

Everything might have been forgiven except that Mrs. Dudgeon had been taken in. She had screamed, "That woman."

She began to look about for Adelaide Maud.

"Will you be so kind as to tell my daughter that we must be going," she said to Mr. Leighton.

Cuthbert volunteered to look for her.

Dr. Harry really did the neat thing. He went out for Lance and brought him in with Betty and May. He hauled Lance by the ear to Mrs. Dudgeon.

"Here you see a culprit of the deepest dye."

Lance looked very rosy and mischievous, and Miss Steven, who had been immersed in hysterical laughter since his exploit on the bar, was delighted with him.

"I am so sorry," said Lance gravely, encouraged by this appreciation, "but I promised mother that I should be an ornament to the company this afternoon."

"Oh, Lance," said May, "how can you!"

"By 'mother,' of course I mean Mabel," said Lance to Mrs. Dudgeon in an explanatory fashion. "She has grown so cocky since she put her hair up."

Mrs. Dudgeon determined to give up trying to unravel the middle classes.

Mr. Maclean broke in. "Everybody spoils Lance, Mrs. Dudgeon. It isn't quite his own fault; look at Miss Steven."

Miss Steven, always prompt to appreciate a person's wickedest mood, had made an immediate friend of Lance.

"They are a great trial to us, these young people," said Mr. Leighton gently.

The speech wafted her back to her gracious mood, and for a little while longer she forgot that she had sent for Adelaide Maud.

Meanwhile Cuthbert endeavoured to discover what had happened to that "delicious" person.

With swishing skirts, and gleam of golden hair under a white hat, Elma had seen herself escort Adelaide Maud from the drawing-room to the schoolroom. Adelaide Maud sat on a hassock in the room where "You don't mean to say you were all babies," and Elma played "Anything you like" to her.

Adelaide Maud's face became of the dreamy far-away consistency of Miss Grace's–without the cap, and Elma felt her cup of happiness run over.

"Does your sister play like that?" asked Adelaide Maud.

"Far better," said Elma simply.

They heard the bars of the railway polonaise, and the schoolroom, being just over the drawing-room, they had also the full benefit of Lance's exploit.

Adelaide Maud laughed and laughed.

"Oh, what will Mrs. Dudgeon say?" asked Elma.

She told Adelaide Maud about the party, a frightful "breach of etiquette," as Mabel informed her later. Adelaide Maud's face grew serious and rather sad.

"What a pity you live in another ph–phrase of society," sighed Elma, "or you would be coming too, wouldn't you?"

"Would you really ask me?" asked Adelaide Maud.

Ask her?

Did Adelaide Maud think that if the world were made of gold and one could help one's self to it, one wouldn't have a little piece now and again! She was just about to explain that they would do anything in the world to ask her, when Cuthbert came into the room. Adelaide Maud got so stiff at that moment, that

immediately Elma understood that it would never do to ask her to the party.

Cuthbert explained that Mrs. Dudgeon had sent him to fetch Miss Dudgeon.

"Oh," said Adelaide Maud.

She did not make the slightest move towards leaving, however.

She looked straight at Cuthbert, and Elma could have sworn she saw her lip quiver.

"I believe I have to apologize to you," she said in a very cold voice. "I cut out a dance, didn't I–at the Calthorps'!"

"Did you?" asked Cuthbert.

Elma wondered that he could be so negligent in speaking to Adelaide Maud. She never could bear to see Cuthbert severe, and it had the effect of terrifying her a trifle and making her take the hand of Adelaide Maud in a defensive sort of manner.

Adelaide Maud held her hand quite tightly, as though Elma were really a friend of some standing.

"I didn't intend to, but I know it seemed like it," said Adelaide Maud in perfectly freezing tones.

Cuthbert looked at her very directly, and seemed to answer the freezing side more than the apologizing one.

"Oh–a small thing of that sort, what does it matter"? he said grandly.

Adelaide Maud turned quite pale.

"Thank you," said she. "It's quite sweet of you to take it like that," and she marched out of the schoolroom with her skirts swishing and her head high. No–it would never do to invite Adelaide Maud to the party.

Elma however had seen another side to this very dignified lady, and so ran after her and took her hand again.

"You aren't vexed with me, are you?" she whispered.

Adelaide Maud at the turn of the stairs, and just at the point where Cuthbert, coming savagely behind, could not see, bent and kissed Elma.

"What day do you go to Miss Grace's?" she asked.

"To-morrow at three," whispered Elma, with her plans quite suddenly arranged.

"Don't tell," said Adelaide Maud, "I shall be there."

Mrs. Dudgeon departed with appropriate graciousness. The irrepressible gaiety of the company round her had merely served to make her more unapproachable. She greeted Adelaide Maud with a stare, and strove to make her immediate adieus. Mr. Maclean, always ready to notice a deficiency, remembered that Mr. Leighton had never met Adelaide Maud, and forthwith introduced her. Adelaide Maud took this introduction shyly, and Mr. Leighton was charmed with

her. With an unfaltering estimate of character he appraised her then as being one in a hundred amongst girls. Adelaide Maud, on her part, showed him gentle little asides to her nature which one could not have believed existed. Mrs. Dudgeon grew really impatient at the constant interruptions which impeded her exit.

"Mr. Leighton has just been telling me," she said by way of getting out of the drawing-room, "that a little party is to be celebrated here to-night. I fear we detain you all." Nothing could have been more gracious–and yet! Mabel flushed. It seemed so like a children's affair–that they should be having a party, and that the really important people were actually clearing out in order to allow it to occur.

Miss Steven said farewell with real regret.

"I don't know when I have had such a jolly afternoon," she said. "I think I must get knocked over oftener. Though I don't want Mr. Leighton to break his ribs every time. Do you know," she said in a most heart-breaking manner, "I've been hardly able to breathe for thinking of it. You can't think how nice it is to see you all so jolly after all."

When they had got into the Dudgeons' carriage, and were rolling swiftly homewards, she yawned a trifle.

"What cures they are," she said airily.

Adelaide Maud, in her silent corner of the carriage, felt her third pang of that memorable afternoon.

CHAPTER VIII
The Party

Nobody knew how anybody got dressed for the party, and certainly nobody took any dinner to speak of. It was laid in the morning-room, and Mr. Leighton said throughout that roystering meal that never again, no matter how many ribs Cuthbert broke or how much sympathy he excited, would he allow them to have a party.

The occasion became memorable, not only because of Cuthbert or the mayonnaise, or the Dudgeons, but because on that night Robin Meredith appeared. Mabel and Jean lately had already in quite a practical manner begun to wonder whom Mabel would be obliged to marry. Jean was getting very tall, and showed signs of being so near the grown-up stage herself, that she was anxious to see Mabel disposed of, so as to leave the way clear.

"The eldest of four ought to look sharp," she declared; "we can't allow any trifling."

This seemed rather overwhelming treatment of Mabel, who was only seventeen. But viewed from that age, even a girl of twenty-one is sometimes voted an old maid, and Mabel was quite determined not to become an old maid.

"There seems to be only George Maclean," she had sighed in a dismal way. She was quite different from Elma, who continually dreamed of a duke. George Maclean would do very well for Mabel, only, as Jean complained, "George Maclean is a gentleman and all that kind of thing, but he has no prospects." So they rather disposed of George Maclean, for immediate purposes at least. Then came Mr. Meredith. After that, in the language of the Leightons, it was all up with Mabel. She would simply have to get engaged and married to Mr. Meredith.

Mr. Meredith was of middle height, with rather a square, fair face, and a short cut-away dark moustache. He spoke in a bright concise sort of way, and darted very quick glances at people when addressing them. He came in with the Gardiners, and after shaking hands with Mrs. Leighton he darted several quick glances round the room, and then asked abruptly of Lucy Gardiner "Who was the tall girl in white?"

Here was the point where the fortunes of the Leighton girls became at last crystallized, concrete. It is all very well to dream, but it is much pleasanter to be sure that something is really about to happen.

None of this undercurrent was noticeable, however, in the general behaviour of that imaginative four. They began the evening in a dignified way with music. Every one either sang or played. Jean in her usual hearty fashion dashed through a "party piece." Even Elma was obliged to play the Boccherini Minuet, which she did with the usual nervous blunders.

As Dr. Harry placed the music ready for her, she whispered to him, "Whenever I lift my heels off the floor, my knees knock against each other."

"Keep your heels down," said Dr. Harry with the immobile air of a commanding officer.

Elma found the piano pedals, and in the fine desire to follow out Dr. Harry's instructions played Boccherini with both pedals down throughout.

"How you do improve, Elma!" said May Turberville politely.

And Elma looked at her with a mute despair in her eyes of which hours of laughter could not rid them. If only they knew, those people in that room, if only they knew what she wanted to play, the melodies that came singing in her heart when she was happy, the minor things when she was sad! All she could do when people were collected to stare at her was to play the Boccherini Minuet exceedingly badly. The weight of "evenings" had begun already to rest on Elma. Her undoubted gifts at learning and understanding music brought her

into sharp prominence with her teachers and family, but never enabled Elma to exhibit herself with advantage on any real occasion.

It was all the more inexplicable that Mabel could at once dash into anything with abandon and perfect correctness. Technique and understanding seemed born in her. In the same way could she, light-heartedly and gracefully, take the new homage of Mr. Meredith, who made no secret of his interest in her from the first moment of entering the drawing-room. Mabel received him as she received a Sonata by Beethoven. With fleet fingers she could read the one as though she had practised it all her life; with dainty manners she seemed to comprehend Mr. Meredith from the start, as though she had been accustomed to refusing and accepting desirable husbands from time immemorial. It put her on a new footing with the rest of the girls. They felt in quite a decided way, within a few days even, that the old, rather childish fashion of talking about husbands was to be dropped, and that no jokes were to be perpetrated in regard to Mr. Meredith. It began to be no fun at all having an eligible sister in the house.

On this night, however, they were still children. About forty young people, school friends of themselves and Cuthbert, sustained that gaiety with which they had begun the afternoon. Even the musical part, where Mr. Leighton presided and encouraged young girls with no musical talents whatever to play and sing, passed with a certain amount of lightness. Before an interlude of charades, a strange girl was shown in. She giggled behind an enormous fan, and made a great show of canary-coloured curls in the process. She seemed to have on rather skimpy skirts, and she showed in a lumbering way rather large shiny patent shoes with flat boys' bows on them.

There was a moment of indecision before Betty broke out with the remark, "You might have had the sense to hide your feet, Lance."

The canary-coloured curls enabled Lance to look becomingly foolish. In any case, Mr. Leighton could not prevent the intellectual part of the evening from falling to bits. They had no more real music. Instead, they fell on Lance and borrowed his curls, and made some good charades till supper time.

"I can't help feeling very rocky about that supper," whispered Jean to Mabel. "Yet we've everything–sandwiches, cake, fruit and lemonade, tea and coffee. What can go wrong now?"

"Oh! the thing's all right," said Mabel, who was in a severely exalted mood by this time.

They trooped into the dining-room, where girls were provided in a crushy way with seats round the room, and boys ran about and handed them things. Mrs. Leighton gave the head of the table to Mabel, who sat in an elderly way and poured coffee. The salad was magnificent. Aunt Katharine had come in "to look on." Mrs. Leighton told her how Mabel had arranged forty-two plates

that morning, with water-lily tomatoes cut ready and chopped chicken in the centres, and had nearly driven Cook silly with the shelves she used for storing these things in cool places.

"Wherever you looked–miles and miles of little plates with red water lilies," said Mrs. Leighton. "It was most distracting for Cook. I wonder the woman stays."

"What a mess," said Aunt Katharine. "You spoil these girls, you know, Lucy."

"Oh–it's Mr. Leighton," said she sadly.

"I don't think mayonnaise is a very suitable thing for young people's parties," said Aunt Katharine dingily.

By this time the white cake with "Cuthbert" in pink was handed solemnly round. Every person had a large piece, it looked so good.

Every one said, "Walnut, how lovely," when they took the first bite.

Every one stopped at the second bite.

"Cuthbert," called out Mrs. Leighton after she had investigated her own piece, "I notice that your father has none of the cake. Please take him a slice and see that he eats it."

Mr. Leighton waved it away.

"I do not eat walnuts," said he.

Mrs. Leighton went to him.

"John, this is not fair, this is your idea of a party," she said. "You ought to eat Cuthbert's cake."

"He can't," cried Jean; "nobody can. It's only Mabel who likes iced marbles."

"You will all have to eat gingerbread," said the voice of Betty hopefully.

Jean started up in great indignation with a large battered-looking "orange iced cake" ready to cut.

"Betty always gets herself advertized first," she complained. "Please try my orange icing."

They did–they tried anything in order to escape Mabel's walnuts. It occurred to the girls that Mabel would be quite broken up at the wretched failure of her wonderful cake–the Cuthbert cake too. It was such a drop from their high pedestal of perfection. Even mummy, who had been so much on her own high horse at all their successes, now became quite feelingly sorry about the cake. She gave directions for having the loose pieces collected and surreptitiously put out of sight, but the large dish had to remain in front of Mabel. Mabel was still charmingly occupied over her coffee cups. She poured in a pretty direct way and yet managed to talk interestedly to Mr. Meredith. He was invaluable as a helper.

"And now, at last," said she in a most winning manner, "you must have a slice of my cake. I baked it myself, and it's full of walnuts. Don't you love walnuts?"

"I do," said Mr. Meredith.

May Turberville nudged Betty, and Lance stared open-mouthed at the courage of Mabel. He would do a good deal for the Leighton girls, but he barred that particular cake. An electric feeling of comprehension ran round the company. They seemed to know that Mabel was about to taste her own cake and give a large slice to Mr. Meredith. They made little airy remarks to one another in order to keep the conversation going, so that Mabel might not detect by some sudden pause that every one was watching her. One heard Julia Gardiner say in an intense manner to Harry Somerton that the begonias at Mrs. Somerton's were a "perfect dream." And Harry answered that for his part he liked football better. Even Mr. Leighton noticed the trend of things, and stopped discussing higher morality with Aunt Katharine.

Mabel seemed to take an interminable time. She gave Mr. Meredith a large piece, and insisted besides on serving him with an unwieldy lump of pink icing containing a large scrawly "e" from the last syllable of Cuthbert's name.

"E–aw," brayed Lance gently, and Betty exploded into a long series of helpless giggles.

"What a baby you are, Lance," said Mabel, amiably laughing. She bit daintily at the walnut cake.

Mr. Meredith bit largely.

There was an enormous pause while they waited to see what he would do.

Cuthbert and Ronald Martin were near, aimlessly handing trifle and fruit salad. Mr. Meredith helped with one hand to pass a cup.

"You know, Leighton," he said, "I have a great friend, he was one of your year–Vincent Hope–do you remember him?"

Cuthbert stared. One mouthful was gone and Mr. Meredith was cheerfully gulping another.

"What a digestion the man has," he thought, and next was plunged politely in reminiscent conversation regarding his College days.

Mabel sat crunching quite happily at the despised walnut cake.

Lance approached her timidly.

"For Heaven's sake," he said, "give me a large cup of coffee for the ostrich. The man will die if he isn't helped."

"Who on earth do you mean, Lance?" asked Mabel innocently.

"Meredith. Don't you see he has eaten the cake."

Mabel looked conscience-stricken. Her own slice had not dwindled much.

"It is rather chucky-stoney, isn't it?" she asked anxiously.

"It's terrific," said Lance sagely.

Mabel looked quite crushed for a moment, so crushed that even Lance's mischievous heart relented.

"Never mind, Mabel," he comforted her. "If Meredith can do that much for you without a shudder, he will do anything. It's a splendid test."

A golden maxim of Mrs. Leighton's flashed into Mabel's mind, "You never know a man till he has been tried." It made her smile to think that already they might be supposed to be getting to know Mr. Meredith because of her villainous cake.

"The piece we tested wasn't so bad," she explained to Lance, quite forgetting that she had skimmed that quantity in order to get plenty of chopped walnuts into the "real" cake.

A few people in the room seemed fearfully amused, and poor Mabel in an undefined manner began to feel decidedly out of it. Lance went about like a conspirator, commenting on the appearance of "the ostrich." He approached Cuthbert, asking him in an anxious manner how long the signs of rapid poisoning might be expected to take to declare themselves after a quadruple dose of walnut cake. Mr. Meredith unruffled, still handed about cups for Mabel.

Jean was in a corner with her dearest friend Maud Hartley.

"Isn't it wonderful what love can do?" she remarked quite seriously. It was a curious thing that Elma, who dreamed silly dreams about far-away things, and was despised for this accordingly by the robust Jean, did not become romantic over Mr. Meredith at all. She merely thought that he must be fearfully fond of walnuts.

The supper was hardly a pleasure to her–or to Betty. Every dish was an anxiety. They could almost count the plates for the different courses in their desire to know whether each had been successfully disposed of. There was no doubt about the trifle.

"What a pity Mabel didn't make it," sighed Jean. After all, Mabel had only inspired the chicken salad, and even there Dr. Harry had made the mayonnaise.

"It isn't much of a start for her with Mr. Meredith," she sighed dismally, "if only we hadn't told anybody which was which."

Mr. Meredith took a large amount of trifle, praising it considerably.

This alarmed Lance more than ever.

"One good thing does not destroy a bad thing," he exclaimed. "The first axiom to be learned in chemistry is that one smell does not kill another. It is a popular delusion that it does. Meredith seems to have been brought up on popular lines."

He posed in front of Cuthbert with his hands in his pockets.

"We are running a great risk," said he. "To-morrow morning Meredith may be saying things about your sisters which may prevent us men from being friends with him–for ever."

Above the general flood of conversation, Aunt Katharine's treble voice

might now be heard.

"Mabel," she said in a kind manner, "I must compliment you. When your mother told me about this ridiculous party, I told her she was spoiling you as she always does. In my young days we weren't allowed to be extravagant and experiment in cooking whenever a party occurred. We began with the 'common round, the daily task.'" Aunt Katharine sighed heavily. "But I never knew you could make a trifle like this."

Mabel had been sitting like the others, trying to subdue the merriment which Aunt Katharine's long speeches usually aroused. The wind-up to this tirade alarmed her however. She would have to tell them all, with Mr. Meredith standing there, that the trifle was not her trifle. She would have to say that it was Betty's.

Before she could open her mouth however, the whole loyal regiment of Leightons had forestalled her.

"Isn't it a jolly trifle!" they exclaimed. Mabel could even hear Betty's little pipe joining in.

"Oh, but I must tell you," she began.

Cuthbert appeared at the doorway.

"Drawing-room cleared for dancing," said he. "Come along."

That finished it, and the girls were delighted with themselves. But one little melancholy thing, for all her partisanship, disturbed Jean considerably. Mr. Meredith, on giving his arm to Mabel for the first dance, was heard distinctly to remark, "You make all these delicious things as well as play piano! How clever of you."

And Mabel looking perfectly possessed floated round to the first waltz as though she had not made a complete muddle of the walnut cake.

Jean did not regret their generosity, but she was saddened by it.

"It all comes of being the eldest," she confided to Maud, "We may stand on our heads now if we like, but if anything distinguished happens in the family, Mabel will get the credit of it."

CHAPTER IX
At Miss Grace's

Miss Grace sat crocheting in her white and gold drawing-room and Elma played to her. Then the front door bell rang.

"Oh please, Miss Grace," said Elma with crimson cheeks, "that is Adelaide Maud."

"She isn't coming, I hope, to disturb our afternoons, and your playing," asked Miss Grace anxiously.

"Oh, Miss Grace, she has eyes like yours and listens most interrogatively," said Elma in the greatest alarm. The fear that Miss Grace might be offended only now assailed her.

"Intelligently, dear," corrected Miss Grace.

"I never did truly think she would come," said Elma.

"Then, dear, it was not very polite to invite her." Miss Grace could not bear that Elma should miss any point in her own gentle code of etiquette.

"In justice to little Elma, I invited myself." The full-throated tones of Miss Dudgeon's voice came to them from the door. "And what is more, I said to Saunders, 'Let me surprise Miss Grace, I do not want to disturb the music.'"

"And then of course the music stopped," said Miss Grace.

She kissed Adelaide Maud in a very friendly way.

"Oh, but it will go on again at once, if neither of you are offended," said Elma. She was much relieved.

"You must not be so afraid of offending people," said Miss Grace. "It is a great fault of yours, dear."

As Adelaide Maud bent to kiss her, Elma was struck with the justice of this criticism.

"I believe I might be as fascinating as Mabel if only I weren't afraid," she thought to herself. The reflection made her play in a minor key.

"Just let me say a few words to Miss Grace," had said Adelaide Maud. "Play on and don't mind us for a bit."

Adelaide Maud spoke to Miss Grace in an undertone. Elma thought they did it to let her feel at ease, and correspondingly played quite happily.

"I have seen Dr. Merryweather," said Adelaide Maud to Miss Grace. "He says you must go off for a change at once."

"Dr. Merryweather!"

Miss Grace turned very pale.

"Exactly. I did it on my own responsibility. He was most concerned about you. He said that what Dr. Smith had ordered you ought to carry out."

"He was always very hard on Annie," said Miss Grace, who saw only one side to such a proposal.

Adelaide Maud bent her head a trifle.

"You ought not to think of Miss Annie, at present," said she. "It isn't right.

It isn't fair to her either, supposing you turn really ill, what would become of her?"

Neither noticed the lagging notes on the piano. Instead, in the earnestness of their conversation, they entirely forgot Elma.

Miss Grace shook her head.

"I can't help it," she said. "Whatever happens to me, I must stay by my bed-ridden sister. Who would look after her if I deserted her? What is my poor well-being compared to hers!"

The notes on the piano fell completely away. Elma sat with the tears raining down her face.

"Oh, Miss Grace," she said brokenly, "are you ill? Don't say you are ill."

The sky had fallen indeed, if such a thing could be true, as Miss Grace in a trouble of her own–and such a trouble–ill health–when Miss Annie required her so much.

Adelaide Maud looked greatly discouraged.

"Now, Elma," she exclaimed abruptly, "Miss Grace is only a little bit ill, and it's to keep her from getting worse that I'm talking to her. We didn't intend you to listen. Miss Annie will wonder why the piano has stopped. Be cheerful now and play a bit–something merrier than what you've been at."

She pretended not to see that Miss Grace wiped her eyes a trifle.

"I make you an offer, Miss Grace. I shall come here every day and stay and be sweet to every one. I shall take Miss Annie her flowers and her books and her work, and I shall bark away all nasty intruders like a good sheep dog. I shall keep the servants in a good temper–including Saunders who is a love, and I promise you, you will never regret it–if only you go away for a holiday–now–before you have time to be ill, because you didn't take the thing at the start!"

(Could this be Adelaide Maud!)

Elma flung herself off the music stool, and rushed to Miss Grace.

"And oh, please, please, Miss Grace, let me go with you to see that you get better. You never will unless some one makes you. You will just try to get back to Miss Annie." Thus Elma sounded the first note of that great quality she possessed which distinguished the thing other people required and made her anxious to see it given to them.

A break in Miss Grace's calm determination occurred.

"Oh that, my love, my dear little love, that would be very pleasant." She patted Elma's hand with anxious affection.

Adelaide Maud looked hopeful.

"Won't you leave it to us?" she asked, "to Dr. Smith to break it to Miss Annie, as a kind of command, and to me to break it to Mr. Leighton as an abject request? Because I believe this idea of Elma's is about as valuable as any of mine.

You must have some one with you who knows how self-denying you are, Miss Grace. You ought to have Dr. Merryweather with you in fact, to keep you in order."

"My dear, how can you suggest such a thing," said Miss Grace. She was quite horrified.

"Dr. Smith," she turned to Elma, "has ordered me off to Buxton, to a nasty crowded hotel where they drink nasty waters all day long."

"They don't drink the waters in the hotel, and the hotels are very nice," corrected Miss Dudgeon.

"It will be very hot and crowded and dull," wailed Miss Grace. It was astonishing how obstinate Miss Grace could be on a point where her own welfare was concerned.

Elma clasped and unclasped her hands.

"A hotel! Oh, Miss Grace, how perfectly lovely!"

"There, you see," said Miss Dudgeon, wonderfully quick to notice where her advantage came in, "you see what a delightful time you will confer on whoever goes with you. Some of us love hotels."

Perhaps nobody ever knew what a golden picture the very suggestion opened out to Elma. Already she was in a gorgeous erection with gilt cornices and red silk curtains, like one she had seen in town. People whom she had never met were coming and going and looking at her as though they would like to speak to her. She would not know who their aunts or cousins or parents were, and she shouldn't have to be introduced. They would simply come to Miss Grace and, noticing how distinguished she looked, they would say, "May I do this or that for you," and the thing was done. She herself would be able to behave to them as she always behaved in her daydreams, very correctly and properly. She would never do the silly blundering thing which one always did when other people were well aware of the reputation one was supposed to bear. Didn't every one at home know, before she sat down to play piano for instance, that she invariably made mistakes. Jean would say, "Oh, Elma gets so rattled, you know," and immediately it seemed as though she ought to get rattled. Nobody in the hotel would know this. She saw herself playing to an immense audience without making a single mistake. Then the applause–it became necessary to remember that Miss Grace was still speaking.

Miss Grace sat with her hands folded nervously. She was quite erect in a way, but there was invariably a pathetic little droop to her head and shoulders which gave her a delicate appearance. A very costly piece of creamy lace was introduced into the bodice of her grey gown, and on it the locket which contained Miss Annie's portrait and hair rose and fell in little agitated jerks. Miss Annie wore a corresponding locket containing Miss Grace's portrait and hair, but these

always lay languorously on her white throat undisturbed by such palpitation as now excited Miss Grace.

"Oh, my dear," she said to Miss Dudgeon, "you don't understand. The gaiety of the place is nothing to me. It's like being here–where my friends say to me how nice it is to have windows opening on to the high road, where so many people pass. I tell them that it isn't those who pass, it is those who come in who count. You passed for so long, my dear."

She put her hand mutely on that of Adelaide Maud.

It was true then. Miss Grace hadn't known her all these years when the Leighton girls talked about the Story Books so much, but only recently! The Dudgeons must really be coming out of their shell.

Elma's eyes grew round with conjecture.

Why was Adelaide Maud so friendly now?

"It was really Dr. Merryweather," said Adelaide Maud.

A faint flush invaded Miss Grace's pallor.

"It is most kind of Dr. Merryweather. Years ago, I am afraid we rather slighted him."

"Oh well, he keeps a very friendly eye on you, Miss Grace, and he says you are to go to Buxton."

It became the first real trouble of Miss Grace's own life, that she should have to go to Buxton. Adelaide Maud arranged it for her, otherwise the thing would never have occurred. It was she who persuaded Dr. Smith to put it this way to Miss Annie that it would be dangerous for her to have the anxiety of Miss Grace's being ill at home, and most upsetting to the household. It was better that the excursion should be looked upon as a holiday graciously granted by Miss Annie, the donor of it, than an imperative measure ordered by the doctor for the saving of Miss Grace.

Miss Grace wondered at the ready acquiescence of Miss Annie. She seemed almost pleased to let her sister go. In a rather sad way, Miss Grace began to wonder whether, after all, she might not have released herself years ago. Would Annie have minded? The progress of this malady which now asserted itself, she had quietly ignored for so long, that only a darting pain, which might attack her in the presence of Miss Annie, had compelled her to consult Dr. Smith. He was astonished at what she had suffered.

"You do not deserve to have me tell you how fortunate it is that after all we have nothing malignant to discover," he told her. "But you will become really ill, helpless occasionally, if you do not take this in hand now." Just after he had gone, Adelaide Maud called. She came to ask for money in connection with the church, but she stayed to talk over Miss Grace's symptoms. The grey shadow on Miss Grace's face had alarmed her.

"Aren't you well, Miss Grace?" she asked sympathetically. Then for the first time since Miss Annie had gone to bed, Miss Grace had given way and confessed what the trouble was to Adelaide Maud.

It became astonishing to think how rapidly things could happen in so tiny and so slow a place.

Here they were now, in a happy confidential trio, the moving inspirator that smart, garden-party person, Adelaide Maud.

The Leighton girls could not believe it. They had, with the exception of Elma, reached a hopeless condition with regard to the Story Books. The Dudgeons had so palpably shown themselves, even although graciously polite throughout, to be of so entirely different a set to the Leightons. None of the girls except Adelaide Maud had called. And after what Cuthbert had done! Elma certainly felt the difference that might occur where Miss Grace and Miss Annie were concerned. "Why haven't we a footman and an odd man?" asked Jean viciously. "Then it would be all right."

Now came the invitation for Elma to go with Miss Grace.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Leighton were greatly touched. Mr. Leighton put his hand on Elma's shoulder.

"When you can make yourself indispensable to your best friends, that is almost as great a thing as playing the Moonlight Sonata without a mistake," said he.

But both Mrs. Leighton and he refused to let Elma go. They called on Miss Grace to explain. The fact that they had left Elma in a state of despair that bordered on rebellion made them more firm.

"Elma is so young," said Mrs. Leighton, "and so highly strung and sensitive, I can't let her go with an easy mind. She has visited so seldom, and then invariably lain awake at nights with the excitement. It wouldn't be good for you, Miss Grace. I should have you both very much on my mind."

Adelaide Maud was there.

"I see your point, Mrs. Leighton," she said brightly. "But Elma knows Miss Grace so well, wouldn't it be just like going with you or Mr. Leighton."

Mr. Leighton interposed.

"It's more for the sake of Miss Grace. She must have some one regarding whom she does not require to be anxious. Elma is a dreamy little being, and might turn home-sick in an hour, or frightened if Miss Grace were a little ill–anything might occur in that way."

"But she is nearly thirteen. Some day she must be cured of home-sickness, and Miss Grace will take her maid," said Adelaide Maud. "Oh, Mr. Leighton, don't hold in your daughters too much! It's so hard on them later."

Adelaide Maud looked quite pathetic.

"It isn't so with all of them," said Mrs. Leighton. "Jean is quite different. Jean can go anywhere."

Underneath Mrs. Leighton's kind, loving ways lay a superb respect for the domineering manners of her second daughter.

"I should never be afraid of Jean's lying awake at night, or turning homesick. She is much too sensible."

Miss Grace became impressed with the virtues of Jean.

"Then Jean might come," she proposed apologetically.

Adelaide Maud could not forgive her. After having awakened that radiant look in Elma's eyes, to weakly propose that she might take the robust Jean!

Mrs. Leighton's eyes wandered to her husband.

"Jean grows so fast. Perhaps a change would do her good," she suggested vaguely.

"I should feel much more confident of Jean," said he.

So it was arranged.

Elma never forgot it. She wept silently in her room, and accepted comfort from no one, not even her mother.

"There is one thing, Jean oughtn't to have said to mother she would go. She put that in her mind before mother went out. I knew it was all up then. Jean will always get what she wants, all her life, and I shall have to back out. Just because I can't play sonatas without mistakes they think I cannot do anything."

Elma found Betty's shoulder very comforting.

A remark of Adelaide Maud's rankled in Mr. Leighton's mind. He was not altogether happy at having to act the dragon to Elma in any case. Adelaide Maud had got him quietly by herself.

"Don't let little Elma begin giving up things to those sisters of hers too soon, Mr. Leighton. Unselfishness is all very well. But look at the helpless thing it has made of Miss Grace."

Then she relented at sight of his face.

"I'm almost as disappointed as Elma, you see," she said radiantly.

Mr. Leighton tried to put it out of his mind, but Elma, sobbing in her bedroom, had at last reached a stage where she couldn't pretend that nothing had hurt her, a stage where the feelings of other people might be reckoned not to count at all. It was an unusual condition for her to be in. She generally fought out her disappointments in secret. Her father came to her finally, and began smoothing her hair in a sad sort of way.

"You aren't looking on your own father as your worst enemy?" he asked her kindly.

Elma's sobs stopped abruptly.

"I was," she said abjectly.

It was part of the sincerity of her nature that she immediately recognized where the case against herself came in.

"I'm sorry about Jean," said Mr. Leighton. "It didn't strike me at the time that it would be such a treat to either of you, you see. And we chose the one who seemed most fitted for going with Miss Grace."

"Mabel might have gone," wailed Elma.

Mabel! Not for a moment had the claims of Mabel been mentioned. Mr. Leighton was completely puzzled.

Elma in an honourable manner felt that probably she might be giving away Mabel to an unseeing parent. Mabel wanted, oh very much, to stay at home just then.

"But of course Jean wanted to go," she said hurriedly. "more than Mabel did."

"Some day you will all have your turn," said Mr. Leighton consolingly. "I know it's very dull being at home with your parents! Isn't it?"

Elma laughed a little.

"It isn't that," she said, "but it would be lovely–in a hotel–with a maid, you know–of your own! Such fun–seeing the people. And Miss Grace wanted me."

Mr. Leighton stroked her hair.

"I liked her wanting you. I shall never forget that," said he.

"Oh!" Elma gave a little gulp of pleasure. This was worth a great deal. There was really nothing on earth like being complimented by one's father. She sidled on Mr. Leighton's knee and put her arms round his neck. He still stroked her hair.

"You must remember that it isn't only in hotels that you see life," he said, "or on battle-fields that you fight battles. It's here at home, where one apparently is only sheltered and dull. It's always easy to get on for a day or two with new, or outside friends. But it's your own people who count. Don't make it disagreeable for Jean to go with Miss Grace." His voice came in the nature of a swift command. After all, her mother and father had arranged it, and the consciousness came down on her of how she slighted those two, dearer than any, in being so rebellious.

"I won't," said Elma. Quite a determined little line settled at her quivering lips, "But I never felt so bad in my life."

"Oh well, we shall see what can be done about that," said Mr. Leighton. And it pleased him more than a battle-field of victories could have done to see Elma come into her own again.

"Do you think you could try the Moonlight Sonata now?" he asked abruptly, looking at his watch.

It was his hobby that he must keep at least one girl at the piano in the

evenings.

"Not without a lot of mistakes," said Elma.

But she played better that night than she had ever done.

CHAPTER X
Compensations

Miss Grace brought home a delicate silver purse and a silver chain set with torquoise matrix from Buxton for Elma.

Mr. Leighton shook his head over the pretty gift.

"Bribery and corruption," said he.

But by that time Elma's soul had soared far above the heights or depths of triumph or pettiness in connection with the sojourn of Miss Grace. Life had been moving swiftly and wonderfully. Jean indeed came home from hotel life, full of stories of its inimitable attractions; and nobody, although longing to be, had really been much impressed. Jean served to mark the milestone of their own development, that was all. She had left at one stage and come back at another. Where she had imagined their standing quite still, they had been travelling new roads, looking back on their childish selves with interest.

Mabel and Elma had been thrown much together, and Mabel had grown to depend on the silent loyalty with which Elma invariably supported her in the trying time now experienced in connection with Mr. Meredith. Where Jean, bolt outright, complained that already Mabel had known him for a month or two, and yet no hint of an engagement could be discovered, Elma sympathized with Mabel's horror of any engagement whatever.

"It would be lovely to have a ring, and all that kind of thing," Mabel had confided. "But fancy having to talk to papa and mamma about it!"

It did not impede her friendship with Mr. Meredith however. He had found a flower which he intended to pluck, and he guarded it to all intents and purposes as one from which he would warn off intruders. But the reserve which made Mabel sensitive in regard to anything definite, her extreme youth, above all the constant espionage of her parents and sisters, led him to a tacit understanding of his privileges, a situation appalling to the business-like Jean.

"If I had had my hair up, I should have had two proposals at Buxton," said

she, and the remark became historic.

Cuthbert put it in his notebook. Whenever he wanted to overcome the authority of Jean he produced and read it. She found her family a trifle trying on her arrival. She wanted to be able to inform them how they should dress, and had a score of other things ready to retail to them. Yet most of them fell quite flat, just as though she had had no special advantages in being at Buxton.

Mr. and Mrs. Leighton talked this over together.

"It makes me think," said Mrs. Leighton, "that you are not altogether wrong in crowding them up at home here. Jean got variety, but she seems to have lost a little in balance."

"Still, that is just where experience teaches its lesson," said Mr. Leighton. "To get balance, one must have the experience. Yet Mabel, in an unaccountable manner, seems to be perfectly balanced before she has received any experience at all."

"Ah! I expect she will still have her experiences," said Mrs. Leighton in her pessimistic way. "No girl gets along without some unpleasant surprise. Betty is longing for one. Betty complains that in story books something tragic or something wonderful happens to girls whenever they begin to grow up, but that nothing happens in this place. Nobody loses money–if you please–and nobody gets thrown out on the world in a pathetic manner to work for a living, for instance."

"Do they want to work for their living?"

"They do want to be sensational," said Mrs. Leighton with a sigh, "and as Elma says, 'We are neither rich enough nor poor enough for that.'"

"Thank providence," said Mr. Leighton.

His girls were much more of a problem to him than the direct Cuthbert, who had shown a capacity for going his own way rather magnificently from the moment he had left school. Mr. Leighton was determined to give his girls an object in life, besides the ordinary one of getting married. "There is great solace in the arts," he had often affirmed, making it seem impossible that a girl should look on the arts as ends in themselves, as a man would. "A girl must be trained to interruptions," he used to declare. He made rather a drudge of their music in consequence of these theories in connection with a career, but the hard taskmaster in that direction opened a willing indulgence in almost any other. It alarmed him when Mr. Meredith appeared so conspicuously on the scene, when Mr. Meredith's sister called and invited Mabel to dine, when invitations crossed, until the Merediths and themselves became very very intimate. Elma had the wonderful pleasure of being allowed to accompany Mabel. In the absence of Jean, she fulfilled that sisterly position in a loyal way, loving the exaltation of going out with Mabel, becoming very fond of the Merediths in the process. They had only recently come from town to live near the Gardiners, and the whole place

did its duty in calling on them. There were only Mr. Meredith and his sister, and both were of the intensely interesting order rather than of the frank and lively nature of the like of the Leightons. Mr. Meredith sang, and Miss Meredith's first words to Mabel were to the effect that he no longer wanted his sister to play for him after having had the experience of Mabel as an accompanist.

"Aren't you glad papa made us musical?" asked Betty of Mabel after that compliment.

Mabel was glad in more ways than one. But it seemed a little hard that just then Mr. Leighton should insist on her going in for a trying examination in the spring.

"When she ought to be getting the 'bottom drawer' ready," complained poor Jean.

Nothing moved for Jean in the family just as she expected. She began to wonder whether she shouldn't go out as a governess. *Jane Eyre* had always enthralled her. It was one way of seeing life, to be very down-trodden, and then marry the magnificent over-bearing hero.

As a companion to Miss Grace, she had been a great success. Indeed, even Adelaide Maud was bound to confess that Jean had been just the person to go with Miss Grace. Jean, in spite of her Jane Eyre theories, was so down on self-effacement. Her frank direct ways were the best tonic for a lady who had never at any time been courageous. Miss Grace wrote continually to Elma, "Jean has been very good in doing this–or that," until Elma, swallowing hard lumps of mortification, had at last to believe that she never could have done these determined, cool-hearted things for Miss Grace in the same capable manner. She often wondered besides whether, even to have had the delight of being at Buxton, she could have dropped the glamour of finding a new sister in Mabel, and of being the daily companion of Adelaide Maud. For the time had now come, when, on being shown into Miss Annie's drawing-room, her duke, clean-shaven and of modern manners, had ceased to be really diverting, and in fact often forgot to attend to her in the pause when she awaited the coming of Adelaide Maud.

Adelaide Maud kept her word. She reigned as vice-queen over Miss Annie's household, indulging that lady in all her little whims, for Miss Grace's sake, and never omitted a single day for calling and seeing that Miss Annie was comfortable. Adelaide Maud had theories of her own. She said that every one in Ridgetown attended to the poor, but that she believed in attending to the rich.

"Now who would ever have looked after Miss Grace if we hadn't?" she asked Elma.

Mrs. Dudgeon imagined she had other reasons for being so devoted to Miss Annie, and considered that Helen wasted her time in applying so much of it to a bedridden invalid.

"Whom do you see there?" she asked stonily.

"Principally Saunders," said Helen, whose good temper was unassailable. "Saunders is a duck."

The "duck," however, was a trifle worried with these changes, "not having been accustomed to sich for nigh on twenty-five years, mum," as he explained to Mrs. Leighton.

But the great boon lay in the restored health of Miss Grace. She came home shyly as ever, but with a fresh bloom on her face. What withered hopes that trip recalled to life, what memories of sacrificial days gone by, what fears laid past–who knows! She was very gentle with Miss Annie, and boasted of none of her late advantages as Jean did. Indeed, one might have thought that the events of the world had as usual taken place in Miss Annie's bedroom. But, with a courage born of new health and better spirits. Miss Grace called one day on Dr. Merryweather. In a graceful manner, as though the event had only occurred, she apologized to him for the slight offered by Miss Annie.

"I hope you know that you still have our supreme confidence," she said. "It was your kind interest which persuaded me to go to Buxton."

Dr. Merryweather seemed much affected. He shook her hand several times, but his voice remained gruff as she had always remembered and slightly feared it.

"You must be exceedingly careful of yourself, Miss Grace," he said bluntly, "Miss Annie has had too much of you."

Too much of her. Ah, well, she could never reproach herself for having spared an inch of her patience, an atom of her slender strength.

"Remember," said Dr. Merryweather, "courage does not all lie in self-sacrifice, though"–and he looked long at the kind beautiful eyes of Miss Grace–"a great deal of it is invested there."

He held her hand warmly for a second again, and that was the end of it. Miss Grace went home fortified to a second edition of her life with Miss Annie.

Adelaide Maud gave up her semi-suzerainty over the masterful Saunders with some real regret. It was fun for her to be engaged in anything which did not entail mere social engagements. Miss Annie liked her thoroughly, liked the swirl of her tweed skirts, the daintiness of her silk blouses, the gleam of her golden hair. Adelaide Maud had straight fine features, pretty mauve eyes ("They are mauve, my dear, no other word describes them," she declared), very clearly arched eyebrows, and "far too determined a chin." "Where did you get your chin?" asked Miss Annie continually.

"My father had the face of an angel. It wasn't from him," said Adelaide Maud. "I have my mother to thank for my chin."

"Well, Heaven help the man who tries to cross you, my dear," said Miss

Annie, who had a very capable chin of her own, as it happened. The tired petulant look of the invalid only showed at the droop to the corners of her mouth.

Elma could no longer interest Adelaide Maud in Cuthbert. It seemed as though he had no further existence. Until one day when she told her that Cuthbert had an appointment which would last throughout the summer, and keep him tied to town. Then the chin of Adelaide Maud seemed to resolve itself into less chilly lines.

"Oh, won't you miss him?" she suddenly asked.

Adelaide Maud was the most comprehending person. She pulled Elma to her and kissed her when Elma said that it wasn't "missing," it simply wasn't "living" without Cuthbert.

"I'm so sorry you quarrelled with him," she said to Adelaide Maud.

Adelaide Maud grew stonily angry.

"Quarrel with him?" she asked.

It reminded Elma of the Dudgeon's first call

"Oh, please don't," she cried in alarm.

"Then I won't," said Adelaide Maud, "but will you kindly inform me when I quarrelled with your brother Cuthbert."

It was exactly in the tone of one who would never think of quarrelling with the Leighton set. Elma grew quite pale, then her courage rose.

"He thinks such a lot of you, and you don't think anything of him. Just as though we weren't good enough!"

"Oh, Elma," said Adelaide Maud.

"And he likes you, and keeps things you drop, and you won't even speak to him."

"Keeps things I drop!"

The murder was out.

"Oh, I promised not to tell, how awful."

Adelaide Maud grew very dignified.

"What did I drop? Oh! I think I remember–my handkerchief!"

Mrs. Dudgeon had reflected openly on the fact that it had never been returned to Helen.

"I wanted to keep it till we saw you again, but he said he would give it to you when you were nice to him, or something like that."

"Till I was nice to him!" The chin dimpled a trifle.

"Somehow, I would rather he kept it," said Adelaide Maud dreamily.

"Shall I tell him that?" asked Elma anxiously.

"Tell him–what nonsense! You mustn't tell him a syllable. You mustn't say you've told me. It would be so ignominious for him to hear that I knew he had been thieving! Thieving is the word," said Adelaide Maud. Although she talked

in a very accusing manner, her voice seemed kind.

"Mayn't I tell him you didn't mean to quarrel?" asked Elma anxiously. "You don't know what you are to all of us."

Here she sighed deeply.

"No," said Adelaide Maud, "you mustn't tell him anything. I think he must just wait as he suggested, until I am nice to him."

"Until you deserved it, he said," cried Elma, triumphantly, remembering properly at last. "I knew it was something like that."

"Then he may wait until he is a hundred," said Adelaide Maud with her face in a flame.

It was difficult after this ever to talk to Adelaide Maud about Cuthbert with any kind of freedom or pleasure.

Elma went home that evening in the bewilderment of an early sunset. Bright rays turned the earth golden, the leaves on the trees laid themselves flat in heavy blobs of green in yellow sunlight, the sky faded to a glimmering blue in the furthermost east. A shower of rain fell from a drifting cloud and the drops hit in large splotches, first on Elma's hat, on her hand, and then in an indefinite manner stopped. As she turned into her own garden, the White House seemed flooded in a golden glow of colour.

Then at last they heard thunder in the distance.

Elma never forgot that shining picture, nor the thunder in the distance. It seemed the picture of what life might be, beautiful and safe in one's own home, thunder only in the distance. The threatening did not alarm her, but the remembrance of it always remained with her. When thunder really began to peal for the Leighton family, she tried to be thankful for the picture of gold.

CHAPTER XI
The Split Infinitive

Guests at the Leightons' were divided into two classes. There were those who were friends of Mr. Leighton, and who therefore were interested in art, or literature, or science, or public enterprise, but were not expected to go further; and there were those who came in a general way and who might be expected to be interested in anything from a game of tennis to a tea party. Of the first might be

reckoned the like of Mr. Sturgis, who painted pictures in a magnificent manner, and who, at the end of a large cigar, would breathe the heresies on the teaching of art which for ever paralyzed the artistic abilities of Elma. Mr. Sturgis was quite young enough for an Aunt Katharine public to quote his eligibility on all occasions.

"You don't understand, Aunt Katharine," Mabel told her once. "Nobody seems to understand that a man, even a young man, may adore papa without having to adore us at the same time. Mr. Sturgis is quite different from your kind of young man."

"Different from Robin, I suppose," sighed Aunt Katharine.

"Yes, quite different from Robin," said Mabel sedately. Robin had certainly from the first put Mr. Leighton into the position of being his daughter's father. Mr. Sturgis, on the other hand, found his first friend in Mr. Leighton because he had such a nice discriminating and most sympathetic enthusiasm for Art. Besides which Mr. Leighton had the attributes of an exceptional man in various respects.

The girls put Mr. Sturgis on the same high plane as their father and admired him openly accordingly. But there were others whom they put on this plane by reason of their accomplishments and yet did not admire at all.

Amongst these was the "Split Infinitive."

The first call on the part of Professor Theo. Clutterbuck was one never to be forgotten. He found a roomful of people who, so far as his own attitude to them was concerned, might have been so many pieces of furniture. Mr. Sturgis had at least the artist's discrimination which made him observe one's appearance, and he also allowed one to converse occasionally; but Dr. Clutterbuck rushed his one subject at Mr. Leighton from the moment of his entrance, and after that no one else existed.

"What more or less could you expect from the father of the Serpent?" asked Betty.

Lance was responsible for the nickname.

The Serpent, the elf-like daughter of the Professor, staying next to the Turbervilles, had introduced herself in a violent manner long ago to Betty and Elma. Sitting one day, hidden high in the maple tree, she cajoled her cat silently over the Turberville wall and from a wide branch sent him sprawling on a tea table. From the moment that the black cat drew a white paw from the cream jug, and a withering giggle from the maple tree disclosed the wicked little visage of the Serpent, war had been declared between the Clutterbucks and the Turbervilles. Lance occasionally removed the barrier and met the Professor in company with his own father.

"An awful crew," his verdict ran. "The Past Participle (Mrs. Clutterbuck) can't open her poor little timid mouth but the Split Infinitive is roaring at her.

Consequently she keeps as silent as the grave."

"Will you kindly explain?" said Mrs. Leighton patiently. "It's a long time since I studied grammar in that intimate way. What is the Split Infinitive and why the Past Participle?"

"It's like this, Mrs. Leighton, simple when you know–or when you are married to a brute like Clutterbuck," said Lance mischievously. "I beg your pardon. I know I ought to say that he is a genius and all that sort of thing. But 'brute' seems more explicit."

"Go on with your story," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Well–Clutterbuck married Mrs. Clutterbuck."

"That's generally the end of a story, isn't it?" asked Jean.

Lance was not to be interrupted.

"Trust a boy for gossip," exclaimed Betty. "Fire away, Lance."

"My aunt knew them," said Lance. "She, Mrs. C., was a little dear, awfully pink and pretty you know, and Clutterbuck, a big raw thin thing with wild sort of hair and dreamy manners. Well, they were awfully proud and pleased with themselves, and started off for their honeymoon like two happy babies."

"Will you kindly tell me how you knew this?" asked Mrs. Leighton helplessly.

"I heard my aunt telling my mother," said Lance.

"There's a gleam in your eye which I don't quite trust," Elma remarked sedately. "Go on."

"Everything went well," exclaimed Lance, "until one morning when Mrs. C., all rosy and chiffony you know, said 'My dear Theo, I don't remember to ever have been so happy.' Clutterbuck rose from the table, as pale as death. She cried, 'Theo, Theo, tell me, what is wrong?' 'Wrong,' cried Professor Clutterbuck, 'you have used the Split Infinitive!' Gospel, Mrs. Leighton," said Lance as a wind-up. "She's been the Past Participle ever since."

There was this amount of truth in Lance's story: that Dr. Clutterbuck was distinguished in his own career as Professor of Geology, that his English was irreproachable; and that Mrs. Clutterbuck had practically no English, since she was hardly ever known to speak at all. She shunned society; and the same introspective gaze of the Professor, which had skimmed the Leighton drawing-room and found there only the striking personality of Mr. Leighton, skimmed his own home in a like abstracted manner, and took no notice of the most striking personality in Ridgetown–Elsie, his daughter.

It was the black cat episode which precipitated the nickname of "The Serpent." Lance had always declared that this girl had an understanding with animals which was nothing short of uncanny. He happened to read *Elsie Venner*, and the names being alike, and temperament on similar lines, he immediately christened

her the Serpent. He caught her out at numberless pranks which were never reported to the diligent ears of Betty and May. One was that she had climbed to his bedroom and purloined a suit of clothes.

There was no end to what might be expected of this lonely little person.

Years ago, Betty and May had turned their backs on her in the cruel haphazard manner of two friends who might easily dispose of an outsider. Betty and May despised the Serpent because she "had a cheap governess," "couldn't afford to go to school," and "wore her hair in one plait."

The lonely little Serpent never properly forgave these insults.

Mrs. Leighton did not wholly encourage Lance in his tale.

"I do not think I approve of your being so down on these people," she said: "and if there is any truth in what you say, it is very tragic about poor Mrs. Clutterbuck, though she does not strike me as being a very capable person."

"Capable," asked Lance. "Who could remain capable, Mrs. Leighton, with a cold tap continually running freezing remarks down one's back. Don't you think it's a miracle she's alive?"

Mrs. Leighton preferred to remain on her smooth course of counsel.

"It never does to judge people like that," she exclaimed. "You do not know. To put it in a selfish manner, one day you may find the Clutterbucks being of more service to you than any one on earth."

She pulled at her knitting ball.

"You girls talk a great deal of romance and nonsense about people like the Dudgeons. Why don't you think something nice about that poor little Serpent for a change?"

The girls remembered not very long afterwards the prophetic nature of these remarks. That they should cultivate the Clutterbucks for any reason at all, however, seemed at that moment impossible.

Dr. Merryweather called the same afternoon.

It was one of the coincidences of life that he should immediately talk of the Clutterbucks.

"Know them?" he asked. "I think your husband does, doesn't he? Do you call on the wife at all?"

"No," answered Mrs. Leighton. "I never feel that I could get on with her very well either. Mr. Leighton meets the Professor and they talk a lot together, but it's quite away from domestic matters."

"It would be a bit of a kindness, I think," said the old Doctor, "your calling, I mean. There's too little public spirit amongst women, don't you think?"

"Oh, wouldn't it be a little impertinent perhaps to call, in that spirit?" asked Mrs. Leighton.

"Well, I don't know. The child is running wild. The parents are a pair of

babies where healthy education is concerned. Result, the child has no friends, and expends her affection, she has stores of it, on her animals. A dog gets run over and dies. What do you get then? She never squeaks. Not a moan, you observe. But she sits up in that tree of hers with a cat to do any comforting she may want–and her hair begins to come out in patches."

Mrs. Leighton's knitting fell to her lap.

"Her hair is coming out in patches?" she asked in a horrified voice.

"Yes. What else would you have when a child is allowed to mope. Something is bound to happen. Clergymen are of use when a child's naughty. But when it mopes itself ill, we are called in. Yet it's a clergyman's task after all. This child, on the way to being a woman, has never had one friend. Her mother is too timid to be really friendly with any one, and the husband is wrapped in his dry-as-dust philosophy–and where are you with a tender child like that?"

"But if Mrs. Clutterbuck can't be friendly with any one, why should I call?" asked Mrs. Leighton hopelessly.

"Your girls might become friendly with the child," said he. "I'm afraid I don't make a very good clergyman."

"They call her the Serpent, you know," said Mrs. Leighton, "very naughty of them. I shall do my best, Doctor. I didn't know her hair was coming out in patches."

Dr. Merryweather might be complimented on his new profession after all. It had been a master stroke to refer to the patches. Mrs. Leighton had known of its happening after illness or great worry. That a child should suffer in this quiet moping manner seemed pathetic.

"Yet, I don't think I'm the person to do a thing of this sort," Mrs. Leighton said hopelessly to Miss Meredith later in the day. "I do so object to intrude on people. I should imagine it indelicate of any one else to do the same to myself, you know."

"Very awkward, certainly," replied Miss Meredith primly.

"Oh, mummy," said Elma, "you know how kind Miss Grace is or Miss Annie. They say 'Isn't Betty a little pale at present?' and you get her a tonic. You think nothing of that. It's just the same with the Clutterbucks. Betty ought to behave herself and go and call with you, and get the Serpent to come. I think she looks a jolly little thing."

Elma was quite alone in that opinion.

"Jolly!" said Jean, "you might as well talk of a toadstool's being jolly. Still, Betty isn't a child. She shouldn't be squabbling. Betty ought to call."

"You know Dr. Clutterbuck, wouldn't you call on his wife?" asked Mrs. Leighton of Miss Meredith.

"Oh, I'm afraid I don't know him well enough. Robin rather dislikes him–

and, well, we have no young people, you see."

Miss Meredith was lame but definite.

"Then the sooner the better. Betty and I call to-morrow," said Mrs. Leighton.

They did, and to their astonishment found Mrs. Clutterbuck dimly but surely pleased. Nobody remained timid very long in Mrs. Leighton's kind presence, and the mutual subject of days long ago when it was no crime to talk of babies, broke the ice of years of reserve in Ridgetown with Mrs. Clutterbuck. The Serpent, after many pilgrimages on the part of the one maid to the garden, finally appeared. Mrs. Clutterbuck's restraint returned with the evident unwillingness of Elsie's attitude. Both retreated to the dumb condition so trying to onlookers.

The Serpent indeed paid Betty out for many months of torture. Her calm, disconcerting gaze never wavered, as she watched every movement of that ready enemy. Mrs. Leighton made her only mistake in showing definitely that she wanted to be kind to Elsie. That little lady's pale visage looked fiercely out at her and chilled the words that were intended to come.

It was as Betty described it a most "terrifying interview."

In the midst of it came a telegram to Mrs. Clutterbuck.

"Oh, you will excuse me," said she nervously. "We are expecting a friend."

During the interval of opening the envelope Elsie disappeared. It had the effect of warming Mrs. Clutterbuck to confidences once more.

"It is a great pleasure to me," said she. "My young cousin is coming. He is quite a distinguished, man. All Dr. Clutterbuck's people are distinguished, but my family are different. Except Arthur, whom Dr. Clutterbuck is quite pleased to meet. He is coming to-night."

She called the maid.

"Tell Miss Elsie it is the 5.40 train. Mr. Symington comes then."

She had a halting, staccato way of picking her small sentences, as though insecure of their effect.

"People enjoy coming to Ridgetown," said Mrs. Leighton lamely, in the endeavour to keep the wheels of conversation oiled more securely.

"Do they," asked the Professor's wife. Then she stammered a trifle. "A–a–that is–I have never had a visitor in Ridgetown till now. Dr. Clutterbuck does not care for visitors. Arthur is different from what others have been, I hope."

She seemed full of anxiety.

"Oh, I gave up long ago trying to please Mr. Leighton with my visitors," said Mrs. Leighton heartily and quite untruthfully. "Husbands must take their chance of that, you know." She rose to go.

"Please tell Dr. Clutterbuck he is never again to come to see us without you," she said, "and won't Elsie come to tea one day?"

On their departure Mrs. Clutterbuck turned to find a blazing little fury in the doorway.

"Mother," cried Elsie, "Mother! How could you! I shall never go to tea with Betty Leighton."

Her mother turned two eyes full of light on her. The light slowly died to dull patience again.

"We shall go down together to meet cousin Arthur," she said quietly. It seemed as though her bright thoughts must turn to drab colour automatically where either her husband or child was concerned.

It was characteristic of Elsie that, although blazing with wild anger and wicked little intentions, she should be unable to give voice to them at that moment. The inevitable obstinacy of her mother where the routine of the house was concerned, the drab colour of the one day which was invariably like the other, the cruel, cruel sameness of it all! It was impossible that Cousin Arthur should not be drab colour also.

"I'd rather remain here," she said at last. There was even some pleading in her tone.

"Your father said we had better meet Cousin Arthur," said her mother.

That was the remorseless end and beginning to everything. "Your father said" meant days and weeks and years of drab colour.

"Oh, let us go then," said Elsie. There was a drowning hopelessness in her voice, so great an emptiness that it was hard to believe she had merely used the words–"Let us go then."

Her mother accepted the answer without the sigh which burned in her heart because it had no outlet.

They proceeded to get ready to go out.

Mrs. Leighton and Betty by this time were chatting easily enough at the Merediths'. Mrs. Leighton had the feeling of an inexperienced general after a very indefinite victory.

"I do not possess the talent of inflicting myself gracefully on people," she said, "and the child is quite extraordinary. However, I liked the mother; she is a dear little woman."

Miss Meredith was only partially interested.

She arranged to walk home with them, and they set out in rather a slow manner.

"I can quite believe the child would be different in other surroundings," said Mrs. Leighton. "What a fine-looking man!" The one remark ran into the other automatically. In later days it seemed prophetic that the two people should be mentioned in one breath.

Mrs. Leighton was passing the station where arrivals from the train oc-

curred. A cab was drawn up, and into this a sunburned, athletic-looking young man put some traps. Then he handed in Mrs. Clutterbuck and Elsie.

Betty was greatly impressed.

"It must be Mr. Symington," said she.

"Well, for a timid lady, she has a very man-like cousin," exclaimed Mrs. Leighton. "I don't wonder she was allowed that one visitor at least."

Miss Meredith turned her head carefully to a more slanting angle, when she clearly saw the carriage drive past.

"Do you know, Mrs. Leighton," she said quite nimbly and happily, "it seems very hard that she should not have all the visitors she wants. Dr. Merryweather is quite right. None of us have any public spirit. I think I shall call on her to-morrow."

So Miss Meredith also called on Mrs. Clutterbuck.

CHAPTER XII
The Burglar

That Miss Meredith should turn in a moment from being freezingly uninterested in the Professor's wife, to being more friendly than any one else, seemed from one point of view very noble and distinguished, from another puzzling and peculiar.

"It's a little dis-disconcerting," said Elma at Miss Grace's. "We were so pleased at first when Miss Meredith pointed out our talents to us. Now she is pointing out Mrs. Clutterbuck's. And you know, last week, we didn't think Mrs. Clutterbuck had any talents at all."

"Ah–that is one of our little tragedies," said Miss Grace simply. "That we are obliged to outlive the extravagance of new friends."

"Do you think Miss Meredith won't keep it up where we are concerned?" asked Elma anxiously. "It would be a little sad if she didn't, wouldn't it? Like deceiving us to begin with; and now she may be deceiving Mrs. Clutterbuck."

"Oh, I don't know. She may work wonders with the Professor. It must be pure goodness that prompts her, dear."

"She must be used to being taken coldly," said Elma. "The Professor glares at her, and Elsie charges straight out to the back garden every time she calls."

"Is Mr. Symington there now?" asked Miss Grace.

"No, he left in two days. Papa was charmed with him. He and the Professor

and papa had an evening together when we were all at the Gardiners, and Mrs. Clutterbuck came too. Papa says Mr. Symington will make a name for himself one day. He is coming back to Ridgetown for a summer, some time soon, he liked it so much."

If only for the sudden interest taken by the Merediths in the Clutterbucks, it seemed necessary that they should become very much a part of the Leightons' life just then. But nothing could thaw the demeanour of Elsie. Dr. Merryweather found her improved slightly, but there were signs that she fretted inordinately. Nothing she did was what other girls did, and she was quite beyond the abstracted influences of her parents.

Adelaide Maud met the Professor.

"I hear you have a perfect little duck of a daughter," said she airily.

"Ha, hm," exclaimed the Professor, quite irresponsible in the matter of English for the moment. He had no real words for such a situation.

"Aren't you awfully proud of her?" asked Adelaide Maud.

The Professor recovered. That word "awfully!" It made him forget this new version of his daughter.

"So you are also in this conspiracy," whispered Lance afterwards to Adelaide Maud. "It's no good. A bomb under that fanatic is all that will move him."

But in the meantime Elsie made some moves for herself.

The Leightons were interested in their own affairs. Cuthbert was away, and Mr. Leighton had to make a run to London. He took Mabel with him and that occurrence was exciting enough in itself. As though to show up the helplessness of a family left without a man in the house, however, one night the maids roused every one in alarm. A burglar, it seems, was trying to get in at the pantry window. The girls, who were getting ready for bed, went quaking to their mother's room. Very frightened and most carefully they made their way to the vicinity of the pantry. There was certainly to be heard a faint shuffling.

"See'd him as plain as day, Miss, leaning up against the window. He moved some flower pots, and stood on 'em."

"Lock the kitchen door, telephone for the police, and light the gas," said Jean in a strained whisper.

She immediately obeyed her own orders by telephoning herself in a quick deep undertone, "Man at the pantry window trying to get in."

Then she took the taper from the shaking hands of Betty.

"I've read in *Home Notes* or somewhere that when burglars appear, if you light up they get frightened and go away."

They had roused Aunt Katharine who had come as company for a night or two and had gone to bed at half-past nine.

"What's the good of frightening them if you've sent for the police?" asked

Aunt Katharine. "Better let them get caught red-handed." She invariably objected to being roused from her first sleep.

"Oh goodness," wailed Betty. "It sounds like murder." She felt quite thrilled.

The maids cowered shivering in the passage.

"I heard them flower pots again, Miss. 'E's either got in or–'e's—-"

They distinctly heard the pantry window move.

"Well, the door between is locked," said the quiet voice of Mrs. Leighton, "and the police ought to be here very soon now."

Jean took the curlers out of her hair.

"I wish they would hurry up," said she.

Elma got under Aunt Katharine's eiderdown.

"I may as well die warm," she remarked with her teeth chattering.

There was not much inclination to jokes however, and Elma's speech was touched with a certain abandonment of fear. The situation was very trying. When the police did arrive and ran at a quick, stealthy run to the pantry window, they waited in terror for the expected shuffle and outcry.

"It's really awful," whispered Betty, clinging in despair to her mother.

"I can't think why they are so quiet," said Mrs. Leighton. "I think I must open the kitchen door."

"Oh, ma'am, please, ma'am." Cook at last became hysterical. "Don't move that door, ma'am; we've had scare enough. Let 'em catch 'em themselves."

Betty sat down on the stairs and leant her head on her hands.

"They must be arresting them," she said, "with handcuffs. And papa said they always have to read over the charge. They must be reading over the charge now, I think."

"In the dark!" said Aunt Katharine with a certain eloquent sniff.

"They have lanterns, dark lanterns. Isn't it beautiful?" said Betty.

She rose in her white dressing-gown.

"Listen," said she.

The door-bell suddenly clanged. Every one screamed except Mrs. Leighton.

"I do wish you would keep quiet," said she. "The police will think we are being murdered." She moved to the door. But again she was arrested by piercing directions.

"Talk to them at the window, mummy. They might be the burglars themselves. How are we to know? Do talk at the window."

"I'm extremely cold," said Mrs. Leighton, "and I'd rather ask them in whoever they are, than talk to them at an open window."

By the time she had finished, however, Jean, the valiant, had the window open and had discovered a policeman. They had "scoured the premises," he said, and no thief was to be found. Mrs. Leighton wrapped herself in an eiderdown

quilt.

"Will you come in, please, and open my kitchen door? Cook thinks they may be there," she said.

With deep thankfulness they let in the policeman. A sergeant appeared. He was very sympathetic and reassuring. "Best not to proceed too quickly," he said in a fat, slow way. "I have a man still outside watching. So if 'e's 'ere, Miss, we'll catch 'im either way. A grand thing the telephone."

He unlocked the door, and thoroughly investigated the kitchen.

"No signs," said he, "no signs."

The Leightons recovered some of their lost dignity and crowded in. Only Jean however had the satisfaction of hair in order and curlers discarded. How brave of Jean to remember at that dreadful moment of burglars in the house!

The sergeant had gas lighted and looked extremely puzzled.

"'E 's been 'ere right enough," said he. "Window open right enough. Was it fastened?"

He turned about, but the chief evidence had departed. With the advent of the policeman, cook and retinue had suddenly remembered their costumes. Like rabbits they had scuttled, first into the larder for cover, then into their own rooms, where they donned costumes more suitable for such impressive visitors. Mrs. Leighton's eye twinkled when she found cook appear in hastily found dress.

"Did you leave the window unfastened, cook?" she asked.

Cook was sure. "It was a thing as 'ow I never forgot, ma'am, but this one night—-"

Well, there seemed to be some uncertainty.

Elma's eyes during this were straying continually to a piece of notepaper lying on a table. First she thought, "It is some letter belonging to the maids." Then an impelling idea that the white paper had some other meaning forced her to pick it up. Every other person was engaged in watching the search of the sergeant and listening to his words.

"Some one has been right in this 'ere kitchen. It's the doors and windows unlatched that do it. Many a time since I've been here as sergeant, I've said to myself, 'We'll 'ave trouble yet over these unlatched windows.'"

"We have been so safe," complained Mrs. Leighton. "The poor people here too–so respectable and hard-working!"

"Drink, ma'am, drink," said the sergeant dismally, "you never know what it will do to a man."

He turned his lantern in his fat fingers.

"Oh," said Aunt Katharine with a sudden gasp, "I could stand a plain thief, hungry, may be, but master of himself. But a drunk man–it's dreadful."

She shivered and looked into corners as though one of the thieves might

be asleep there. The sergeant and his companion made a thorough search of the house.

None of them noticed Elma who sat as though cast in an eternal shiver and who surreptitiously read the scrap of notepaper.

"The Trail." That was all that was written in words but nimbly drawn on a turned back corner was a snaky, sinuous serpent. It had the eyes and the accusing glare of the expression of Elsie.

Elma wondered how far she might be right in keeping that document while the fat sergeant followed up his cues, and described the burglar. He was six feet at least it seemed, to have got in at the window where he did. "Flower pots or no flower pots, no smaller man could have done it." "Fool," thought Elma. "Elsie, who can climb a drain pipe, drop from a balcony, skim walls. Elsie had a way of which he doesn't know."

One thought that ran through her mind was the wickedness of any one's having called Elsie by such a name as the Serpent, and the tragedy of her having found it out. There was some excuse for this latest wickedest prank of all. The daring of Elsie confused her. What girl would be so devoid of fear as to move out at eleven at night and act the burglar? None of their set had the pluck for it, to put it in the baldest way. The idea that she might have been caught by the fat sergeant appalled Elma. She saw the scornful, wilful eyes of the Serpent dancing. Would she care? Yet she was the girl who had moped for the death of her dog till "her hair came out in patches."

She was still staring at the trail of the Serpent when the sergeant had finished his "tour of safety." After all, it might not have been a prank of Elsie's. It might have been a six-foot burglar. This accusing serpent–well, one couldn't go on a thing of that sort. It would be so amusing too that they were had practically out of bed in such a panic. Aunt Katharine looked very worn and disturbed. She would never forgive a practical joke. Elma held the paper tight, and down in her sympathetic, plaintive little soul felt she could never accuse a fly, far less a sensitive wicked little mischief like Elsie Clutterbuck.

She could not help laughing at themselves. But after all, who was looking after that wild child now? She nearly asked the sergeant to make his way home by the side lane by which she now knew Elsie had come. Then the certainty that this self-satisfied person with his six-foot burglar would never make anything of this slippery fearless little elf burglar kept her silent.

The sergeant finished his tour with great impressiveness. They were informed they might safely go to bed. A man or two would be about to see that no one was hanging round at all. It was very ridiculous to Elma. "After all," remarked the sergeant, "you are very early people. It is only eleven o'clock now. Hardly the dead of night, ma'am!"

"We are generally less early of course," said Mrs. Leighton, "but we were alone to-night. Mr. Leighton and my son are away."

"Ah, bad," remarked the sergeant. "It looks as though our friend had an inkling to that effect."

Elma thought the interview would never be over.

It was best to say nothing, or Mrs. Leighton would have had the town searched for Elsie. It was best in every way to crumple tight that incriminating paper and wonder why in the wide world Elsie had done it.

She met the Serpent the following day. There was an impish, happy look of mischief on that usually savage little face. Miss Meredith had been retailing to her mamma the terrific alarm which the Leightons had experienced on the previous evening. She met Elma full face and the smile on her lips died.

"Why did you do it?" asked Elma bluntly as though she had known the Serpent all her life. The Serpent glared blandly at Elma, then fiercely resumed her ordinary pose.

"You came to my house, or your mother did, to take me out of myself–charity-child sort of visit, you know. I heard of that, never mind how. I came to you to take you out of yourselves. I rather fancy I did it–didn't I?"

The ice of reserve had been broken at last and the Serpent was stinging in earnest.

Elma could only gaze at her.

"You think I'm a kind of 'case,' I suppose. Some one to feel good and generous over. Just because my hair is coming out in patches. Well, it's stopped coming out in patches but I still have a few calls to pay."

"Weren't you afraid last night?" asked Elma in complete wonder.

They had moved into a shadow against the wall.

"Afraid," blazed the Serpent, and then she trembled as though she would fall.

"Don't," cried Elma sharply, "don't faint."

"I nearly did–last night. I nearly did. It was dreadful going home. Who knows that it was I who was there?"

"I do," said Elma, "that's all."

"Don't tell a soul," wailed the burglar. "You won't, will you? I know it was awful of me, but such fun up to the moment, when–when I heard them moving inside. Then my legs grew so weak and it was like a dream where you can't get away. You shouldn't have called me the Serpent."

"We didn't," said Elma. "Not in the way you mean. But because you seemed to know about animals in a queer way–like Elsie Venner. Lance said she was half a snake, but just because she knew about snakes. It's difficult to explain."

"Lance?" asked the Serpent.

"Yes, why don't you speak to Lance now and then?"

"I pay him a higher compliment," said the queer little Serpent. "I wore his clothes last night."

"Oh," said Elma. "Oh! yet you could faint to-day–or nearly so."

"Isn't it wicked," said the Serpent. "A boy wouldn't have given in. They do much worse, and don't give way at the knees, you know. I only opened the window and threw in the note. It was nothing. I meant you just to be puzzled. I was there early and couldn't find a suitable window or a door, so I waited till the maids went to bed. They left a little window half open."

"Mamma ought to dismiss cook," said Elma primly.

It was a streak of the sunlight of confidence which did not illuminate the Serpent again for many days to come. Elma, however, at the time, and until she once more met the scornful glare of reserve habitual to that person, felt as though she had found a friend. They said good-bye in fairly jocular spirits, and Elma rushed home to give at least her "all-to-be-depended-upon" mother the news.

When she entered the drawing-room, however, Jean was describing the burglary to a company of people. Little shrieks and "Ohs" and "Oh, however did you do it?" "I should have died, really I should," were to be heard.

Jean's burglar was six feet two by this time and he had an "accomplice."

Elma thought she would choose another occasion on which to give her news to Mrs. Leighton.

CHAPTER XIII
A Reconciliation

Mr. Leighton was very sympathetic over the burglar. He heard of the occurrence in two ways, first in the fiery excited recital of Jean, and then in confidence from Elma. Mrs. Leighton was there also.

"Well, I never!" she said. "That poor little lonely soul stealing about at night! it's dreadful." She never thought for a moment of how foolish it made the rest of them seem.

"She isn't at all afraid of the dark, or the woods, or storms, or anything of that kind," said Elma. "She loves being out with her black cat when it's pitch dark. But she's terrified now of policemen, and I don't think she will ever call

properly on us all her life. She's perfectly savage with us."

Mr. Leighton stroked his hair in a preoccupied manner.

"One has to beware of what I should call professional goodness," he said mildly. "It's pleasant, of course, to feel that one does a nice action in being kind to the like of that stormy little person. But when she detects the effort at kindliness! Well, one ought sometimes to think that it must be humiliating to the needy to be palpably helped by the prosperous. There are various kinds of wealth, not all of them meaning money. This child has had no affection. Naturally she scorns a charitable gift of it. It's almost a slight on her own parents, you know."

"There," said Mrs. Leighton in a dismal way, "I told Dr. Merryweather I disliked intruding. It was an intrusion."

"Oh, it will be all right," replied Mr. Leighton. "Don't plague the child over this romp of being a burglar, that's all. And don't patronize her," he said to Elma. "Give her a chance of conferring something herself. It's sometimes a more dignified way of finding a friend."

Elma felt some of her high ideas of reclaiming the serpent topple. Miss Grace had advised differently. "Be kind and helpful," she had declared. Now her father seemed to think that it was the serpent's task to be the generous supporting figure. It made Elma just a little wild with that blazing little serpent Elsie.

For a year and a half their friendship with the serpent existed over crossed swords. She recovered in health, but the routine of her life never wavered. The force of habit in connection with her mother, that the Professor's tempestuous irritable habits should rule the house and that she should be kept quaking in a silence which must not be broken, could not be dispelled even by the diligent visits of Miss Meredith. Adelaide Maud drew off after the first encounter with the Professor. "I'm afraid that there will just have to be a tragic outburst every time Mrs. Clutterbuck says 'a new pair of shoes' instead of 'a pair of new shoes,'" said she, "nothing can save her now."

Soon the efforts of Dr. Merryweather were forgotten in the impenetrable attitude of the whole family.

At the end of eighteen months, most of Ridgetown was collected one day for a river regatta at a reach a few miles up from the town. Every one of any consequence except Lance, as Betty put it, was present. They rowed in boats and watched the races, picnicked and walked on the banks. One wonderful occurrence was the presence of Mrs. Clutterbuck and the Serpent. Mr. Symington had appeared once more and done something this time to penetrate the aloofness of their existence. He had come once or twice to the Leightons' with the Professor.

The girls put this friend of their father's on a new plane.

He could be engrossed in talk with their father and the Professor, and yet not gaze past the rest of the family as though they were "guinea pigs."

They now knew Mr. Sturgis well enough to tell him that he thought nothing more of them than that they were a land of decorative guinea pig. Mr. Symington, however, who had not seen them grow out of the childish stage, but had come on them one memorable evening when the picture of them, for a new person, was really something rather delightful to remember–Mr. Symington was immediately put on a pedestal of a new order. The difference was explained to Robin, who growled darkly. "It's perfectly charming to be received with deference by the man who is splendid enough to be received with deference by our own father," explained Jean. "Don't you see?"

Robin saw in a savage manner. He had never been on this particular pedestal. With all his sister's enthusiasm for Mr. Symington, he could see little to like in that person.

Mr. Symington studied in lonely parts of the world the wild life an ordinary sportsman would bring down with his gun. He was manly, yet learned. Delightfully young, yet stamped with the dignity of experience. Robin in his presence felt a middle-aged oppression in himself, which could not be explained by years.

He was particularly galled by his sister's persistence in keeping near the Clutterbuck party on the Saturday of the river regatta.

There were exciting moments of boat races, duck races, swimming competitions, and so forth. Then came the afternoon when everybody picnicked.

The Leightons had a crowd of friends with them, and took tea near the pool by the weir.

May undertook to teach Betty how to scull in an outrigger, which one of the racers had left in their care for the moment. Betty was daring and rather skilful to begin with. It seemed lamentable that with so many looking on, she should suddenly catch a real crab. May, standing on the bank, screamed to her, as Betty's frail little boat went swinging rather wildly under the trees of an island.

"Look here," cried Jean to May sharply. "What made you two begin playing in such a dangerous part? Sit still," she shouted wildly to Betty.

It seemed as if no one had understood that there was any danger in these little pranks of Betty's, till her boat was swept into mid-stream, and ran hard into certain collision on the island. Jean called for some one to take a boat out to Betty. Then the full danger of the situation flashed on them. Just a few minutes before, a detachment had gone up to the starting point, and no boat was left in which one might reach Betty.

"Sit still," shouted Jean again, "hold on to the trees or something."

It had occurred in a flash. Betty in the quiet water was all very well, but Betty, the timid, out alone on a swirling river with a weir in the very near distance, this Betty lost her head.

Jean's scream, "Sit still," had the effect of frightening her more than any-

thing. "It was what one was advised to do when horses were running off, or something particularly dreadful was about to happen," thought Betty.

She first lost an oar, then splashed herself wildly in the attempt to recover it. The sudden rocking of her "shining little cockle shell," as she had called it only a minute before, alarmed her more than anything. She was being swept on the island, deep water everywhere around it. With a gasp of fear she rose to catch the tree branches, missed, upset the cockle shell at last, and fell into the river.

Those on the bank, for a swift moment, "or was it for centuries," stood paralysed.

"Oh!" cried Jean, "oh!"

There was a swift sudden rush behind them, "like a swallow diving through a cornfield," said May later. A tense, victorious little figure, flinging off hat and a garment of sorts; a splash; a dark head driving in an incredibly swift way through water impatiently almost trodden upon by two little wildly skimming hands, then a voice when Betty rose: "Lie on your back, I'll be with you in a minute," and the valiant little Serpent was off to the saving of Betty. It was sufficiently terrifying on account of the weir. If Elsie reached Betty, would she have the strength to bring her back. If Elsie did not reach Betty, Betty could not swim. It was dreadful. Jean, second-rate swimmer as she was, would have been in herself by this time, but that Elma held her.

"She's got her," she whispered with a grey face. They shouted when the Serpent turned slightly with Betty. She was like a fierce little schoolmistress. "Don't interfere with me, he on your back. Keep lying on your back," and Betty obeyed. At the supreme moment the Serpent had come into her own, and displayed at last the talent which till then had only been expended on her cats and dogs. "Lie still," she growled, and obediently, almost trustingly, Betty lay like a little white-faced drowned Ophelia. Then "Come along with that boat," sang out the Serpent cheerily.

Round the bend of the river above, at sound of their cries had come "Hereward the Wake, oh how magnificent," sobbed Jean. It was Mr. Symington.

The Serpent, with hard serviceable little strokes, piloted Betty lightly out of the strength of the current. Mr. Symington was past and gently back to them before a minute had elapsed.

"Grip the gunwale," he said cheerily to Elsie. It was the tone of a man addressing his compatriot.

(Oh! how magnificent of the Serpent.)

"Now," he said. "Keep a tight hold on her still. I must get you into quiet water." He pulled hard. Immediately he had them into the backwater. It was rather splendid to see him get hold of a tree, tie the boat, and be at the side of the Serpent before one could breathe. He had rowed in with the full strength of

a strong man, and in a minute he was as tenderly raising Betty. He had never properly removed his eyes from her face. "She was just faulting. You held on well," he said approvingly. "Don't let her sisters see her at present." He lifted Betty to the bank.

"Quick, open your eyes," he said commandingly.

"Look here," called the Serpent. She had scrambled neatly out by herself, "Betty, Betty Leighton, oh! Betty, open your eyes." There was an answering quiver. "Quick, Betty, before your sisters come. Don't frighten them. Open your eyes, Betty."

Mr. Symington rubbed Betty's hands smoothly in a quick experienced manner.

Betty opened her eyes and looked at the Serpent.

"Oh, Elsie," she said, "Elsie, you sweet little Serpent!" It was an end to the crossed swords feud. Elsie took her in her arms and cried.

When the girls arrived panic-stricken they found Mr. Symington trying to get a coherent answer to his orders from two bedraggled girls, who could do nothing but weep over each other. The brave little Serpent had lost her nerve once more.

"Oh!" she said, "it's very wicked to be a girl. Boys wouldn't give way like this."

Jean looked at her narrowly, "Do you always go about in gymnasium dress, ready to save people?" she asked, with the remains of fear in her voice.

The brave little Serpent looked down on her costume, and the red which glowed in her cheeks only from mortification ran slowly up and dyed her pale face crimson. "Oh!" she said, "oh!" and sat speechless.

Betty sat up shivering. "I do call that presence of mind, don't you? She flung off her skirt, didn't you, dear?"

The Serpent would have answered except that the "dear" unnerved her. She faded to tears once more.

"Come, come," said Mr. Symington.

And at that, as they afterwards remembered, Mabel "came."

She came through the trees in a white dress, and the sunshine threw patches of beautiful colour on her hair.

"Oh, little Betty!" she cried.

Then she saw the Serpent.

She took Elsie right up against the beautiful white dress and kissed her. Mabel could not speak at all. But her eyes glowed. She turned them full on Mr. Symington. "We must take these children home at once," she said.

Mr. Symington looked as though he had been rescuing an army. "Yes," said he gravely.

Robin had trailed in looking somewhat dissatisfied.

"Jean would go, wouldn't she?" he asked.

"Oh no, I don't want mummy to know," said Mabel. "She is up there with Mrs. Clutterbuck. These two must go home, and get hot baths, and be put to bed and sat upon, or they won't stay there. Where can we get a cab, I wonder?"

"Here," said a voice.

Adelaide Maud now came through that beautiful pathway of sun-patched trees with Elma. "I've heard all about it," said she, "and we have the carriage. Borrow wraps from every one and tuck them in. We shall keep Mrs. Clutterbuck employed till Mr. Symington comes back."

It seemed that they all took it for granted that Mr. Symington would go.

Robin showed signs of losing his temper. Mabel as a rule, when these imperious fits descended on him began to investigate her conduct and wonder where she might alter it in order that he might be appeased. This time, however, she was too anxious and concerned over Betty, and while Jean might be quite wholehearted in her manner of looking after people, one could not depend on her for knowing the best ways in which to set about it. In any case, the two could not be kept there shivering.

Adelaide Maud was a trifle indignant at the interruption. "Quick," she said to Mr. Symington, "get them in and off."

"Oh you are the fairy princess, always, somehow, aren't you," sighed Betty, happily, as on their being tucked in rugs and waterproofs, Adelaide Maud gave quick decided orders to the coachman.

"Isn't she just like a story book," she sighed rapturously. They drove swirling homewards, in a damp quick exciting way until they pulled up at the door of the White House.

"Oh, mine was nearer," said the Serpent nervously. She had never entered the portals of the White House in this intimate manner, and suddenly longed for loneliness once more.

"Well," said Mabel sweetly and nicely, "you will just have to imagine that this is as near for to-day at least. Because I am going to put you to bed."

They laughed very happily because they were being put to bed like babies.

"If only Cuthbert were here," said Mabel anxiously and in a motherly little way to Mr. Symington, afterwards, "he would tell me whether they oughtn't to have a hot drink, and a number of other things they say they won't have."

"I should give them a hot drink," said Mr. Symington with his grave eyes dancing a trifle. "And keep them in blankets for an hour or two."

It was he who found Mr. Leighton and told him a little of what had happened. ("Oh the conspiracies which shield a parent!") For days Mr. and Mrs. Leighton, the Professor and Mrs. Clutterbuck, had an idea that the two girls had

merely fallen in and got very wet. In any case, Elsie often came home in considerable disrepair. When one found, however, that neither was the worse for the fright, Elsie was made a real heroine. It changed her attitude completely. The Leightons liked her now whether they felt charitable or not. It was a great relief. And one day her own father focussed his far-away gaze on her, as though he had only then considered that there was anything on which to look at her particular place at table.

"They tell me–ahem–that you can swim," he exclaimed. "Very excellent exercise, very."

To an outsider it did not sound like praise, but his sentence set Elsie's heart jumping in a joyous manner.

"Oh, papa," she said. "I was very frightened afterwards."

"Hem," said he, "an excellent time in which to be frightened."

Mrs. Clutterbuck congratulated herself on his having said it (she would have made it "time to be frightened in," and the Professor in such good humour, too!)

Happier days had really dawned in that grim household however.

The growing up of the courage of Elsie became a wonderful thing.

Meanwhile other events had occurred than the saving of Betty. Robin had had to go home alone, and Lance had the benefit of some of his ill-humour on meeting him on the way.

"Who shot cock Robin to-day?" reflected Lance with speculative eyes on that retreating person. He nearly ran into a very athletic figure coming swinging round on him from the Leightons'.

Hereward the Wake was in his most magnificent mood and his eyes shone with the light of achievement. He was speaking when he turned, and the words dropped automatically even before the impish gaze of Lance.

"Knew you and named a star," quoted Mr. Symington.

"Now what on earth has that to do with the boat race?" asked Lance.

CHAPTER XIV
The First Peal

Mabel was twenty-one when her cousin Isobel Leighton came to make her home at the White House. Isobel's mother had died ten years before, and since the more

recent death of her father, she had stayed for a year or two with her mother's relations. Now, suddenly, it seemed imperative that Mr. Leighton should offer her a place in his own family, since various changes elsewhere left her without a home. It was the most natural thing in the world that everybody should be pleased. The girls got a room ready for her, and took pains towards having it specially attractive. They even made plans amongst their friends for Isobel to be suitably entertained. "Though how we are to manage about dance invitations and that sort of thing, I can't think," said Jean. "It's bad enough with two girls, and sometimes no man at all. It will be awful with three."

Elma herself was on the verge of being eligible for invitations. Mabel looked as though she did not mind much. Worrying thoughts of her own were perplexing her, thoughts which she could not share with any one just then. The spring of her life had been one to delight in. Tendrils of friendship had kept her safely planted where Jean, the revolutionist, tore everything by the roots. What was not good enough for Jean immediately was had up and cast away. What had not been good enough for Jean had been their own silly enthusiasm for the Story Books. Jean in her own mind had disposed of the whole romance of this by beating Theodora at golf. She now patronized Theodora, and ignored the others. Adelaide Maud she already considered entirely *passé*.

The confidences of long ago were shaken into an unromantic present. The Dudgeons called ceremoniously twice a year, and invited the girls to their dances. Mabel and Jean went, occasionally with Cuthbert "cut in marble," and were inexpressibly bored in that large establishment.

"It doesn't seem to make up for other things that one sits on velvet pile and has a different footman for each sauce," Mabel declared. "We have to face the fact that the Dudgeon establishment is appallingly ugly."

So much for Mrs. Dudgeon's beaded work cushion effect.

"It's only a woman who would make you leave an early Victorian drawing-room for a Georgian hall, and get you on an ottoman of the third Empire, and expect you to admire the mixture," growled Cuthbert. It was this sort of talk that was to be had out of him after he had been to the Dudgeons' balls.

Elma still prized her meetings with Adelaide Maud at Miss Grace's, but recognized where her friendship ceased there. There seemed no getting further into the affections of Adelaide Maud than through that warm comradeship at Miss Grace's, or through her outspoken admiration for Mr. Leighton. And "Adelaide Maud had grown *passé*" Jean had declared.

The world seemed very cold and unreal at this juncture.

Mabel came into Elma's room one day looking very disturbed. There was a fleeting questioning look of "Are you to be trusted?" in her eye.

"You know I'm to be trusted, Mabs," said Elma, as though they had been

discussing the iniquity of anything else. "You aren't vexed at Isobel's coming are you?"

"Oh, no," said Mabel quickly, "it isn't that, it's other things." She threw herself languidly on a couch.

"Haven't you noticed that the Merediths haven't been here for a fortnight?"

Elma brushed diligently at fair, very wavy hair. It fell in layers of soft brown, and shone a little with gold where the light touched the ripples, diligently created with over-night plaiting. She had grown, but in a slender manner, and was admittedly the *petite* member of the family. There was a wealth of comprehension in the glance she let fall on Mabel.

"Mabel, you don't mean to quarrel with them do you?"

It seemed that the worst would happen if that happened.

"I don't suppose I shall have the chance," said Mabel. She took a rose out of a vase of flowers, and began to pluck absently at the petals.

"I think I should love to have the chance."

"Oh, Mabel," said Elma distractedly, "how dreadful of you! And how fatal it might be! I shouldn't mind quarrelling a little. I think indeed it would be lovely, if one were quite sure, perfectly convinced, that one could make it up again. That's why I enjoy a play so much. Every one may be simply disgusting, but they are bound to make it up. If only one could be absolutely safe in real life! But you can't. I don't believe Mr. Meredith would make it up."

"I am sure he wouldn't." Mabel plucked at a pink leaf stormily. "That's why I should like to quarrel with him."

"Mabs, don't you care for him now?" Elma's eyes grew wide with trouble. It was not so much that Mabel had given any definite idea of having cared for Mr. Meredith. It had been a situation accepted long ago as the proper situation for Mabel, that there should be an "understanding" in connexion with Mr. Meredith. It established limitless seas of uncertainty if anything happened to this "understanding" except the most desirable happening. Mabel leaned her head on her hand.

"You see, dear," she exclaimed, "this is how it is. Long ago, papa so much disliked our talking about getting married, any of us, even in fun you know, that it was much easier, when Mr. Meredith came, just to be friends–very great friends, you know, but still–friends. Papa always said he wouldn't let one of us marry till we were twenty-three. That was definite enough. And he has been quite pleased that we haven't badgered him into getting engaged. Still, I always think that Robin ought to have said to him, once at least, that sometime he wanted to marry me. He didn't, I just went on playing his accompaniments, and being complimented by his sister. Now–now, what do you think? He has grown annoyed with papa for being so kind to Mr. Symington. Fancy his dictating about papa!"

Mabel's eyes grew round and innocent.

"But that's because Mr. Symington is nice to you, perhaps," said Elma, as though this burst of comprehension was a great discovery on her part.

"Exactly," said Mabel calmly. "But if you leave unprotected a cake from which any one may take a slice, you can't blame people when they try to help themselves. Robin should be able to say to Mr. Symington, 'Hands off–this is my property,' and then there would be no trouble. As it is, he wants me to do the ordering off, papa's friend too!"

"What did you say to him, Mabel?" Elma asked the question in despair.

"I said that when Mr. Symington had really got on–then would be the time to order him off."

Mabel fanned herself gently. Then her lip quivered.

"I don't think papa ever meant to let me in for an ignominious position of this sort–but here I am. If Robin won't champion me, who will?"

"Oh, but surely," said Elma, "surely Robin Meredith would never—-"

"That's the trouble. He would," said Mabel. "And once you've found that out about a man–you simply can't–you can't believe in him, that's all."

Elma sat in a wretched heap on her bed.

"I think it's horrid of him to let you feel like that," she said. "Other men wouldn't. Cuthbert wouldn't to any one he cared for."

"Lots wouldn't," said Mabel. "That's why it's so ignominious, to have thought so much of this one all these years!"

"Mr. Maclean wouldn't," said Elma. She had always wondered why Mabel had ignored him in her matrimonial plans.

"No, I don't believe he would," said Mabel. "But that's no good to me, is it?"

"Mr. Symington wouldn't," said Elma.

"Oh, Elma!"

Mabel's eyes grew frightened. "That's what scares me. I sit and sit and say, Mr. Symington never would. It makes Robin seems so thin and insignificant. He simply crumples up. And Mr. Symington grows large and honourable, and such a man! And I'm supposed in some way to be dedicated to Robin. It's like having your tombstone cut before you are dead. Oh, Elma, whatever shall I do!"

Elma was quite pale. The lines of thought had long ago disappeared with the puckerings of wonder on her face. Here indeed was thunder booming with a vengeance, and near, not far off like that golden picture of years ago. Mabs was in deep trouble.

"You see what would happen if I told papa? He would order off Mr. Symington in a great fright, because he has never thought somehow that any of us were thinking of him except that he is an awfully clever man! I think also that papa would turn Robin out of the house."

"I believe he would," said Elma in a whisper.

"And then–how awful! All our friends, their friends! Everywhere we go, we should meet Sarah Meredith! What a life for us! I should like to quarrel–just because I'm being so badly treated, but the consequences would be perfectly awful," said Mabel. She took it as though none of it could be helped.

Elma was quite crumpled with the agitation of her feelings.

"You must tell papa, Mabel," she said gently.

"Oh, Elma, I can't–about Mr. Symington. Imagine Mr. Symington's ever knowing and thinking–'What do I care for any of these chits of girls!' Robin has always got wild–if I smiled to my drawing master even. What I hate, is being dictated to now. And his sulking–instead of standing by me if there is any trouble. He isn't a man."

A sharp ring at the bell, and rat-tat of the postman might be heard. Somebody called up that a letter had come for Mabel.

Elma went for it and produced it with quaking heart. The writing seemed something very different to any of the letters which came to Mabel.

It was from Mr. Symington.

It explained in the gentlest possible way that he had learned from Miss Meredith that his presence in Ridgetown caused some difficulty of which he had never even dreamed. He wrote as a great friend of her dear father's, and a most loyal admirer of her family, to say the easiest matter in the world was being effected, and that his visit to Ridgetown had come to an end.

The paper shook gently in Mabel's fingers, and fell quivering and uncertain to the floor. She looked up piteously and quite helplessly at Elma, like a child seeking shelter, and then buried her head on the couch. She cried in long, strangled sobs, while Elma stood staring at her.

Elma pulled herself together at last.

"Mabel dear, I'm going to read it."

Mabel nodded into her bent arms.

"Oh but," said Elma after shakingly perusing that document, "but he can't–he can't do this. It's dreadful. It's like blaming you! What can Miss Meredith have said? Oh! Mabel! Mabel, I shall cut that woman dead wherever and however I meet her. Oh, Mabel–what a creature! Don't you cry. Papa will explain to Mr. Symington. He will believe papa. Papa will explain that you had nothing to do with it, that you don't mind whether he goes or stays–that—-"

"But I do mind," said Mabel in cold, awe-struck tones. "That's the awful part. And it's nothing but the smallness of Robin that has taught me, Mr. Symington is the only man worth knowing in the whole earth."

She clasped her hands in a hopeless way.

"And he has been sent away, banished, by the very man who should have

made it impossible for me to see any good quality in any one else except himself."

"Who will play Mr. Meredith's accompaniments now?" Elma asked. "Why they can't get on without you, dear." She still believed that just as plays were arranged, so should the affairs of Mabel come back to their original placidity.

"I shall never play another note for Robin Meredith," said Mabel.

Elma could not yet doubt but that Robin would come directly he knew how satisfactorily he had disposed of his rival. One hoped that Mr. Symington had only explained so far to Mabel. That afternoon they were to meet Isobel, so that every one was more or less occupied, and always on this same evening of the week, Friday, the Merediths were at an open "at home" which the friends of the Leightons attended at the White House. The question was, would the Merediths come?

Mabel did not seem to care whether they came or not. She sat, crushing the letter and not looking at Elma.

"Elma dear," she said at last, "I can't stand this. I shall tell papa. Mamma will only say 'I told you so' for our having been such friends with the Merediths. But I can't bear that she shouldn't know I'm not ashamed of anything," she caught her breath with a slight sob. "But I'm done with Robin."

It seemed magnificent to Elma that for her own honour she should jeopardize so much. Men like Mr. Meredith were so rare in Ridgetown. Yet when she asked her, couldn't she still admire Robin, Mabel said very truthfully then "No."

Elma would have liked to say that it didn't matter about Mr. Symington.

"Robin will never enter this house again," Mabel said with quivering lip.

But he came–several times.

CHAPTER XV
The Arrival

The 4.50 train hammered and pounded in a jerkily driven manner to Ridgetown. It was hot, and most of the windows lay open in the endeavour to catch any air that had escaped being stifled in smoke and the dust of iron. Miss Meredith occupied a first-class carriage together with two people. One, an old gentleman who travelled daily and who did not count, the other a dark-eyed girl of pale complexion. She wore irreproachably fitting tweeds, and as though to contradict the severity of their trim appearance, a very flamboyant red hat. It was tip-tilted

in a smart way over her nose, and had an air of seeming to make every other hat within eyeshot scream dejectedly, "I come from the country."

The red hat came from the town, London presumably. The dark girl seemed in a petulant mood, as though the atmosphere of the carriage stifled her in more ways than by its being uncontrollably hot. It was out of gear with the smooth, madonna-like appearance of her features, that she should be petulant at all. There was an indescribable placidity about her carriage and expression which contradicted her movements at this moment of nearing Ridgetown. She caught Miss Meredith's eye on her, and seemed annoyed at the interest it displayed. Miss Meredith was much impressed by her appearance. As a rule, she confined her ideas of people in Ridgetown either to their being "refined" or "rather vulgar." This girl had not the air of being either of those two. She was a type which had never been dissected in Ridgetown. It was as evident that one would neither say of her that she was the complete lady, nor yet that she was un-ladylike. One could say that she was good-looking, adorably good-looking. Calm, lucid eyes, containing a calculating challenge in their expression, milky complexion framing their mysterious depths of darkness, red lips parting occasionally with her breathing over startlingly white teeth, this was all very different to the rosebud complexions, the rather shy demeanour of Ridgetown.

Miss Meredith could act as a very capable little policeman when she became interested in any one. She determined to act the policeman now that she was aware this must be a visitor to Ridgetown. They had passed the last slow stopping-place, and were nearing what must be her destination. Each station without the name of Ridgetown had evidently annoyed the dark girl.

"The next station is Ridgetown," said Miss Meredith pleasantly.

The dark girl stared.

"Oh, ah, is it?" she asked negligently.

An old gentleman rose from the corner and began collecting his belongings.

"May I help you?" he asked, and lifted down her dressing case.

She became radiant.

"Thank you so much," she said very gracefully.

Miss Meredith felt in an annoyed manner that her own overtures had been unrecognized in favour of these. She could be an abject person, however, wherever she intended to make an impression, and decided not to be non-plussed too soon. Doubtless the dark girl was about to visit some friend of her own. She rose at her end of the carriage to get a parasol from the rack. It allowed the new arrival to swing out on the platform even before the train was stopped.

Miss Meredith saw Isobel being received by the Leightons.

This was enough to allow of Miss Meredith's slipping away unnoticed before a porter came to find the neglected dressing bag. But she went unwillingly,

and in a new riot of opinion. The truth came forcibly that the new cousin would be a great sensation in Ridgetown. It was strange that she had never dreamed that the dark girl might be the Leightons' cousin. No occasion would be complete without her. A few weeks ago, and she might have had her first reception at the Merediths', where they should have had the distinction of introducing her. Now, owing to late events, relations might be rather strained between themselves and the Leightons.

Miss Meredith had grown more ambitious each year with regard to her brother. She was the ladder by which he had climbed into social prominence in Ridgetown. Her diligence overcame all obstacles. At first, she had deemed it delightful that he should be attached to Mabel, now it seemed much more appropriate that he should make the most of the Dudgeons. Through the Leightons they had formed a slight acquaintance there, which had lately shown signs of development. It became necessary to sow seeds of disaffection in the mind of Robin where the Leightons were concerned. He had become too much of their world. He was a man not easily influenced, and he had had a great affection for Mabel. But the constant wearing of the stone had invariably been the treatment for Robin, and lately a good deal of wearing had been necessary on account of Mr. Symington.

She began to recall just how much she had said to Mr. Symington. Her face burned with the recollection that he had shown how much he thought of Mabel. She had put the matter from Mabel's point of view. While Mr. Symington was there, Mabel's happiness with Robin was interfered with. Miss Meredith had intended to infer that it was his constant attendance at the White House which was being called in question. Whereas, he had already, unknown to her, settled on it as meaning Ridgetown. He had interrupted her abruptly, with stern lips, "Pardon me, but will you let me know distinctly,–is Miss Leighton engaged to your brother?" Miss Meredith saw her chance and took it at a run. "Yes," she said. It was hardly a lie, considering how Robin and Mabel had been linked for so many years in a tacit sort of manner.

"That–I had not understood," said Mr. Symington. Whereupon he immediately wrote his letter to Mabel.

Miss Meredith had always had her own ideas of Mr. Symington. He was not the companion for these very young girls. He was not old, on the other hand, but he possessed a temperament which put him on another plane than that of the rather boisterous Leighton family. On the Meredith plane, if one would have the words spoken.

"Robin," she said that evening, after the arrival of Isobel, "let us go down to the Leightons' as though nothing had happened."

Robin turned a reserved mask of a countenance in her direction.

”You women can do anything,” he said.

The weariness of being without these kaleidoscopic friends of theirs had already beset him. They were still in time to find the old level again. It would certainly be a freezing world without the Leightons. Everybody knew that one might get social advantages with the Dudgeons, but one had always a ripping time with the Leightons.

Miss Meredith, on her part, began to wonder, now that Mr. Symington was warned and would keep Robin from feeling the desirability of the girl whom two men were after, whether Robin himself might be more gently weaned than by thus being borne away on an open rupture. Robin was in the position of a man who had been brought up by mother and sister. Practically, whatever he had touched all his life had remained his own, sacred and inviolate. It seemed that Mabel ought to have remained his own merely because he had once stretched out his hand in her direction. Then, he began to find that he reckoned with a family which had been taught unselfishness.

Isobel, to do her justice, always imagined that Mabel from the reserve of her welcome on the occasion of her arrival, resented her presence at the White House. She noticed that of all the girls to welcome her, Mabel kept a constrained silence. This she immediately put down to a personal distaste of herself, and controlled her actions accordingly. From the first moment of greeting her aunt and uncle, and sitting down to table, she upheld a sweetness of character which was unassailable, and which put Mabel’s distrait manner into rather wicked relief. Isobel’s was a nature, formed and articulate, entirely independent of the feelings and sympathies of others, a nature which could thrive and blossom on any trouble and disappointment, so long as these were not her own. She had learned in the mixed teaching of her rather stranded life, that very little trouble or disappointment came in the way of those who could see what they wanted and grab with both hands accordingly. She determined to grab with both hands every benefit to be derived from being leader in the Leighton family. She had come there with the intention of being leader. Before the meal was over, she had gained the good opinion of all except Mabel, an intentional exclusion on her part. Mabel had received her without effusion. Here was rivalry. In the most methodical and determined manner, she began a long siege of those rights and privileges which Mabel, as head of the Leighton girls, had never had really questioned before. She supplied a link in their musical circle, incomplete before. She could sing. Her methods were purely technical and so highly controlled, that the rather soulful playing of the Leighton girls shrank a little into a background of their own making. Isobel’s voice was like a clear photograph, developed to the last shred of minuteness. One heard her notes working with the precision of a musical box. The tiring nature of her accomplishments was never evident

at a first performance. These only appeared to be ripplingly brilliant. She had the finished air and mechanical mannerisms of the operatic artist, and they became startlingly effective in a room where music only in its natural and most picturesque aspect had been indulged. Mr. Leighton endeavoured to reconcile himself to a person who was invariably at top notes, and Isobel deceived herself into thinking that she charmed him. She charmed the others however, and Jean especially was at her feet. It struck her that probably she would be able to get more of the fat of life out of Jean than out of any one. She noted that Jean ordered a good deal where others consulted or merely suggested. Ordering was more in her line.

Of Mrs. Leighton she took no account whatever, except that she was invariably sweet in her presence.

It dawned on no one that a very dangerous element had been introduced into the clear heaven of the wise rule of the White House.

Mabel's mind at the start, it is true, was in a subconscious condition of warning. The particular kind of warning she could not recognize, but, long after, attached it to the attitude of Isobel. In a month or two, she found that while her family still remained outwardly at one with her, a subtle disrespect of any opinion of hers, a discontent at some of her mildest plans, seemed to invade the others. It came upon her that her ideas were very young and crude with Isobel there to give finer ones.

Ah! that was it. Isobel was so much better equipped for deciding things than she was. It affected Mabel's playing when she imagined that her family found it at last not good enough. She never could play for Isobel. On the first night of arrival, Mabel was most concerned, however, on how she was to give certain news to her father and mother. Mr. Leighton had heard from Mr. Symington–only that he had been called away. Mabel took the news in public with a great shrinking Her heart cried out in rebellion, and instead of indulging that wild cry, she had to be interested in the arrival of Isobel. She caught Isobel's keen darkness of gaze on her, and shifted weakly under its influence to apparent unconcern and laughter.

At the worst of it, when they were taking tea in the drawing-room after dinner, Robin and his sister came in. Miss Meredith's *coup* was worth her fear and distrust in experimenting with it. Robin became genuinely interested in Isobel. This made him almost kind to Mabel.

It concentrated all Mabel's wild rush of feelings to a triumph of pride. Where she would willingly have gone to her room and had it out with herself, she waited calmly in the drawing-room and heard Isobel's first song.

Miss Meredith's heart glowed feebly. She had won her point. But Mabel's face heralded disaster.

Elma too would not look at her.

Elma trembled with the weight of what she would like to say to Sarah Meredith, and could not. Feebly she determined not to shake hands with her, then found herself as having done it.

Mr. Leighton talked quite unconcernedly about the departure of Mr. Symington. "Can you tell me why he leaves us so suddenly?" he asked of Miss Meredith.

She had always made a point of liking to be asked about Mr. Symington. This time she seemed afraid of the subject, certainly of Mr. Leighton's airy manner of handling it. Robin's face flushed hotly in an enraged sort of manner. Mabel's grew cold.

With all their experience of each other, and their knowledge of what had been going on, none in the room knew the nature of the crisis at hand, except the actors in it, and Elma. But, by the intuition of a nature that scented disaster easily and wilfully, Isobel, without a word from one of them, saw some of these hearts laid bare.

Miss Meredith, ill at ease, interested her immensely.

Miss Meredith at last answered that she knew nothing of the reason why Mr. Symington had left so abruptly.

Elma rose shaking in every limb.

"That is not true," she said. Her voice, more that her words carried effect.

She could go no further, she could only say, "That is not true."

Mrs. Leighton looked very surprised, and then helplessly bewildered. Miss Meredith had a talent for seeing her chance. She saw it here. She turned in a rather foolish way, as though they intended some compliment.

"Indeed," said she, "you all over-rate my influence with Mr. Symington. It is nothing to me whether he goes or stays."

Mabel pulled Elma into a corner.

"Oh shut up dear, for Heaven's sake shut up!" she whispered, and that incident was closed.

But Isobel began to play with a loud triumphant accompaniment and sang in a manner which might have shown every one the thing which she thought she had just discovered.

Instead, they all declared they had never heard such clear top notes.

CHAPTER XVI

The Thin Edge of the Wedge

It seemed to Mabel that Isobel's proposals, kindly worded and prettily mentioned, were always impossible of acceptance. She did nothing but refuse these overtures to friendship for the next week or so. This was the more awkward since she was particularly anxious to make everything nice for Isobel. But the proposals and the overtures seemed continually to occur in connexion with the Merediths. It was a ridiculous thing of course that Isobel should be proposing anything in connexion with the Merediths.

Jean had now found some one after her own heart, one who did not wait for invitations, but thought immediately on a plan for making one's self known to people. Isobel had already called on the Dudgeons. Her progress was a royal one, and Mabel hated herself for the way she alone, though often with the backing up of Elma's companionship, kept out of things. She ventured to tell Jean why Robin no longer was a friend of hers. Jean seemed then to think him all the more eligible for Isobel. This hurt more than one dared to believe. But Jean always had been for a direct way of dealing with people, sentiment not being in her nature at all. She considered it stupid of Mabel to bother about a man to whom she had not even been engaged.

Mabel, rather morbidly clung to her pride after this, and refused Elma's repeated pleadings to tell her mother and father. If one's own sister called one a donkey, it wasn't much encouragement to go on to more criticism. Mabel would rather see Isobel married to Robin than say a word more on her own account. Elma worried about it as much as Mabel did, and nothing would induce her to go near the Merediths. Mr. and Mrs. Leighton noted the difference, but had to confess that changes of a sort must come. Above all, Mabel was very young, and they did not want to press anything serious upon her just then. Robin's behaviour remained so gentlemanly that no one could convict him of anything except a sudden partiality for Isobel.

"They are all children of a sort," said Mr. Leighton, "and children settle their own differences best."

Isobel felt the difficulty of the number of girls in the place. It appalled her to think of Elma's creeping up next, and making the string lengthen. She looked with positive disapproval on Elma with her hair up. In a forlorn way, Elma felt the great difference between her seventeenth birthday, and that glorious day when Mabel entered into her kingdom.

Mabel was in trouble, Jean engrossed with her own affairs, and Isobel sweetly disdainful when Elma turned up her hair. She put it down again for

three weeks, and nobody seemed to be the least pained at the difference.

At every visit to Miss Grace, she wondered whether or not it would be quite loyal to tell her about Mabel. Miss Annie and she were, however, so uncomprehending about anything having gone wrong, so interested in the new cousin, that invariably Elma's confidences were checked by such a remark as, "How very sweet Isobel looked in that pink gown to-day," and so on. Then one had to run on and be complimentary about Isobel. It seemed to Elma that her heart would break if Miss Grace, along with every one else, went over to Isobel.

She was not to know that Adelaide Maud had been there before her.

"I can't quite explain," said Adelaide Maud to Miss Grace one day, "I can't explain why I feel it, but this new cousin isn't on the same plane with the Leightons. There's something more–more developed, it's true, but there's also something missing."

"Something that has to do with being a lady?" asked Miss Grace in her timid way.

"Exactly. I know my London types, and this isn't one I should fasten on to admire, although she makes rather a dashing brilliant appearance in her present surroundings."

"I'm a little concerned about that," said Miss Grace.

In spite of her uniform courtesy where Isobel was concerned she had quite a talk with Adelaide Maud regarding her.

"I should fancy it's this," said Miss Grace finally, "that while she stays with the Leightons she has all the more income on which to look beautiful. I can't help seeing an ulterior motive, you observe. I sometimes wonder, however, what she will do to my little girls before she is done with them."

The first thing Isobel did was to inflame Jean with a desire to sing. There was no use trying to inflame Mabel about anything. After Jean had discovered that she might have a voice there was nothing for it but that she should go to London. She begged and implored her father and mother to let her go to London. She was the only member of the family who had ever had the pluck to suggest such a thing. They had a familiar disease of home-sickness which prevented any daring in such a direction. Mabel had twice come home a wreck before she was expected home at all, and invariably vowing never to leave again.

And now Jean, the valiant, asked to be allowed to go alone to London in order to study.

"It's Isobel who has done it," wailed Betty. "She's so equipped. We seem such duffers. And it will be the first break."

Mr. Leighton groaned.

"Why can't you be happy at home," he asked Jean.

"Oh, it will be so lovely to come back," said Jean, "with it all–what to do

and how to do it–at one's fingers' ends."

"You don't keep your voice at your fingers' ends, do you?" asked Mrs. Leighton.

It seemed superb nonsense to her that Jean should not take lessons at home. Isobel marvelled to find that the real difficulty in the way of Jean's getting was this mild obstinacy of Mrs. Leighton's.

"I can tell Jean of such a nice place to live–with girls," said Isobel. "And I know the master she ought to have."

"And we can't all vegetate here for ever," said poor Jean.

Nothing ever cost Mr. Leighton the wrench that this cost him, but he prepared to let Jean go.

Mabel and Elma would rather anything than that had happened just then. It had the effect of making Isobel more particular in being with Mabel rather than with Jean. Had she sounded the fact that with all Jean's protestations, Mabel was the much desired–that people were more keen on having the Leighton's when Mabel was of the party! Elma began to speculate on this until she was ashamed of herself.

They played up for Jean at this juncture as though she were going away for ever. One would have thought there was nothing to be had in London from the manner in which they provided for her. Even Lance appeared with a kettle and spirit lamp for making tea.

"You meet in each other's rooms and talk politics and mend your stockings," said he, "and you take turns to make tea. I know all about it."

Maud Hartley gave her a traveller's pincushion, and May Turberville a neat hold-all for jewellery.

Jean stuck in her two brooches, one bangle, a pendant and a finger ring.

Then she sighed in a longing manner.

"If I use your case, I shall have no jewellery to wear," she said to May.

At that moment a package was handed to her. It was small, and of the exciting nature of the package that is first sealed, and then discloses a white box with a rubber strap round it.

"Oh, and it's from Bulstrode's," cried Jean in great excitement. "The loveliest place in town," she explained to Isobel. "What can it be?"

It was a charming little watch on a brooch clasp, and it was accompanied by a card, "With love to dear Jean, to keep time for her when she is far away. From Miss Annie and Miss Grace."

"Well," said Jean, with her eyes filling, "aren't they ducks! And I've so often laughed at Miss Grace."

"They are just like fairy godmothers," said Elma. "Jean! It's lovely."

She turned and turned the "little love" in her hand.

Where so many were being kind to Jean, it appeared necessary to Aunt Katharine that she also must make her little gift. She gave Jean a linen bag for her boots, with "My boots and shoes" sewn in red across it.

"I don't approve of your trip at all," she said to Jean, "but then I never do approve of what your mother lets you do. In my young days we were making jam at your age, and learning how to cure hams. The stores are upsetting everything."

"I want to sing," said Jean, "and your bag is lovely, Aunt Kathie. Didn't you want very badly to learn the right way to sing when you were my age?"

Aunt Katharine sang one Scotch song about Prince Charlie, and it was worth hearing for the accompaniment alone, if not for the wonderful energy with which Aunt Katharine declaimed the words. Dr. Merryweather, in an abstracted moment, once thanked her for her recitation, and this had had the unfortunate result of preventing her from performing so often as she used to.

"No, my dear," she said in answer to Jean's remark, "I had no desire to find out how they sang at one end of the country, when my friends considered that I performed so well at the other end. The best masters of singing are not all removed from one's home. Nature and talent may do wonders."

Then she sighed heavily.

"The claims of home ought to come first in any case. Your mother and father have given you a comfortable one. It is your duty to stay in it."

"Well, papa has inflamed us with a desire to excel in music. It isn't our fault," said Jean. "And one can't get short cuts to technique in Ridgetown."

"I quite see that your father places many things first which ought to come last," said Aunt Katharine dismally. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she exclaimed, for four girls, even including Jean with her boot bag, had risen at her, "I forgot that I am not allowed free expression in regard to my own brother-in-law."

Aunt Katharine could always be expected to give in at this point, but up to it, one was anxious.

Cuthbert came down to bid farewell to Jean.

"You are a queer old thing," he said to her. "Living in rooms is a mucky business, you know."

"Oh, I shall be with twenty other girls," said Jean; "a kind of club, you know. Isobel says it's lovely. And then we get so *stuck* here!"

Cuthbert admitted that it wasn't the thing for them all to be cooped up in Ridgetown.

"Couldn't stand it myself, without work," said he. "And then, it's ripping, of course."

It was lovely to have Cuthbert back, and he made a new acquaintance in Isobel. She had been a queer little half-grown thing when he had last seen her.

In an indefinite way he did not approve of her, but finding her on terms of

such intimacy with every one, he only gave signs of pleasure at meeting her.

Elma was in dismay because there were heaps and heaps of things for which she wanted Cuthbert, and he only stayed two days. An idea that he could put a number of crooked things straight, if he remained, made her plead with him to come again.

Cuthbert promised in an abstracted manner.

"Give me one more year, Elma, and then you may have to kick me out of Ridgetown," he said. "Who knows? At least, I shall make such a try for it, that you may have to kick me out."

Everybody nice seemed to be leaving, and Adelaide Maud was away.

It was rather trying to Elma that Isobel should about this period insist on visiting at Miss Annie's. Isobel seemed to be with them on every occasion, from the moment that Jean arranged to go to London.

Jean got everything ready to start. With Isobel's help she engaged her room from particulars sent to her. It was the tiniest in a large house of small rooms, but Jean, rather horrified at a detached sum of money being singled out by her father from the family funds, was determined to make that sum as small as possible. Mr. Leighton saw these preparations being made and was helpful but dismal about them. Mrs. Leighton presented her with a travelling trunk which would cover up and be made a window-seat, no doubt, in that room where the tea parties were to occur. Everything was ready the night before her departure, and exactly at 7.15, when the second dressing bell rang for dinner, as Betty explained afterwards, Jean broke down.

This was an extraordinary exhibition to Isobel, who had travelled, and packed, and always moved to a new place with avidity. She said now that she would give anything she was worth at that moment to be flying off to London like Jean.

"Oh," said Jean, "it's like a knife that has cut to-day away from to-morrow, and all of you from that crowd I'm going to. Do you know," she said, as though it were quite an interesting thing for them to hear about, "I feel quite queer–and sick. Do you think that perhaps there is something wrong with me?" She even mentioned appendicitis as a possible ailment.

"You are getting home-sick," said Mabel, who knew the signs.

Jean was much annoyed.

"You don't understand," she said. "I'm not silly in that way. I don't feel as though I could shed a tear at going away. I'm just over-joyed at the prospect. But I'm so wobbly in other ways. I'm really terrified that I'm going to be ill."

Poor Jean ate no dinner. Jean didn't sleep. Jean perambulated the corridors, and thought of the night when Cuthbert got hurt. She wished that she were enough of a baby to go and knock at her mother's door, as they had done then,

and get her to come and comfort her. She hoped her father wasn't vexed that she had asked to go, and hadn't minded leaving him. Then she remembered how she intended coming home–a full-blown prima donna sort of person–one of whom he should really be proud. This ought to have set her up for the night, but the thought of it failed in its usual exhilarating effect.

The sick feeling returned, with innumerable horrors of imaginary pain, and a real headache.

Jean saw the dawn come in and sincerely prayed that already she had not appendicitis.

CHAPTER XVII
A Reprieve

The first two letters from Jean were so long, that one imagined she must have sat up most of the night to get them off.

"I don't mind telling you that I felt very miserable when I got to my rooms," she said among other things. "I drove here all right, and the door was opened by a servant who didn't seem to know who I was. Then she produced a secretary who looked at me very closely as though to see whether I was respectable or not. She took me up to my room, and it's like a little state-room, without the fun of a bunk. There's one little slippy window which looks out on the gardens, and across the gardens there are high houses, with occasionally people at the windows. One girl with a pink bow in her hair sits at a window all day long. Sometimes she leans out with her elbows on the sill, and looks down, and then she draws them in again and sits looking straight over at me. She's quite pretty. But what a life! It must be dreadful only having one room and nothing to do in it. My piano hasn't come, and until it arrives, it's like being the girl with the pink bow. At home it's different, we can always pull flowers, or fix our blouses or do something of that sort. The girls here don't seem to mind whether one is alive or dead. I think they are cross at new arrivals. I sat last night at dinner at a little table all by myself, on a slippery linoleum floor, and thought it horrid. Then it would have been fun to go to the drawing-room ('to play to papa,' how nice that sounds), but the girls melted off by themselves. I looked into the drawing-room and thought it awful, so I ran up to my room and stayed there. The girl with

the pink bow was at her window again, and I really could have slain her, I don't know why."

Then "I'm to have my first lesson to-morrow. I'm so glad. Because I can't practise, even although my piano has come. A girl who writes made the others stop playing last night in the drawing-room because it gave her a headache. It makes me think that no one will want to hear me sing. I suppose they think I'm very countrified.

"I think the real reason why I can't practise is because I'm not very well. London food doesn't seem so nice as ours, and I still have that funny feeling that I had when I started. I suppose you are all having jolly times. You would know that girls lived in this house. It's all wicker furniture, and little green curtains, and vases of flowers. I've only gone out to see about my lesson, except to the post and quite near here. I don't like going out much yet. Isobel's directions were a great help."

This letter stopped rather abruptly. So much so that Mr. Leighton was far from happy about Jean. He bothered unceasingly as to whether he should have allowed her to go. Mrs. Leighton enlarged his anxiety by her own fears. Jean's growing so much faster and taller than any one else had been a point in her favour with her mother a few years before, and Mrs. Leighton had never got over the certainty that Jean must be delicate in consequence.

"I hope she won't have appendicitis," said she mournfully.

"Oh, mummy," said Mabel, "Jean is only home-sick."

Jean wrote another desponding letter.

"Home-sick or not home-sick, if Jean is ill, she has got to be nursed," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Jean has never been ill in her life," Mabel pointed out. "She hasn't even felt very home-sick. It will pass off, mummy dear."

But it didn't.

Jean sat, in dismal solitude, in the room looking over to the girl with the pink bow, and she thought she should die. She did not like the words of encouragement which came from home. Every one was trying to "buck her up" as though she were a kid. No one seemed to understand that she was ill.

At the fifth day of taking no food to speak of and not sleeping properly, and with the most lamentable distaste of everything and every one around possessing her, she detected at last an acute little pain which she thought must be appendicitis.

She went out, wired home "I am in bed," and came back to get into it.

Once the girls in the house heard that she was ill, they crowded into her room with the kindest expressions of help and sympathy. They brought her flowers and fruit, and one provided her with books. Then they came in, as Lance had

promised, and made tea for her. Jean took the tea and a good many slices of bread and butter, and felt some of the weight lifted. It might not be appendicitis after all.

And she never dreamed of the havoc which her telegram might create. Towards the evening, she got one of her effusive visitors to send off another telegram. "Feeling better," this one declared.

She did not know that just before this point, Mr. Leighton had determined to fetch her home from London. The whole household was in despair. Mrs. Leighton wanted to start with him in the morning. Mr. Leighton was not only anxious, he was in a passion with himself for ever having let Jean go.

"Madness," he said, "madness. I cannot stand this any longer."

Isobel hated to see people display feeling, and this excitement about a girl with a headache annoyed her infinitely. She was invited out to dinner with Mabel, and Mabel would not go.

"Papa is in such a state," Mabel said, "I could not possibly go out and leave him like this. Let us telephone that we cannot come."

Isobel checked the protest that rose to her calm lips. She was ready in a filmy black chiffon gown, and her clear complexion looked startlingly radiant in that framing. She had quite determined to go to the dinner party.

"Let me telephone for you, Mabel," she said with rather a nice concern in her voice. "Then it won't take you away from your father."

Mabel abstractedly thanked her.

"Say Jean is ill please, and that papa is in fits about her. The Gardiners will understand."

Isobel telephoned.

She came back to Mabel with her skirts trailing in little flaunting waves of delicate black.

"They beg me to come. It's so disorganizing for a dinner party. What shall I do?" she asked in an interrogative manner.

Mrs. Leighton said, "Oh, do go, Isobel," politely. "Why should anybody stay at home just because we were so foolish as to let Jean go off to London alone?"

"Oh, well," said Isobel lightly, "when you put it like that, I must."

She went to telephone her decision.

It was nearly four weeks afterwards when, in quite an unexpected manner, Betty discovered that she never telephoned that second time at all. Isobel had arranged her going from the start, adequately.

Mabel was left alone with the anxious parents when Jean's second telegram came in. It opened Mabel's eyes to the fact that perhaps for once Jean was really homesick. It was so much like the way she herself would have liked to have acted on some occasions and dared not. Jean had never been ill or been affected

by nerves before, and had therefore no confidence in recoveries. No doubt her interest in the new experience had made her imagination run away with her. She disliked London and wanted to get out of it–that was clear enough. But after just six days of it–with everybody laughing at her giving in! The thing was not to be thought of.

It seemed to Mabel that her own difficult experiences lately, all the hard things she had had to bear, culminated in this sudden act of duty which lay before her. She must clear out–go to Jean and help her through.

"Oh, papa," she said, "please let me go."

Mr. Leighton jumped as though she had exploded a bomb.

"What, another," asked he; "isn't one enough! No, indeed! I've had quite enough of the independence of girls by this time. There's to be no more of it. Jean is coming home, and you will all stay at home–for ever."

He never spoke with more decision. Mrs. Leighton had reached the point where she could only stare.

Mabel sat down to her task of convincing them. She looked very dainty–almost fragile in the delicate gown of the particular colour of heliotrope which she had at last dared to assume. A slight pallor which Mrs. Leighton had noticed once or twice of late in Mabel had erased the bright colour which was usual with her. She spoke with a certain kind of maturity which her mother found a little pathetic.

"You see, papa, it's like this. If you go to Jean now, in all probability whenever she sees you she will be as right as the mail, just as the rest of us are when we've been home-sick. Then she will be awfully disgusted that she made so much of it when she finds out what it is, and it won't be coming home like a triumphant prima donna for her to come now, will it? She will fall awfully flat, don't you think? And Cuthbert and Lance and you, papa, will go on saying that girls are no good for anything. You will take all the spirit out of us at last."

"She mustn't go on being ill in London," said Mrs. Leighton. "We can't stand the anxiety."

"Let me go up for a week or two, and see her started," pleaded Mabel. "I've been there, you know, and know a little about it, and she would have time to feel at home. If I find her really ill, I could send for you. Jean wouldn't feel an idiot about it if I went up just to see her started."

Then Mabel fired her last shot.

"It would be good for me, mummy. I've been so stuck lately. Won't you let me go?"

Something in Mabel's voice touched her mother very much.

"Won't Robin miss you?" she asked in a teasing, but anxious way. "You don't tell us, Mabel, whether you want Robin to miss you or not. And that's one

of the main things, isn't it?"

Mabel started, and her eyes grew wide with a fear of what they might say next.

"It's all right, Mabs! Don't you worry if you don't want to talk about it," said her father cheerily. There was a reserve in all of them except Jean which kept them from expressing easily what they were not always willing to hide.

"Oh," said Mabel, "I think I did want to, but n-never could. I don't think I want to be c-coupled with Robin any more. It was fun when I was rather s-silly and young, but it's different now."

She looked at her father quite sedately and quietly.

"I think Robin thinks a good deal more of Isobel and I'm glad," she said quite determinedly. "The fact is, I was sure I would be glad if something like that happened. I was sure before Isobel came."

Mr. Leighton patted her shoulder.

"Thank you, my dear, for telling us. You're just to do as you like about these things. Difficult to talk about, aren't they? Remember, I don't think much of Robin now, or that sister of his. They could have arranged it better, I think. Never mind. I shall be glad to have you find worthier friends." He patted her shoulder again, and looked over at Mrs. Leighton. She was surreptitiously wiping her eyes. Mabel sat strong and straight and rather radiant as though a weight were lifted.

"I don't think," said Mr. Leighton to his wife in a clear voice, "I don't think that either you or I would be of greater service to Jean than Mabel could be! Now, do you, my dear, seriously, do you?" He kept an eye on her to claim the answer for which he hoped.

"I don't think so, John," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Then could you get ready for the 8.50 to-morrow morning?" asked Mr. Leighton of Mabel.

Mabel hugged him radiantly for answer.

"I don't know how I can live without two of you, even for a week," he said. "But then, I won't be selfish. Make the most of it and a success of it, and I shall always be glad afterwards that you went."

It was no joke to have to prepare in one evening for a visit to London. Elma's heart stopped beating when she heard of the arrangement.

"Oh, Mabs, and I shall be left with that–bounder!"

The word was out.

Never had Elma felt so horrified. Years she had spent in listening to refinements in language, only to come to this. Of her own cousin too!

"Oh, Mabs, it's shameful of me. And it will be so jolly for Jean. And you too! Oh, Mabs, shall I ever go to London, do you think?"

"You go and ask that duck of a father of ours–now–at present–this instant, and he will promise you anything in the world. No, don't, dear. On second thoughts he needs every bit of you here. Elma! Play up now. Play up like the little brick you are. You and Betty play up, and I'll bless you for ever. Don't you know I'm skipping all that racketing crowd. I'm skipping Robin. I'm skipping Sarah! Think of skipping the delectable Sarah!" She shook her fist in the direction of the Merediths' house. "And what is more, dear Elma, I am skipping Isobel."

She said that in a whisper.

They had all the feeling that Isobel was a presence, not always a mere physical reality.

Elma had not seen Mabel in such a joyous mood for weeks.

"And it's also because I feel I can soon square up Jean, and make her fit," said Mabel; "so that I'm of some use, you see, in going. I'm quite sure Jean is only home-sick after all."

She trilled and sang as she packed.

"Won't you be home-sick yourself, Mabel?" asked Elma anxiously.

"I have to get over that sooner or later. I shall begin now," said Mabel.

"Won't it be beastly in that girls' club?" wailed Betty.

"Oh, I'm sure it will," quivered Mabel. She sank in a heap on the floor.

"Whatever possessed Jean to go off on that wild chase, I can't think," cried Betty.

"I know," said Elma.

"What?"

"Isobel."

The gate clicked outside and there were voices. Betty crept to the window-sill and looked over. Mabel and Elma stood silent in the room. Crunching footsteps and then Isobel's voice, then Robin's, then "Good-night."

Mabel, with a smothered little laugh, flung a blouse into her trunk.

"Isn't it ripping, I'm going to London," said she.

CHAPTER XVIII
"Love of our Lives"

Elma in the privacy of her best confidences had called Isobel a bounder. The

iniquity, viewed even only in the light of a discourtesy, alarmed her, and made her more than anything "buck up" to being "nice" to her cousin.

Isobel had been quite taken aback by the news of Mabel's departure. She had bargained for almost anything rather than that. Jean had continually rubbed it in that Mabel was no use for going anywhere away from home. And now she was being sent to succour Jean. Isobel had gone out with the news for everybody that Mr. and Mrs. Leighton would be leaving in the morning. She had even made some plans. Now, what she looked upon as the tutelage of Mr. and Mrs. Leighton remained, and Mabel, whom she already regarded as the most useful companion where her own interests were concerned, was going off to London.

She could not avoid looking very black about it. To be left there with two children, Elma and Betty, chained hand and foot to that kindergarten! One could hardly believe that so dark a cloud could sit on so clearly calm, so immobile a countenance. Mabel detected the storm, and it had the effect of making her the more relieved and willing to be off.

She had many thoughts for Elma.

"Don't be hustled out of your rights, dear," she whispered. "Remember, you are the head."

Elma had to remember almost every hour of the day. The rule of Isobel was subtle, and it was most exceedingly sure. She did not take the pains to hide her methods from Elma and Betty, as she had done from Mabel and Jean. She openly used the telephone, not always with the door shut. It brought her plenty of engagements. When a dull day offered itself, Isobel invariably was called up by telephone to go out. She never dreamed of inviting Elma. Mrs. Leighton she looked after in a protecting way which was very nice and consoling to that lady stranded of her Jean. Many plans were made for Mrs. Leighton's sake, which Elma considered must have often surprised her. It did not seem necessary that Mrs. Leighton should attend tea at the golf club for instance, but Isobel insisted on seeing her go there. Everybody congratulated the Leightons on having such a charming girl to keep them company while Mabel and Jean were away. Isobel had certainly found a vocation.

She came in to Mrs. Leighton and Elma in the drawing-room one day in her prettiest tweeds with rather fine furs at her throat.

"Hetty Dudgeon has just rung me up, asking me to go to see her this afternoon," she said calmly. "I don't suppose you care for the walk," she asked Mrs. Leighton.

Mrs. Leighton roused herself from the mental somnolence of some weeks.

"Miss Hetty! Why, I was speaking to her half an hour ago. She wanted to send an introduction to Jean. She–she, why, it's very strange that she didn't tell me she wanted you to come. And you've dressed since. In fact, she said—-"

Mrs. Leighton got no further.

"She must have changed her mind," said Isobel in a careless manner. "Well, good-bye, everybody, I'm off."

Mrs. Leighton sat a little speechless for the moment.

"I don't think I quite like that of Isobel," she said. "Miss Hetty did not want any one this afternoon. She told me why–she's so frank. Vincent is coming."

Elma sat debating in her mind, should she tell her mother or should she not. It was hardly right that Isobel should drag in the telephone, anything, under her mother's unsuspecting eyes, for her own ends. It was wildly impertinent to her mother.

"Mummy, Isobel knew that Vincent was going and she made up her mind to go too!"

"Made up her mind!"

"Yes–she almost half arranged it with Vincent at the golf club the other day."

"Then–then what about telephoning!"

"She never telephoned at all," said Elma.

Mrs. Leighton would willingly have had that unsaid.

"It is dreadful to think that any one would take the trouble to do such a thing for the sake of going to the Dudgeons," she said. "Are you sure you are not mistaken?"

"Oh, Miss Meredith is happy for a week if she can squeeze in an excuse for going to the Dudgeons," replied Elma. "The Dudgeons are such 'high steppers,' you know."

"I don't like it," said Mrs. Leighton, "I really don't. None of you were brought up to go your own way like that, and I don't admire it in other people."

"Isobel believes in grabbing for everything one wants with both hands. She doesn't mean to do anything wicked. She simply means to be on the spot," said Elma.

"But what about loyalty, and friendship, and–and honour?" said poor Mrs. Leighton.

"Oh, when you are grabbing with both hands for other things you haven't time for these."

"My precious child! What in the wide world are you saying!" Mrs. Leighton was quite horrified.

"Nothing that I mean, or believe in, mummy. Only what Isobel believes in. She thinks we are fools to bother about loyalty and that kind of thing. She hasn't had any one, I think, who cared whether she was honourable or not. And it must be distracting to know that all the time she can be perfectly beautiful. It must make you think that everything ought to come to you, no matter how."

Elma was really scourging herself now for that iniquity of "the bounder."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" said Mrs. Leighton.

"Oh, mummy, I'm almost sorry I told you now. Except that it lifts the most awful weight from my mind. I've been so afraid that while Isobel went on being so sweet and graceful that we should all get bad-tempered if you believed in her very much. She countermands my orders to the servants often and often, and they never think of disobeying her. That's one thing I want to ask you about. If I insist on their obeying me, will you back me up? I simply crinkle before Isobel, I hate so to appear to be against her in any way. But Mabel told me I'm to play up as head of the house, and I'm not doing it while Isobel upsets any order of mine with a turn of her little finger. It's awfully weak of me, but I've always said I was made to be bullied, I do so hate having rows with people."

The murder was out then.

Mabel had been gone four weeks, and the housekeeping which had gradually drifted into her hands was now of course in the command of Elma, or ought to be. Mrs. Leighton saw at last where Isobel had been getting hold of the reins of government.

"You must not be jealous of Isobel's attractions," she said. "And you know, Elma, any little squabble with your cousin would be a rather dreadful thing."

"Awful," said Elma.

"Your father would never forgive us."

"He would understand, though," said Elma. There was always such a magnificence of justice about her father.

"He is feeling being without the girls so much," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Yes," said Elma. "But, oh! mother, he is so pleased now that they are getting on. And isn't it magnificent of Mabel! That's what makes me think I must play up here. Miss Grace says it's very weak to give in on a matter of principle. She says that whether I'm wrong or right, the servants ought to obey me."

Mrs. Leighton debated for a long time.

"I quite see your difficulty," she said. "But above all things, we must never let Isobel think she hasn't her first home with us. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, mummy," said Elma. "If only you will back me upon the servant question once. Then I don't believe we shall have any more trouble with Isobel. I don't mind about whom she telephones to or whom she doesn't, but I do mind about the housekeeping. She thinks I'm such a kid, you know. And I mustn't for the credit of the family remain a kid all my days."

There was a far stronger motive to account for Elma's determination than any mere slight to herself. It was that Isobel had known about Robin and yet appropriated him as though he were a person whom one might make much of.

The treatment of Mabel turned her from a child into a woman blazing for justice.

As they sat down to dinner that night, she noticed that her own little scheme for table decoration had been changed. At dessert she asked, with her knees trembling in the old manner, "Who changed my table centre?"

Nobody answered till Isobel, finding the silence holding conspicuously, said in a careless way, "Oh, I found Bertha putting down that green thing." Elma flushed dismally. (If she could only keep pale.)

She simulated a careless tone, however.

"Oh, Isobel," she said, "I wish you wouldn't. When I give directions to the servants, it's very difficult for me if some one else gives them others." It was lame, but it was there, the information that she was in control.

"Very distracting for the servants, too," said Mrs. Leighton calmly, and ratified Elma's venture with her approval.

She ate a grape with extreme care.

Isobel did not answer. She froze in her pink gown however, and a storm gathered kindling to black anger in her eyes.

She looked Elma over, her whole bearing carrying a threat. It was a pose which generally produced some effect.

But Elma was fighting for something more than her own paltry little authority. She was bucking up "for Mabel's sake."

She pretended to treat it as a joke now that Isobel "knew."

"So after this I'm in undisputed authority," she exclaimed, and wondered at herself for her miraculous calmness. "And if you, Betty, endeavour to get more salt in the soup or try on any other of your favourite dodges, I shall–"–she also ate a grape quite serenely–"I shall half kill you."

"Oh, Betty," she said afterwards, "I feel as though I had gone in for a bathe in mid-winter. Did you see her eye!"

"I did," said Betty. "So did papa. You'll find it will be easier for us now. How calm you were! I should have fainted."

"My knees were knocking like castanets," said Elma. "If I had had them japanned, you would have heard quite a row. But it's very stimulating." It occurred to her that now she could write in a self-respecting manner to Mabel.

Isobel after this entirely blocked off Elma from any of her excursions. Even the visits to Miss Grace were over so far as Isobel was concerned, and Elma once more had that dear lady to herself.

She would not tell Miss Grace how it had happened that her cousin no longer accompanied her. Occasionally, however, Isobel stepped in herself and found her former audience in Miss Annie.

None of it affected Elma as it might have done. Isobel hardly spoke to her, certainly never when they were alone. It alarmed Elma how she could light up

when anybody was present, any one who counted, and be quite companionable to Elma.

This all faded before the success of Mabel and Jean, who were now writing in the best of spirits.

And oh! "Love of our lives," Adelaide Maud, who was now in London, had called on them. It opened up a fairyland to both, for she took them to her uncle's house, and fêted them generally. Good old Adelaide Maud.

There was no one like her for bringing relief to the rich, and helping the moderately poor.

So Elma described her.

It seemed odd that it should be difficult to know Adelaide Maud except in an emergency. Elma, on the advice of Miss Grace, merely had to send her one little note when in London, with Mabel's address, and Adelaide Maud had called.

There were great consolations to the life she now led with Isobel. Cuthbert vowed he would come down to Elma's first dance. How different it was to what she had anticipated! She would go with Isobel and Isobel would be sweetly magnificent, and Elma would feel like a babe of ten. She longed to refuse all invitations until Mabel came home. Then the unrighteousness of this aloofness from Isobel beset her, and they accepted an invitation jointly.

Isobel ordered a dream of a dress from London. Elma was in white. Mabel and Jean sent her white roses for her hair, the daintiest things. Cuthbert played up, and George Maclean found her plenty of partners. Isobel was quite kind. Mr. Leighton had looked sadly on Elma on seeing her off.

"Another bird spreading its wings," said he.

She looked very small and delicately dainty. Whereas Isobel, "Isobel was like a double begonia in full bloom," said Betty.

The begonia bloomed till a late hour effulgently.

Elma simply longed all the time for Mabel and Jean, and oh! "Love of our Lives," Adelaide Maud.

It was Lance who christened her "Love of our Lives."

"What's that idiot going on about," asked Cuthbert, as he swung Elma off on the double hop of a polka.

"He is talking about Adelaide Maud. I'm so dull because she isn't here."

"You are?" asked Cuthbert.

There was a curious inflection on the "you" as though he had said, "You also?"

"Yes," said Elma, "though it's so often 'so near and yet so far' with Adelaide Maud, she is really my greatest friend."

Cuthbert seemed impressed.

"She doesn't need to make so much of the 'so far' pose," he said gruffly.

"Oh yes, she does," replied Elma. "It's her mother. She withers poor Adelaide Maud to a stick. It's a wonder she's such a duck. Adelaide Maud, I mean. Cuthbert, when are you coming home for a long visit?" she asked.

"Next summer. I shall tell you a great secret. I think I am to get a lectureship, quite a good thing. Can you keep it from the pater until I'm sure?"

"Rather," said Elma.

"Then," he said, "if it isn't all roses here next summer, you'll only have one person to blame."

"One?" asked Elma.

Visions of Isobel cut everything from her mind.

"Is it Isobel?" she asked mildly.

"Isobel!" Cuthbert looked so disgusted that she could have kissed him.

She saw Isobel at that moment. She was swaying round the room in the perfection of rhythm with no less an old loyalist than George Maclean. Ah, well–all their good friends might drift over there, but she still had Cuthbert. The joy of it lent wings to her little figure. It always had been and always remained difficult for her to adapt her small stride to men of Cuthbert's build. This night she suddenly acquired the strength and ease–the knowledge which really having him gave her, to make dancing with him become a facile affair.

"Oh, Cuthbert, this is ripping," she sighed at last. "If it isn't Isobel, who is it?" she asked him.

"Why, Elma, you are a little donkey! Who could it be, but 'Love of our Lives,' Adelaide Maud?"

He swung her far into the middle:–where the floor became as melted wax, and life opened out to Elma like a flower.

"Oh, Cuthbert dear, how ripping," said little Elma.

CHAPTER XIX
Herr Slavska

Mabel had discovered that a woman with a mission hasn't such a bad time of it. She set out on her journey to Jean without one of her usual misgivings. It was jolly to think that she might be able to be of some use in the world. The tediousness of a long journey of changes till she reached the main-line and thun-

dered direct to London did not pall on her as it had done before. Throughout she thought, "I'm getting nearer to Jean, and I shall put her on her feet."

She prepared to hate the girls' club, but to be quite uninfluenced by it. She would take Jean out, till neither of them cared what the club was like at all. She forgot Robin and Isobel and everything except one thing which she would never forget, and Jean.

She drove up to the door of the club in the most energetic and independent mood she had ever experienced. She didn't care whether the secretary looked her up and down or not. She merely went straight to Jean's room. Jean didn't at all pretend that it was a downcome. She simply wept with delight at the sight of Mabel.

"And I never shed a tear, not one, till you came," said she. "I'm so glad you came just when I began to get better."

Mabel did not dare to tell her that she had only been home-sick.

"If I tell her that, she will lie in bed to convince me that she is really ill," she thought.

Girls' voices were heard screaming volubly.

"What's that?" asked Mabel, thinking that some accident had occurred.

"Oh nothing. They call out for each other from their different rooms. I thought it was a parrot house when I came, but I'm getting accustomed to it. They've been so decent, you can't think, Mabel. I never knew girls could be so comforting."

"Poor Jean," said Mabel.

"You'll stay, won't you," said Jean.

"Of course I shall. Just imagine, papa wanted to come and take you home. It would have been so stale for you after you got there, with those little presents people gave you and all that kind of thing, if you had gone right back home again, wouldn't it?"

"Imagine Aunt Katharine alone," said Jean solemnly.

"So, if you possibly can, Jean, get up as soon as you feel able to crawl. So that I can say you are all right. Papa says I may stay for a week or two if you are."

"Oh, Mabs, I wish you would stay right on!"

"Where's my room?" asked Mabel. "What rickety furniture!"

"The room is next door, isn't it nice? And the furniture's bought for girls. They think we like rickets."

"Wickets," corrected Mabel. "You could use that chair at a match."

"Oh, Mabs, how jolly it is to have you here to laugh at it. Mabs, I do feel better."

Mabel saw her up in three-quarters of an hour.

Jean had still to be treated seriously however.

"You know, Mabs, I had the most dreadful feeling. I could quite understand how poor girls without friends go and drown themselves."

"That's more like depression than appendicitis," Mabel ventured.

"I hadn't been sleeping," explained Jean with dignity.

Mabel thought of some sleepless nights.

"The best cure is always to believe that it can't last," said she. "Do you remember papa's telling us how Carlyle comforted Mrs. Carlyle when she had toothache? He said it wouldn't be permanent."

"What a brute," said Jean.

"Well, it sent me to sleep once or twice when I remembered that," said Mabel. "But you never were ill like this before. You couldn't believe in getting well, could you?"

"I was sure I was going to die," said Jean in a hushed voice.

Mabel's heart had ached. Could she tell Jean of that ache and how she had been obliged to cover it up by making herself believe that it could not possibly be permanent.

"Jean, do you know, I think it's so jolly being here, getting to know the best way of doing things, and all that sort of thing, I think I shall ask papa to let me stay longer. Do you think they would let me?"

"Well, they let me–and then I didn't want to," said Jean.

"And I didn't want to and now I do," said Mabel. "Let's try it for a week or two anyhow."

A great depression had been lifted from her shoulders. She found herself in the midst of girls who had all something to do in the world. They got up in the morning and came tearing down to breakfast and made off to various definite occupations, as though they had nineteen parties in one day to attend. Some were studying, others "arrived" and working, only a few playing. Yet even the last had some excuse in the way of a problematical career in front of them. Here one saw where the desire to be something has quite as hygienic an effect on one, as the faculty of attainment. Mabel had not been three days in the house till she was as feverish as any to be getting on. Going with Jean for her first lesson finished her. Jean was still of the opinion that she was an invalid, and she certainly was overwrought and nervous. She would have backed out of her lesson, except that Mabel accompanied her.

They found a magnificent man, well groomed and of fierce but courtly manners. He shook hands with the air of an arch-duke.

"And which is the fortunate mademoiselle?" he asked. "Not that I prefer 'fortunate' because that she happens to be about to be taught by myself, but she has a voice? Hn?" It was a sound that had only the effect of asking a question, but how efficiently!

He glared at Mabel, who produced Jean, as it were, by a motion of the hand.

"It is my sister who wants lessons," she said. This sounded like something out of a grammar book, and both girls saw the humour of it. But timidly, because Herr Slavska then invited them to sit, while he turned to the piano. He threw some music aside from the desk and cleared a place at the side for his elbow, as he sat down for a moment.

"They do not all have voices! No. But som, they have the sōll. You have the sōll? Hn?"

It did not seem necessary to inform Herr Slavska. He was walking up and down now, flinging out more sentences before they had time to answer the last.

"For myself. I had the voice and I had the sōll. That is why I ask 'and who is the mademoiselle who is so fortunate?' I am a voice, and look at me! I am a drudge to the great public. I gif lessons to stupids who do not love music. For what! For money to keep the stomach alive! Yes, that is it. And yet I say–which is the mademoiselle which is fortunate? For vit a voice and vit the sōll, and vit the art which I shall gif her, what does it matter about the stupid public? or the stomach?"

Herr Slavska waited for no answers.

"For years I was wrong. I had no art. None. I sang to the stupids and they applauded. At last I make great discovery, I find the art. Now I sing to the few."

Herr Slavska paused for a moment.

"My sister has had no training at all, except as a pianist," said Mabel.

"Hn? Then I haf her, a flower, a bud unplucked!"

Herr Slavska grew excited.

"No nasty finger mark, no petal fallen. Ah! it is luck, it is luck for mademoiselle. Come, mademoiselle."

He struck a note.

"Will you sing ze!"

Jean sang "ze." She sang "zo." Then he ran her voice into the top and bottom registers.

"You have the comprehension. It is the great matter," said Herr Slavska.

Then he blazed at her.

His "the," quite English when he remained polished and firm, degenerated into a "ze" at times such as these.

"You haf not ze breath, none," said he, as though Jean had committed an outrage.

Jean, however, had begun to glow with the ardour of future accomplishment.

"That's what I came to learn," she said promptly.

"Aha, she has charac*tere*."

Herr Slavska was delighted, but Jean found this constant dissection of herself trying.

Then the real work began. Herr Slavska breathed, made Jean breathe, hammered at her, expostulated, showed his own ribs rising and falling while his voice remained even, tender, beautiful.

Mabel sat clasping her hands over one another.

"Oh, Herr Slavska, what a beautiful voice you have," she burst out at last.

He looked at her with the greatest surprise.

"Ah! You are her sister? Hn? And you sit there listening to us?"

He had forgotten her existence.

"And you are not of the stupids, no! You say I haf a beautiful voice? Hn? It is ze art, mademoiselle, zat you hear now. Sixty-five, I am zat age! And I still fight for ze stomach wit my beautiful voice. But you are of ze few, is it not? I vil sing to you, mademoiselle, just once. Your sister goes. Ten minutes, mademoiselle–only ten minutes. Zen a rest. And every day to me for two weeks! Hn? Is it not so?"

Then he cast up his arms in despair.

"Helas! It is my accompaniste. He *is* not!"

Jean the direct stepped in.

"Oh, Mabel will play," she said.

Herr Slavska took one of his deepest breaths.

"I say I shall sing to you–I Herr Slavska. Ant you say 'Mabel will play.' Hn? Mabel? Who is dis grand Mademoiselle Mabel?"

The humour of it suddenly appeared to come upper-most, and Herr Slavska became wickedly, cunningly suave.

"Ah yes, then if mademoiselle will," he said blandly.

He produced music.

Mabel was rooted with fear to the couch. Never in her life before had she been nervous.

"Jean, how could you," whispered she.

Oh, fortune and the best of luck! He turned to a song of Brahms'. How often had Mabel tried to drum that song into the willing but uncultured Robin! That Robin in his lame way should help her now seemed the funniest freak of fate. She played the first bars hopefully, joyfully. She *knew* she couldn't do anything silly there.

"But what!"

Herr Slavska had caught her by the shoulders, and looked in her eyes.

"Mademoiselle Mabel! From ze country! Mademoiselle plays like zat! Hn?"

He bowed grandly.

"My apologies, Mees Mademoiselle Mabel. We vill haf a rehearsal."

He sang through part of his programme for a concert. Mabel energetically

remarked afterwards to Jean that she had never really felt heavenly in her life before.

"Oh, Jean," she said, "*Jean.*"

"What would you," said Herr Slavska. "You must also study a little Mees Mademoiselle Mabel. You have great talent. Ah, if you could study in ze Bohemian school, Mees Mademoiselle. Hav I not said for years to these stupids stupids public, there is no school like to that of Prague? Now all ze violinists tumble tumble over ze one another to Sevcik to go. See, it is ze fate. If you could go to Prague, mademoiselle. Prague would make a great artiste of you."

Here was living, wonderful life for Mabel! If Herr Slavska thought so much of her, why should she not have lessons in London?

Mr. Leighton never received such a letter as he had from her next day. If was full of thanks for his having made her play so much and go to concerts when she was young. "Now I really know the literature of music. It's the little slippy bits of technique that I'm not up in. I saw every one of them come out and hit me in the eye when I played for Herr Slavska. Do you think I could really stay and take lessons, dear papa? It would prime me for such a lot. I've often thought about Cuthbert for instance, that it must be so jolly for him to feel primed. And after knowing life here, I'd only be more contented at home. It isn't that one can't be bored in London. I think you can far far more than anywhere. If you saw that girl with the pink bow! She only dresses and dresses, one costume for the morning, another for the afternoon and so on. I suppose she has been taught to be a perfect lady. The girls in our house aren't the crowd that believe in being like men or anything of that sort. They want to get married if they meet a nice enough husband. But nobody wants to get left, and it's so nice to be primed for that. I've sometimes felt I might one day be 'left,' and it's awful. I shouldn't mind so much if I had a profession. Jean is like a new girl. She's full of breathings and 'my method' and all that kind of thing. And she has to have an egg flip every morning at eleven if you please. I'm longing to have a master who orders me egg flip, but they don't do that for piano, do they?

"Oh, please, papa, say you don't care for us for six months, and let us do you some credit at last. We were just little *potty* players at Ridgetown...."

Mr. Leighton took a mild attack of influenza on the strength of this, but he was infinitely pleased at the enthusiasm of Mabel. Mrs. Leighton got into the Aunt Katharine mood, where such "goings on" seemed iniquitous.

"I don't see why you should pay so much money to keep them out of their own home," said she.

By next post, she sent a hamper of cakes to the girls.

Then came a letter from Mr. Leighton, which Mabel locked in a little morocco case along with some other treasures, "to keep for ever."

"I am to stay, and I'm to have lessons from any Vollendollenvallejowski I like to name," she cried to Jean. The two rocked on a bamboo chair in happy abandonment till some explosive crackling sounds warned them that joy had its limits.

Every girl in the house was invited into the tea "with cakes from home."

"What a love of a father and a duck of a mother we've got," said the convalescent homesick Jean.

CHAPTER XX
The Shilling Seats

Jean owed a great debt to Isobel for having told her of Slavska, and acknowledged it extravagantly in every letter. Now there was the difficulty of finding a piano teacher; but here Mabel explained to Jean as nearly as she could why she could not seek the advice of Isobel. Isobel, if they knew, already lamented that she had given away Slavska, it was such an opening to the girls for being independent of her experience. Herr Slavska would recommend no one in London.

"They all play for the stupids," he declared. At last in a better mood, he remembered a certain "Monsieur, Monsieur–Green."

Mabel laughed at the drop to a plain English name.

"Ah no! Smile not," said Herr Slavska. "His mother, of the Latin race, and his father, mark you, a Kelt! What wonder of a result! I will introduce you to the Sir, Herr, Monsieur Green. He is young, but of Leschetitzky. I recommend him."

There seemed nothing more to be said, except that two girls in the club knew Mr. Green's playing and said that no one else really existed in London. A great deal underlay Herr Slavska's "I recommend him."

Mabel met one of the keenest enthusiasts of her life when she met Mr. Green.

"Isn't it queer," said Jean afterwards, who, in spite of egg flips and methods, was in a dejected mood that day, "isn't it queer that an old boy like Herr Slavska and a young one like Mr. Green should both have the same delusions. About music, I mean, being so keen on it."

"You can't call that voice of Herr Slavska's a delusion."

Mabel had been much impressed by what Mr. Green had said.

"Mark you, at such an age, there is no voice like Slavska's in existence. Your

sister is fortunate in learning his method."

"That's what Mr. Slavska said," Jean had answered amiably, and it had started Mr. Green off on his lessons with Mabel in a cheerful mood.

"The Herr is not sparing of his compliments when it is himself that is concerned," he said, laughing loudly. "But he can afford to tell the truth."

It seemed lovely to Mabel, this tribute from one man to another.

"More than your old Slavska said of my man," she told Jean.

Mr. Green was a distracting teacher. He pulled Mabel's playing down to decimals. Where she had formerly found her effects by merely feeling them, he subtracted feeling until she imagined she could not play piano at all. Then he began to build up her technique like a builder adding bricks to a wall.

"You must imagine that you have eaten of the good things of life until you are a little ill, so that good or bad taste very much alike. Then you come to me for the cure. I diet you with uninteresting things, which you do not like, and you imagine I am hard because I do not allow you to eat. Then one day I give you a little tea and toast. Now, Miss Leighton, you have worked to curve the third finger a trifle more than you did. Will you play that study of Chopin which you once performed to me."

Mabel had practised dry technique and had kept cheerfully away from all "pieces" as directed. She played the study.

"Bravo," said Mr. Green. It was his first encouragement.

"Why," said Mabel, "how nice it is to be able to play it like that."

"It is your tea and toast," said Mr. Green.

Into their hard-working life came delightfully Adelaide Maud. Their enthusiasm carried her into scenes she had never visited. She attended concerts in the shilling seats, and took tea once at an A.B.C. The shilling seats fascinated Adelaide Maud. The composite crowd of girls, with excited interest; of budding men musicians, groomed and ungroomed, the latter disporting hair which fell on the forehead in Beethoven negligence, the dark, lowering musician's scowl beneath–what pets they all were! Pets in the zoological sense some of them, but yet what pets! She caught the infection of their ardour when a great or a new performer appeared. Had any crowd ever paid such homage to one of her set, never! Fancy inflaming hearts to that extent. Adelaide Maud could feel her pulses responding.

"Oh," she said after one of these experiences when they were in Fuller's and ate extravagantly of walnut cream cake, "it's as much fun to me to go to these concerts, as it would be for you to–to.—-" It dawned on her that any comparison might not be polite.

"To go to court," said Mabel.

"Oh, *have* you ever been presented?" asked Jean of Adelaide Maud.

Mabel stared at her. All their life they had followed Adelaide Maud's career,

and Jean forgot that she had been presented. Adelaide Maud herself might have been a little hurt, but she was only amused.

"I was–in Queen Victoria's time. I'm an old stager, you know," she said.

"Wasn't it lovely," asked Jean, who had once called her past.

"I don't think so," said Adelaide Maud. "At least I happened to enjoy the wrong part, that was all. I loved going out with the sunshine pouring into the carriage and everybody staring at us. It was very hot and the windows had to be down, and I heard things. One girl said 'Oh, lollipops, look at 'er 'air. Dyed that is.' Another quite gratified me by ejaculating in an Irish voice, 'Oh, the darlint.' 'You mustn't,' said her friend, 'she'll 'ear you.' 'I mean the horses, stupid,' said the girl. She had her eye on the Life Guards. Mamma was disgusted. But in the palace it was not nearly so distinguished. Nobody admired one at all, just hustled one by. I think we were cross all the time."

"I think it would be lovely to be cross in Buckingham Palace," sighed Jean.

They all laughed. Adelaide Maud in particular seemed to be thinking about something which interested her.

"Would it be fun for you to see some of the people who are going to the great ball," she asked. "I don't mean to go to the ball, but Lady Emily is to be at home for the early part of that evening and some people are coming in on the way. I asked her if I might have you to dinner–and she's quite pleased about it."

Mabel and Jean sat in a blissful state of rapture. ("Lady Emily! The gorgeous and far-away Lady Emily!")

"Oh," said Jean, "Elma would say, 'I should be terrified.'"

"And I should say we'll be perfectly delighted," said Mabel.

It cost her no tremor at all to think of going. This reminded Adelaide Maud of Miss Grace's prophecy that there was no sphere in life which Mabel could not enter becomingly.

"Put on that pretty pink thing you wore in Ridgetown, lately," she said.

The name of Ridgetown brought them closer to realities. This was Miss Dudgeon of The Oaks with whom they ate cream cake. Jean said, "I'm sure to give the wrong titles. You don't mind I hope."

"No," said Adelaide Maud. At the same time she was dying with the desire that they should do her infinite credit. Carefully she thought over the matter and then spoke. "In any case it's so much a matter of one's manner in doing it. I remember when Lady Emily was ill once, she had a very domineering nurse, who tossed her head one time and said to me, 'I suppose she wants me to be humble and "my lady" her, but not a bit of me.' Then one of the most distinguished surgeons in England was called in, and his first words were, 'And how d'ye do, my lady.' He called her 'my lady' throughout, quite unusual you know, and yet in so dignified and kind a manner, as though he were saying, 'I know, but I prefer

my own way in the matter.'"

"What a drop to the nurse," said Mabel.

Jean looked reflective.

"Do you know, you've told me something I didn't know," she said. "I never quite knew how one ought to address Lady Emily. It's so different at Ridgetown," she exclaimed.

Adelaide Maud seemed a little confused, but answered heartily.

"Oh, none of it's a trouble when you really meet people. They are so much simpler than one would think."

Mabel saw that Adelaide Maud had given them her first tip. It was sweetly done, but then—-! Anyhow, they had given Adelaide Maud plenty of tips about getting in early to seats in the Queen's Hall and minor affairs of that sort. Why shouldn't the benefits work both ways?

It was about the time of Elma's ball, when they sent the white roses, and Adelaide Maud said she would help them to choose.

"I should like to send little Elma a crown of pearls, but I daren't," said she with a sigh. "She's such a pet, isn't she!"

"Timorous, but a pet," said Jean with a broad smile.

"She is holding the fort just now at any rate," responded Mabel.

They thought it would be all right to tell Adelaide Maud something of what Elma had written.

"I trembled, of course," Elma had said; "but the thing had to be done. I wouldn't for a moment let you think that you couldn't come home and slip in to the places that belong to you. Isobel would have possessed the whole house if I hadn't played up. I don't know why she wants to. It must be so much nicer not to have to bother about servants and table centres. But she has never squeaked since I spoke about it. In fact, she won't even speak to me unless some one is about, passes me without a word."

"Poor darling," said Adelaide Maud; "what a worm your cousin must be."

"No, I don't think she's that," said Mabel; "it's just that she simply must rule, you know. She must have everything good that is going."

"H'm," answered Adelaide Maud. "Why doesn't that brother of yours go slashing about a little, and keep her from bullying Elma."

"Oh, Elma would never tell Cuthbert. Don't you see it mightn't be fair to prejudice him against Isobel. Isobel thinks such a lot of Cuthbert."

"Oh."

A long clinging silence depreciated the conversational prowess of Adelaide Maud.

"Well," she said, in a conventional voice, "We've had a lovely day. Let me know when you are going to another concert. And I shall send you full particulars

about Lady Emily."

They were walking along Regent Street to find their shop for the flowers. It seemed that Adelaide Maud was about to desert them. She beckoned for a hansom and got inside. Mabel and Jean felt that they said good-bye to Miss Dudgeon of The Oaks. In another second they had gone on and Adelaide Maud had had her hansom pulled up beside them again.

"Jean, Jean," she called, quite radiant again. "I forgot the most important thing. It's about lessons. Do you think that your Splashkaspitskoff would condescend to give me some?"

It was rather mad of Adelaide Maud, but she got out and paid off the hansom.

"It isn't so late as I thought it was," she said lamely. But Mabel knew that she came to make up.

Jean only thought of the lessons.

"You will find him so splendid," she said, "and such a gentleman."

"I like that," said Mabel. "Why–he talks about the most revolting things."

"It's his manners that are so wonderful," said Jean in a championing manner. They had found their shop by this time and were looking at white roses. When Mabel said, "Do you think these are nice?" Jean might be heard explaining, "It's the method you know that is so wonderful."

And when at last they had decided about roses and arranged about the lessons, Adelaide Maud thought she must immediately buy a hat.

"I quite forgot that I wanted a hat," she said gravely.

They went to one of the best shops, and sat in three chairs, with Adelaide Maud surrounded by mirrors. Tall girls sailed up like swans and laid a hat on her bright hair and walked away again. Adelaide Maud turned and twisted and looked lovely in about a dozen different hats. After looking specially superb in one, she would say. "Take that one away, I don't like it at all."

Occasionally the swans would put on a hat and sail about in order to show the effect. Then Adelaide Maud would look specially languid and appear more dissatisfied than ever. At last she fixed on one which contained what she called "a dead seagull."

"Why you spoil that pretty hat with a dead bird, I can't think," she exclaimed to the attendant. "Look at its little feet turned up."

Then, "You must take this bird out, and give me flowers."

She began pinning on her own hat again. In a second the bird was gone, and the swanlike personages sailing over the grey white carpet, brought charming bunches of which they tried the effect "for modom."

"Oh, do get heliotrope," said Mabel. "It's so gorgeous with your hair."

Adelaide Maud swung round.

”And I’ve been making up my mind to white for the last half-hour. How can you, Mabel!”

She chose a mass of white roses, ”dreaming in velvet.”

Adelaide Maud rose, gave directions about sending, and prepared to leave.

”Don’t you want to know the price?” asked Mabel in great amazement.

”Oh, of course.”

Adelaide Maud asked the price.

The total took Mabel’s breath away.

”You must never marry a poor man,” said she as they passed out. Adelaide Maud stopped humbly in a passage of grey velvet and silver gilt.

”Well, I never,” she said. Then walking on, she asked in a very humble, mocking tone, ”Will you teach me, Mabs, how to shop so that I may marry a poor man.”

Mabel laughed gaily.

”Thank you,” said she. ”That sounds as though you think that I ought to know. Am I to marry a poor man?”

Adelaide Maud laughed outright, and took her briskly by the arm.

”I didn’t mean that. I believe you will marry a duke. But you see–you think me so extravagant, and I might have to be poor.”

”That dead seagull going cost you a guinea alone,” said Mabel accusingly.

”And they kept the seagull,” said Adelaide Maud. ”How wanton of me!”

”I’ve had a very nice hat for a guinea,” said Mabel, with a smirk of suppressed laughter.

”And yet you won’t marry a poor man,” said Adelaide Maud. ”How unjust the world is.”

They parted in better form than they had done an hour earlier.

”Wasn’t she queer,” said Jean, ”to go off like that?”

”Queerer that she came back,” said Mabel. ”Do you know what I think? I believe Adelaide Maud bought that hat simply–simply—-”

”To kill time,” said Jean.

”No. To stay with us a little longer,” said Mabel.

”It’s more than any of the Dudgeons ever thought of doing before–if it’s true!” said blunt, robust Jean.

”But I don’t believe it is,” said she. ”Let’s scoot for that bus or we’ll lose it.”

So they scooted for the bus.

CHAPTER XXI
At Lady Emily's

Adelaide Maud found herself possessed of quite a fervid longing. She wanted to see Mabel and Jean disport themselves with dignity at Lady Emily's. What had always remained difficult in Ridgetown seemed to become curiously possible at Lady Emily's, where indeed the highest in the land might be met. That she might make real friends of the two girls at last seemed to become a possibility. It was not merely the fact of Lady Emily's being a "complete dear" that constituted the difference. It was more the absence of the Ridgetown standards. There were never upstarts to be found at Lady Emily's. Her own character sifted her circle in an automatic manner. That which was vulgar or self-seeking had no response from her. Racy people found her dull, would-be smart persons quite inanimate. She could no more help being unresponsive to them than she could help being interested in others whom she respected. It was a distinguished circle which surrounded her, and those who never pierced it, never understood how easily it was formed, how inviolately kept. Occasionally Lady Emily's "tact" was upheld as the secret of her power.

"And I have absolutely no tact at all," she would moan. "I simply follow my impulses as a child would."

It was the unerring correctness of her impulses which made Adelaide Maud believe that she would welcome the Leightons.

Lady Emily had married a brother of Mr. Dudgeon's. Adelaide Maud's devotion to her father's memory put her uncle into the position of a kind of patron saint of her own existence. She sometimes thought that his character supplied a number of these impulses which made Lady Emily the dear she was. Lady Emily was the daughter of a Duke, and had none of the aspirations of a climber, her family having climbed so long ago, that any little beatings about a modern ladder seemed ridiculous. Her brother was the present duke of course, and "made laws in London," as Miss Grace used to describe it. This phantom of a duke, intermarried in a way into her family, had prevented Mrs. Dudgeon from knowing any of the Ridgetown people–intimately that is. Yet the duke never

called, and Lady Emily wore her dull coat of reserve when in Mrs. Dudgeon's company. Lady Emily's heart went out, however, to the "golden-haired girls" who spent their seasons with her in London.

She was perfectly sweet about the Leightons, and called at the girls' club in state. What an honour!

The girls found their ideas tumbling. Lady Emily was much more "easy" than any one they had met.

They prepared for the dinner quite light-heartedly.

After all, it could only be a dream. London was a dream. London in the early winter with mellow air, only occasionally touched with frost, glittering lights in the evenings, and crowds of animated people. So different from the dew dripping avenues of streets at Ridgetown.

They "skimmed" along in a hansom to Lady Emily's and thought they were the most dashing persons in London.

"But it's only a dream, remember," said Jean.

They went in radiantly through wide portals. Footmen moved out of adjacent corners and bowed them on automatically.

Mabel loved it, but Jean for a few agonizing seconds felt over-weighted.

Then "it's only a dream!"

They dreamed through a mile of corridor and ran into Adelaide Maud.

The dream passed and they were chatting gaily at shilling seat gossip, and that sort of thing.

Adelaide Maud made the maids skim about. They liked her, that was evident. Mabel and Jean were prinked up and complimented.

"You are ducks, you know," said Adelaide Maud.

They proceeded to the drawing-room.

Here the point was marked between the time when the girls had never known Mr. Dudgeon and the time when they did. Mabel never forgot that fine, spare figure, standing in a glitter of gilt panelled walls, of warm light from a fire and glimmering electric brackets, of pale colour from the rugs on the floor. He had the grey ascetic face of the scholarly man brought up in refinement, and his expression contained a great amount of placidity. He had dark, scrutinizing eyes, and a kind mouth, where lines of laughter came and went. Jean approached tremblingly, for now it suddenly dawned on her that she had never been informed why the husband of Lady Emily should only be plain "Mr. Dudgeon." Was this right, or had she not listened properly? Then Adelaide Maud said distinctly, "Mr. Dudgeon." Jean concluded that it was their puzzle, not hers, and shook hands with him radiantly. Mabel only thought that at last she had met one more man who might be compared to her father.

They sat down on couches of curved legs and high backs, "the kind of

couches that make one manage to look as magnificent as possible," as Jean described it. Mr. Dudgeon said Lady Emily was being indulged with a few moments' grace.

"It's the one thing we have always to do for Lady Emily," said he, "to give her a few minutes' grace." He began to talk to them in a quick, grave manner.

Jean again informed herself, "It is a dream."

One would have thought that Mr. Dudgeon was really interested in them both. And how could he be–he–the husband of the daughter of a duke! He asked all about how long they had known Adelaide Maud and so on.

Mabel was not dreaming, however. She sat daintily on the high-backed couch and told Mr. Dudgeon about the Story Books.

There they were, only ten minutes in the room, and Mr. Dudgeon, who had never seen Mabel or Jean before, was hearing all about the Story Books.

And Adelaide Maud, who had begun to imagine she knew the Leightons, heard this great fable for the first time in her life.

"Uncle," she said, "uncle, isn't this sweet, isn't this fame?"

"It is," said he.

"Do you wonder that I don't go to the ball?" she asked. "And you've done this ever since you were children?" she asked. "Made fairies of us! And I'm 'Adelaide Maud,' am I? Who once called me Adelaide?" She looked puzzled. "Dear me, if only we had known. And not even Miss Grace to tell me!"

"Oh, we bound them over," said Mabel, "and no one else ever heard of it."

"She doesn't tell you all," said wicked Jean. "She doesn't tell you that we sat behind you once at a concert, and Mabel saw, properly you know, how your blue dress was made."

"Oh, Jean, Jean," said Mabel.

"Yes, and had hers made just like it," said Jean. She spread her hands a little.

"Rucked down the front, you remember."

"Oh, I remember," laughed Adelaide Maud.

"And when you came to call–Mabel couldn't put on her prettiest gown, because it was just like yours."

"Oh, Jean," cried Mabel.

In the midst of some laughter came in Lady Emily.

"Well," she said in a gentle way, "you people are enjoying yourselves, aren't you?"

Adelaide Maud knew then that the day was won for Mabel and Jean. Mr. Dudgeon was always a certain quality, but Lady Emily–well, she had seen Lady Emily when people called her "dull." It was wonderful with what grace Lady Emily adapted herself to the interests of two girls almost unknown to her. The effect might be gleaned from what Jean said afterwards.

"Lady Emily was so sweet, I never bothered about forks or anything. There was such a love of a footman! I believe he shoved things into my hands just when I ought to use them. It always worries me to remember–when I'm talking–just like the figures at lancers, you know, but here they did everything for one except eat."

Lady Emily had on a beautiful diamond ornament at her throat, and another in her hair, and they scintillated in splendour. She wore a dress of white chiffon for the ball.

"You insist on dragging me there?" Mr. Dudgeon asked several times. Whenever a pause occurred in the conversation he said, "You insist on carrying me off to this ball, don't you?"

Lady Emily also pretended that she had to go very much against her will. Mabel and Jean had never seen people set out to balls in this way before. They themselves had always their mad rush of dressing and their wild rush in the cloakroom for programmes, and a most enervating pause for partners and then the thing was done. But Lady Emily and Mr. Dudgeon tried to pan out the quiet part of the evening as far as it would pan out.

Then came a trying time.

In the drawing-room, quite late, very gorgeous people arrived. Jean was endeavouring to remember whether or not she took sugar with tea when the first of them came in. The spectacle made her seize three lumps one after another, to gain time, when as a fact she never took more than one. They fell in a very flat small cup of tea and splashed it slightly in various directions. She was always very pleased to remember that she didn't apologize to the footman.

The gorgeous people seemed only to see Lady Emily and to talk to the electric light brackets. They said the ball was a bore.

A rather magnificent and very stout personage settled himself near Mabel. He wore shining spectacles which magnified his eyes in a curious manner.

"Hey, what, what," he said to Mabel. "And you aren't a Dudgeon! Hey! Thought you were one. Quite a lot of 'em, you know. Always croppin' up. Golden hair, I remember. And yours is brownish. Ah, well. You're a friend, you say. Quite as good, quite as good. Not going to the ball. Consider yourself in luck. Not a manjack but says the same. Why they make it a ball, Heaven knows. Never dance, you know. Hey what! None of us able for it. Not so bad as levees though. There, imagine Slowbeetle in white calves. There he is, that old totterer. Yet he does it. Honour of his country, calls of etiquette and that sort of thing. You're young, missed a lot of this, eh! Well, it's mostly farce, y'know. We prance a lot. Not always amusin'. Relief to know Lady Emily. No prance about her. Hey, what!"

Adelaide Maud approached.

"Ah, here we are. Thought you had dyed it. Golden as ever, my dear. Pleasant to see you again. Why aren't you and this lady goin'? We could stay. Instead of prancin', eh!"

The ill humour of having to go to the ball was on all of them evidently. But this spectacled benignity fascinated Mabel. He again was a "complete dear."

"I'm going to steal her," said Adelaide Maud, indicating Mabel, darkly; "you wait."

"Hey, what! I'll report. Report to Lady Emily, y'know. Ye've taken my first partner. Hey, what! Piano? Ah, well. Not in my line, but I'm with you."

He actually accompanied them to a long alcove where a piano stood half shrouded in flowers. Here Adelaide Maud had withdrawn the little party of Jean, Mabel and herself, that they might look and play a little and enjoy themselves.

"Simpkins, more tea," she whispered. "We didn't have half enough."

It was an admirable picnic. Mabel played "any old thing," as Adelaide Maud called it, ran on from one to another while they joked and talked and watched the "diplomatic circles" gathering force in the drawing-room. The spectacled gentleman sat himself down in complete enjoyment.

"D'ye know," he said to Jean in the same detached manner and without any kind of introduction, "no use at that kind of thing," indicating the piano, "but the girl can play. Fills me with content. Content's the word. Difficult to find nowadays. She doesn't strain. Not a bit. She smooths one down. A real talent. And a child! Hey, what, quite remarkable."

Lady Emily came slowly in. Two people talked to her.

The spectacled gentleman rose, and they listened to him.

"Don't interrupt, Lady Emily. She's got the floor, y'know. I've heard prima donnas. Here too. And they didn't smooth me down. Catch a note or two of this. It gives its effect, hey? Gets your ear. Hey, what–if we had her in the House there might be hope for the country, hey, what!"

Lady Emily was pleased.

She laid her hand on Mabel's shoulder.

"Are you liking this?"

"Oh, it's such a dream, and you are so lovely, Lady Emily, and it doesn't seem real. So it's very easy to play, you know."

"I should make them stop talking, but they came for that, you know. And you are playing so well, it's too pretty an interlude. Helen didn't tell me that you could play like this."

"And my new master makes me believe I can't play a note," said Mabel. "I shall tell him he is quite wrong, because you said so."

Aunt Katharine's words came to her mind–playing at one end of the country no better than the other! Ah, well, it was newer, fresher, or something–taking

it either way!

Of course it came to an end. The girls slipped out with Adelaide Maud and found the long corridor with the white room containing their wraps and two attentive maids. They were covered up in their cloaks, and watched one or two leave before them, as they stood looking down on them from the staircase.

"Nobody will miss us," said Adelaide Maud. "They are 'going on,' you know."

There was something rather sad in her voice.

"They all go on to something or somebody, even that dear old Earl Knuptford, he will pick you at the same place next year that he found you at to-night, and say, 'Hey, what,' and never think that both he and you have dropped twelve months out of your lives. It's different at Ridgetown, isn't it?"

"Yes, there's nothing to go on to at Ridgetown, is there?" said Jean grimly. "And nobody to forget or to say, 'Hey, what,' even if they had never met you before."

Her world was full of shining diplomats and she had chatted with an earl.

Adelaide Maud looked softly after them.

"Nothing to go on to at Ridgetown," she murmured. "And no one to forget."

She smiled softly.

"Ah! well, it's nice that there's no one to forget."

CHAPTER XXII
The Engagement

The night at Lady Emily's was by no means a first step into a new and fashionable world. Mabel and Jean never doubted for a moment that they were anything but spectators of that brilliant gathering. Even Adelaide Maud was only a spectator. Lady Emily and her husband were different from the world in which they moved because they had hobbies and minor interests which they occasionally allowed to interfere with the usual routine. Mr. Dudgeon had been known to skip a state banquet for a book which he has just received. And Lady Emily would make such calls and give such invitations as resulted in that wonderful little dinner party. But as for any of her set being interested, why, there was no time for that. Place something in their way, like Mabel sitting on a couch, part of which Earl Knupt-

ford desired to make use and one met a "belted Earl." He became interested and dropped sentences pell-mell on Mabel's astonished head. For days, Jean dreamed of large envelopes arriving–"The Earl and Countess of Knuptford request," etc.

("You donkey, there's no countess," interjected Mabel.) The Earl would as soon have thought of inviting the lamp post which brought his motor to a full stop and his Lordship's gaze on it correspondingly. Bring these people to a pause in front of something, and they might delay themselves to interview it. But while one is not part of the machinery which takes them on, there is no chance of continuing the acquaintance.

Adelaide Maud told them as much. It seemed to Mabel that Adelaide Maud wanted them to know that though she lived in this world, she was by no means of it. She enjoyed herself often quite as much in the shilling seats. Her view of things did not prevent Mabel and Jean from participating in benefits to be derived from the acquaintance of Lady Emily. There ensued a happy time when they had seats at the Opera, of which an autumn season was in full swing, of occasional concerts and drives, and once they went with Lady Emily and Mr. Dudgeon far into the country on a motor. For the rest, friends of their own looked them up, and they had hardly a moment unfilled with practising which was not devoted to going about and seeing the world of London. The Club improved with acquaintance, and it was wonderful how the very girls who annoyed Jean so much on her arrival became part of their very existence. "We are so dull," she would write home, "because Violet has gone off for the week end," or "We didn't go out because Ethel and Gertrude wanted us to have tea with them."

Adelaide Maud left for home. That was the tragic note of their visit. Then Cousin Harry turned up with his sister and her husband and offered to run them over to Paris for Christmas. Here the cup overflowed. Paris!

It was a new wrench for Mr. Leighton, who meant to get them home for Christmas and if possible keep them there. But he knew that a trip with Mrs. Boyne would be of another "seventh heaven" order, and once more he gave way.

"Can you hold the fort a little longer?" wrote Mabel to Elma.

Elma held the fort.

She held it, wondering often what would come of it all. She was in the position of a younger sister to one she did not love. Isobel chaperoned her everywhere. They had reached a calm stage where they took each other in quite a polite manner, but never were confidential at all. Mr. and Mrs. Leighton saw the politeness and were relieved. They saw further, and lamented Isobel's great friendship with the Merediths. It seemed to Mr. Leighton that although he would much rather leave the affair alone, that Isobel was in his care, that she was a handsome, magnificent girl, and that she ought not to be offered calmly as a sort of second sacrifice to the caprices of Robin. He spoke to her one evening very

gently about it when they were alone.

"I thought I ought to tell you," said Mr. Leighton, "that in a tacit sort of manner, Mr. Meredith attached himself very closely to Mabel. She was so young that I did not interfere, as now I am very much afraid I ought to have done. It is a little difficult, you see, for your Aunt in particular, who is asked on every side, 'I had understood that Mabel was to marry Mr. Meredith.' I want you to know of course that Mabel never will marry him now. I should see to that myself, if she had not already told me that she had no desire to. He is not tied in any way, except, as I consider, in the matter of honour. I did not interfere before, but at present I am almost compelled to. I'm before everything your guardian, my dear. I should like you to find a man worthy of yourself."

He had done it as kindly as he knew how.

Isobel sat calmly gazing past him into the fire. There was no ruffling of her features. Only a faint suggestion of power against which it seemed luckless to fight.

"I knew a good deal of this, of course," she said.

"Oh." Mr. Leighton started slightly.

"Yes. But of course there is a similar tale of every man, and every girl– wherever they are boxed up in a place of this size. Somebody has to make love to somebody. I don't suppose Mr. Meredith thought of marriage."

It seemed as though Mr. Leighton were the young, inexperienced person, and that Isobel was the one to impart knowledge.

"In justice to Mr. Meredith, I do not know in the slightest what he thought. That is where my case loses its point. I ought to have known. I certainly, of course, think that I ought to know now."

"Oh," said Isobel. She rose very simply and looked as placid as a lake on a calm morning. "That is very simple. Mr. Meredith intends to marry me whenever I give him the opportunity."

Mr. Leighton was thunderstruck. At the bottom of his mind, he was thankful now that "his girls" were away. Memories of the stumbling block which the existence of Robin's sister had before occasioned made him ask first, "Does Miss Meredith know?"

He spoke in quite a calm manner. It frustrated Isobel for the moment, who had expected an outburst. She wavered slightly in her answer.

"I don't know," she said.

Mr. Leighton moved impatiently.

"That is just it," he said. "This young man makes tentative arrangements and leaves out the important parties to it. Miss Meredith is quite capable of upsetting her brother's plans. Do you know it?"

It seemed that Isobel did. It seemed that Miss Meredith was the one person

who could ruffle her. From that day of negligently answering and partly snubbing her in the train, Isobel had showed a side of cool indifference to Miss Meredith.

"I want you to know, Uncle, that I shall not consider Miss Meredith in the slightest."

Could this be a young girl?

"Do you know what Mabel, what all of you did? You considered Miss Meredith. What were the consequences? She gave Mabel away with both hands. She wants her brother to marry Miss Dudgeon. He won't marry Miss Dudgeon. He will marry me."

She rose slightly.

"And Miss Meredith won't have the slightest possible say in the matter."

Mr. Leighton looked rather pale. He flicked quietly the ash from his cigar before answering her.

"It's a different way of dealing with people than I am accustomed to. Will you keep your decision open for a little yet?"

"I shall, till summer, when we mean to be married."

There seemed to be no altering the fact that she was to be married.

"I should be so sorry if, while here with me–with all of us, you did not find a man worthy of you."

"I won't change my mind," she said.

"And Robin?"

He had returned to the old term.

"He didn't change his mind before. Miss Meredith did it for him. I am quite alive to the fact that if Miss Meredith hadn't interfered, and I hadn't come, he would now be engaged to Mabel."

Mr. Leighton appeared dumbfoundered.

"Do you care very much for him?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." Isobel looked almost helplessly at him. "He isn't the man I dreamed of, but he is mine, you know. It has come to that."

She sank on her knees beside him, her eyes blazing.

"Isn't it an indignity for me, as much as for Mabel, to take what she didn't want? You say she doesn't want him. At first–oh! I only desired to show my power. I always meant to marry a wealthier man. But it's no use. He is a waverer, don't I know it. I see him calculating whether I'm worth the racket. I see that–I! Isn't it deplorable! But I mean to make a man of him. He never has been one before. And I mean to marry him, Uncle."

Mr. Leighton smoked and smoked at his cigar. He was beginning at last to fathom the nature that took what it wanted–with both hands.

"Isobel," he said gently, "let us drop all this question of Mabel. It isn't that which comes upper-most, now. It's the question of what you lose by marrying

in this way. Don't you know that this dropping of Miss Meredith, this way of 'paying her out,' you know, well, it may give you Robin intact; but have you an idea what you may lose in the process? I don't admire the girl, but–she is his sister. I have never known"–he threw away his cigar–"I have never yet known of a happy, a really happy marriage, where the happiness of two was built on the discomfiture of others. Won't you reconsider the whole position of being down on Miss Meredith, and paying everybody out who was concerned in Robin's affairs before you knew him? Won't you try to make your wedding a happiness to every one–even to Miss Meredith?"

"Oh," said Isobel, "I don't know that the average bride thinks much of the happiness of relations. She has her trousseaux and the guests to be invited, and all that sort of thing." She turned over a book which was lying near. "I don't think I should have time for Miss Meredith," she said coldly.

Mr. Leighton sat quite quietly.

"Will you be married here?" he asked.

A gleam came to Isobel's eyes.

"That would be nice," she said. There was the feeling of an answer to an invitation in her voice.

"It's at your disposal," he said, "anything we can do for your happiness."

"Is that to show that I do nothing for anybody else's?" Isobel was really grateful.

"Perhaps." He said it rather sadly.

"I might make an endeavour over Sarah," she said.

"You know, from the first, the day you came in the train, you told us you had ignored her, hadn't you? She nursed Robin through a long illness. Saw him grow up and all that kind of thing. Never spared herself in the matter of looking after him!"

"Well?" asked Isobel.

"Well," said Mr. Leighton, "it's rather pathetic, isn't it?"

The day was won in a partial manner; for Isobel promised she would try to "ingratiate Sarah."

"It's the wrong way of putting it, but it may make a beginning," said Mr. Leighton.

He further insisted on seeing Robin. That was a bad half-hour for every one, but for no one so particularly as for Robin. He had evaded so many things with Mr. Leighton, and for once he found that gentler nature adamant.

Nothing went quite so much against this gentler nature as having to arrange matters for Isobel. So Robin discovered. Yet already it made what Isobel called "a man of him." He was a man to be ruled, and Mabel had placed herself under his ruling. Here was the real mischief. Isobel would take him firmly in

hand.

The girls were greatly mystified, Elma horrified. They had orders to take the news of Isobel's engagement as though it might be an expected event, and certainly no sign was given that it was in the nature of a surprise. Jean could not understand Mabel when the news arrived. She laughed and sang and kissed Jean as though the world had suddenly become happy throughout.

"I thought you would have been cut up," said Jean disconsolately.

"Cut up! Why they are made for one another," cried Mabel. "Isobel, calm and firm, Robin, wavering and admiring, nothing could be better. But oh–oh–I want to see how Sarah takes it."

They had a particular grind just then, for now they were getting into spring, and it would soon be time for making that triumphant passage home of which they had so often dreamed. They lived for that now, but none lived for it more devotedly than Elma.

Isobel's engagement cut her further and further away from enjoying anything very much. She had always the feeling of cold critical eyes being on her. She often congratulated herself on having got over the stage where she used long words in quite their wrong sense. Isobel's proximity in these days would have been dreadful.

Miss Grace also seemed downhearted. It had been a trying winter for her, yet no actual evidence of ill-health had asserted itself. She was concerned about Elma too, who seemed to be losing what the others were gaining by being away, that just development which comes from happy experience. Elma plodded and played, but her bright little soul only came out unfledged of fear at Miss Grace's.

At last one day Miss Grace's face lit.

"My dear, your gift is composition."

Nobody ever had thought of it before. Elma's expression lightened to a transforming radiance.

"Oh, I wonder if I ever could get lessons," she cried.

They discovered a chance, through correspondence. So Elma held the fort, and tried to grapple single-handed with musical composition.

"If only I could compose an anthem before Mabel and Jean get home," she said one day.

"Heavens, Elma, you aren't going to die?" asked Betty.

CHAPTER XXIII

Holding the Fort

Miss Meredith took the news of her brother's engagement in a dumb manner. An explosion of wrath would have helped every one. Robin might have appeared aggrieved, and had something of which to complain, and Isobel's immobility beside some one in a rage was always effective. Miss Meredith would not rage however. She had met a match for her own resourceful methods, and at bottom she feared the reserve of power which prompted Isobel. Under cover of a fine frown she accepted the situation as Isobel had said she would. What hopes were overthrown by the engagement, what schemes upturned, no one but Miss Meredith herself would ever have an inkling. She began to regret her manner of ejecting Mabel, especially since the London reports told of a Mabel many cuts above Ridgetown. Miss Dudgeon had opened their eyes. She had come back in armour, the old Ridgetown armour, and talked in the stiffest manner of Mabel and Lady Emily, as though all were of a piece. Miss Meredith ventured to say to her later on that she understood that Mabel was quite a success in "Society."

"She always was, wasn't she?" asked Adelaide Maud very simply, as though she imagined society had really existed in Ridgetown.

Miss Meredith was a trifle overcast.

"Oh yes, yes, of course," she said. "But Mabel, of course, Mabel—-"

"Mabel would shine anywhere you mean. That is true. She possesses the gift of being always divinely natural."

Adelaide Maud could play up better than any one. Miss Dudgeon ran on to congratulate Miss Meredith on her brother's engagement.

"Ah yes, such a charming girl," said Miss Meredith. "He is very fortunate. We both are, since it relates us to so delightful a family. We have always been such friends."

There was a stiff pause. Adelaide Maud could never bring herself to fill in the pauses between social untruthfulnesses.

"She is very courageous, we think," ran on Miss Meredith. "Robin will not be able to give her very much of an establishment, you know. But that does not grieve her. She has a very even and contented disposition. I often tell Robin–quite a girl in a hundred! Not many would have consented so sweetly to an immediate marriage under the circumstances."

Ah, then, this might explain to the public the defection of Mabel. Mabel had expected an "establishment." Miss Dudgeon began to see daylight.

"Oh, on the contrary," she said, rising, "we have always looked on Mr. Meredith as being so well off in respect of being able to get married. Didn't

you tell me once–but then I have such a stupid memory!"

Miss Meredith recognized where a great slip had taken place. These had been her words before, "Not many young men are in so easy a position for marrying!" And to Miss Dudgeon of all people she had just said the reverse.

There is a pit formed by a bad memory wherein social untruths sometimes tumble in company. There they are inclined to raise a laugh at themselves, and occasionally make more honest people out of their perpetrators.

Miss Meredith knew there was no use in any longer explaining Robin's position, or want of it, to so clear-headed a person as Miss Dudgeon. The best way was to retire as speedily as possible from so difficult a subject.

Mrs. Leighton found the whole affair very trying. She never indulged in any social doctoring where her own opinions were concerned, and it was really painful for her to meet all the innuendoes cast at her by curious people.

"Oh, Mr. Leighton and I always think young people manage these things best themselves. They are so sensitive, you know, and quite apt to make mistakes if dictated to. A critical audience must be very trying. Yes, everybody thought Robin was engaged to Mabel–but he never was."

"Well then," said Aunt Katharine, with her lips pursed up to sticking-point, "if they weren't engaged, they ought to have been. That's all I've got to say."

It was not all she had got to say, as it turned out. She talked for quite a long time about the duties of children to their parents.

Mrs. Leighton at last became really exasperated.

"You know, Katharine," she said, "if you are so down on these young people, I shall one day–I really shall, I shall tell them how you nearly ran away with James Shrimpton."

"My dear," said Aunt Katharine. She was quite shocked. "I was a young unformed thing and father so overbearing—-" She was so hurt she could go no further.

"Exactly," said Mrs. Leighton. "And my girls are young unformed things, and their father is not overbearing."

Aunt Katharine grunted.

"Ah well, you keep their confidence. That's true. I don't know a more united family. But this marriage of Isobel's does not say much for your management."

That was it–"management." Mrs. Leighton groaned slightly to herself. She never would be a manager, she felt sure. She offered a passive front to fate, and her influence stopped there. As for manoeuvring fate by holding the reins a trifle and pressing backward or forward, she had not the inclination at any time to interfere in such a way at all. She leaned on what Emerson had said about things "gravitating." She believed that things gravitated in the right direction, so long

as one endeavoured to remain pure and noble, in the wrong one so long as one was overbearing and selfish. She had absolutely no fear as to how things would gravitate for Mabel after that night when she talked about Robin and went off to succour Jean.

She placidly returned to her crochet, and to the complainings of Aunt Katharine.

Cuthbert came down that evening, and Isobel, Elma, Betty and he went off to be grown-ups at a children's party at the Turbervilles. The party progressed into rather a "larky" dance, where there were as many grown-ups as children. All the first friends of the Leightons were there, including, of course, the Merediths. Cuthbert took in Isobel in rather a frigid manner. He endeavoured not to consider Meredith a cad, but his feelings in that direction were overweighted for the evening. He danced with the children, and "was no use for anybody else," as May Turberville put it. But then Cuthbert was so "ghastly clever and all that sort of thing," that he could not be put on the level of other people at all.

Cuthbert had got his summer lectureship. He told Elma, and then Mr. and Mrs. Leighton, and then Betty, and Isobel could not imagine what spark of mischief had lit their spirits to the point of revelry as they ambled along in their slow four-wheeler. Elma had only one despair in her mind. Neither Miss Grace nor Miss Annie were well. Miss Annie particularly seemed out of gear, so much so and so definitely, that for the first time for nearly thirty years Miss Grace spoke of having in Dr. Merryweather.

Cuthbert asked lots of questions.

"I don't know," Elma generally answered. "She just lies and sickens. As though she didn't care."

She raised her hand to her head at the time.

"Dr. Smith says it's the spring weather which everybody feels specially trying this year."

Cuthbert grunted.

George Maclean came to Elma for the first dance. He seemed in very good spirits. Elma found herself wondering if it were about Mabel. Well, one would see. Mabel had always been tied in a kind of a way, and now she was free! Mr. Maclean anyhow was the best, above all the best. Even Mr. Symington! When she thought of him, her mind always ran off to wondering what now might happen to Mr. Symington.

She had a long, rollicking waltz with Mr. Maclean. They rollicked, because children were on the floor and steering seemed out of fashion. Yet he carried her round in a gentle way, because Elma, with her desire to be the best of dancers, invariably got knocked out with a robust partner. He carried her round in the most gentle way until the music stopped with the bang, bang of an energetic

amateur. Elma found the floor suddenly hit her on the cheek in what seemed to her a most impossible manner.

"Now what could make it do that?" she asked Mr. Maclean. He was bending over her with rather a white face.

Cuthbert came up.

"Why didn't you tell Maclean that you were giddy?" he said. "He would have held you up."

"But I wasn't giddy," said Elma. "I'm not giddy now."

She was standing, but the floor again seemed at a slant.

"Steady," said Cuthbert. "You're as giddy as the giddiest. Don't pretend. Take her off to get cool, Maclean."

"Cool!" Elma's fingers seemed icy. But there was a comforting, light-headed glow in her cheeks which reassured her.

Every one said how well she was looking, and that kept her from wondering whether she was really going to be ill. George Maclean tried to get her to drink tea, but for the first time in her life she found herself possessed of a passion for lemonade.

"You will really think that I am one of the children," she said, "because I am simply devoured with a longing for iced lemonade."

"Well, you shall have iced lemonade, and as much as you want," said George Maclean. "How I could let you fall, I can't think." There was a most ludicrous look of concern on his face.

"I shall grab all my prospective partners for this evening at least," said Elma. "You can't think how treacherous that floor is."

She did not dance nearly so much as she wanted to. George Maclean and Lance and Cuthbert, these three, at least, made her sit out when she wanted to be "skipping."

Isobel looked her up on hearing that she had fallen. Cuthbert said, "She doesn't look well, you know."

"Why, Elma–Elma is never ill," said Isobel. "Look at her colour too!"

Towards the end of the evening, they began to forget about it, and Elma danced almost as usual. Three times she saw the floor rock, but held on. What her partners thought of her when she clung to a strong arm, she did not stop to think. It was "talking to Miss Annie in her stuffy room" that had started it, she remembered.

She was in an exalted frame of mind about other things. The world was turning golden. Cuthbert was coming home, Mabel and Jean would soon be with them, Adelaide Maud was already on the spot. And Isobel would be gone in the summer.

Robin Meredith came to ask her for a dance. He seemed subdued, and had a

rather nervous manner of inviting her. So that it seemed easy for her to be sedate and beg him to excuse her because she had turned giddy. Anything! she could stand anything on that evening except dance with Robin Meredith. Her training in many old ways came back to her, however.

"I shall sit out, if you don't mind," she said. "Isn't it silly to have a headache when all this fun is going on?" She found herself being quite friendly and natural with him. The children were having a great romp in front of them.

"Have you a headache?" he asked rather kindly.

Oh yes, she had a headache. Now she knew. It seemed to have been going on for years. She began to talk about May Turberville's embroidery, and how Lance had sewn a pincushion in order to outrival her. When May had run on to sewing daffodils on her gowns, Lance threatened to embroider sunflowers on his waistcoats. Had he seen Lance's pictures? Well, Lance was really awfully clever, particularly in drawing figures. Mr. Leighton wanted him to say he would be an artist, but Lance said he couldn't stand the clothes he would have to wear. Mr. Leighton said that wearing a velveteen coat didn't mean nowadays that one was an artist, and Lance said that it was the only way of drawing the attention of the public. He said that one always required some kind of a showman to call out "Walk up, gentlemen, this way to the priceless treasures," and that a velveteen coat did all that for an artist. Lance said he would rather be on the Stock Exchange, where he could do his own shouting. She said that frankly, with all the knowledge she had of Lance and his manner of giving people away, she should never think of entrusting him with her money to invest. She said it in a very high voice, since she observed just at that minute that Lance stood behind her chair.

"Well, you are a little cat, Elma," he said disdainfully. "Here am I organizing a party in order to let people know that some day I shall be on the Stock Exchange, and here are you influencing the gully public against me."

"I object to the term 'gully,'" said Robin in a laboured but sporting manner.

"Well–gulled if you like it better," said Lance. "Only that effect doesn't come on till I'm done with you. You are to go and dance lancers, Meredith, while I take your place with this slanderer." It was Lance's way of asking for the next dance.

Elma gave a great sigh of relief after Robin had gone.

"He never heard me say so much in his life before," said she. "He must have been awfully surprised."

"How you can say a word to the fellow–but there, nobody understands you Leightons. You ought to have poisoned him. Or perhaps Mabel is only a little flirt."

He wisped a thread of the gauze of her fan.

Elma smiled at him. She was always sure of Lance.

"I say, Elma, what are we to do with Mother Mabel when she comes back? Does she mind this business, or are we allowed to refer to it in a jovial way?"

"Jovial, I think," said Elma. "I believe Mabs is awfully relieved."

She bent over and whispered to Lance.

"I should myself you know if I had just got rid of Robin."

Lance laughed immoderately.

"He's a rum chap," he said, "but he's met a good match in Isobel. Great Scott, look at the stride on her. She could take Robin up and twist him into macaroni if she wanted to. I'm sorry for him."

"What are you going to do for Sarah?" he asked abruptly.

"Sarah?" asked Elma with her eyes wide.

"Yes, you'll have to marry the girl or something. It's hard nuts on her. Why don't you get Symington back and let him make up the quartette?"

"Mr. Symington?"

"Yes. It would be most appropriate, wouldn't it? Robin and Isobel, and Symington and Sarah. It's quite a neat arrangement. You've provided one husband, why not the other." Several demons of mischief danced in Lance's eye.

"Oh, Lance, don't say that," said Elma; "it's so horrid, and–and common."

"Oh, it's common, is it," said Lance, "common. And I'm going to be your stockbroker one day, and you talk to me like this."

"Look here, Lance, I'd trust you with all my worldly wealth on the Stock Exchange, but I won't let you joke about Mr. Symington."

"Whew," said Lance, and he looked gently and amiably into the eyes of Elma.

"When you look good like that, I know you are exceedingly naughty. What is it this time, Lance?"

"Nothing, Elma, except—-"

"Except—-"

"That I have found out all I wanted to know about Symington, thank you."

"You are just a common, low little gossip, Lance," said Elma with great severity. "Will you please get me a nice cool glass of iced lemonade."

CHAPTER XXIV
The Ham Sandwich

Elma lay on her bed in the pink and white room. The first warm spring sunshine in vain tried to find an opening to filter through partly closed shutter and blinds. A nurse in grey dress and white cap and apron moved silently in the half-light created by drawn blinds and an open door She nodded to Mrs. Leighton who had just come in and who now sat near the darkened window. The nurse pointedly referred her to the bed, as though she had good news for her.

Elma opened her eyes. Their misty violet seemed dazed with long sleep.

"Oh, mummy, you there?" she asked.

"Yes," said Mrs. Leighton quietly.

Elma looked at her inquiringly.

"Is there anything you want?" asked Mrs. Leighton in answer to that expression. How often had they asked the same question uselessly within the past weeks!

Elma looked up at the white walls.

"Yes, mummy, there's one thing. I should like a large ham sandwich."

"There," said Nurse emphatically. "That's it. Now the fight is really going to begin."

"I should like to have plenty of butter on it and quite a lot of mustard," said Elma.

"Mustard?" said Mrs. Leighton helplessly. "Do you know what's been wrong with you all these weeks?"

Elma moved her eyes curiously, there being not much else that she could move. It had never dawned on her till that moment to wonder what had been wrong with her.

"No, mummy," she said, "I haven't a notion."

Mrs. Leighton looked for instructions to the nurse.

"She'd better know now, Mrs. Leighton," she said, "now that she begins to ask for ham sandwiches."

"You've had typhoid fever, Elma," said her mother.

Elma sighed gently.

"Dear me," she said, "how grand. But you don't know how hungry I am or you would give me a ham sandwich. You ought to be rather glad that I'm so much better that I want to eat."

Then an expression of great cunning came into her eyes.

"I ought to be fed up if I've had a fever," she informed them.

"We shall get the doctor to see to that," said the nurse.

She came to her and held her hand firmly.

"Do you know," she said, "you have been very ill and you are ever so much better, but nothing you've gone through will worry you so much as what you've got to do now. You've got to be starved for ten days, when you are longing to

eat. You will lie dreaming of food–and—-"

"Ham sandwiches?" asked Elma.

"And we shall not be allowed to give them to you," said Nurse.

"Isn't she nice, mummy, she's quite sorry. And people say that nurses are hard-hearted," said Elma.

"I've had typhoid myself," said Nurse briefly.

Elma looked at her, her own eyelids heavy with sleep still to be made up.

"Well, barring the sandwich, what about lemon cheese cakes," she asked.

Mrs. Leighton let her hands fall.

"Oh, Elma," she said, "what a thing to choose at this stage."

"Or sausages," remarked Elma. "I'm simply longing for sausages."

She endeavoured to throw an appealing look towards Nurse.

"This isn't humour on my part, mummy dear," she said. "I just can't help it. I can't get sausages out of my mind," she said.

"If you would think of a little steamed fish or a soaked rusk, you'd be a little nearer it," said Nurse, "you'll have that in ten days."

Elma looked at her in a determined way.

"I've always been told that a simple lunch, a very simple lunch might be made out of a ham sandwich. Why should it be denied to me now?"

"Elma," said Mrs. Leighton, "I never knew you were so obstinate."

"You know, mummy," said Elma, "I'm not dreaming now. I'm wide awake, and I'm awfully hungry. I'm sorry I ever thought of sausages, because ham sandwiches were just about as much as I could bear. Now I've both to think of, and Nurse won't bring me either."

"Don't mind her, Mrs. Leighton," said the nurse. "It's always the same, and, without nurses, generally a relapse to follow. You aren't going to have a relapse," she said to Elma.

She gave her some milk in a methodical manner, and the down-dropping of Elma's eyelids continued till she fell asleep once more.

So she had slept since the fever had begun to go down. Probably she had had the best of the intervening weeks.

There was the slow stupor of a fever gaining ground. It began with the headache of the Turberville's dance, a headache which never lifted until Elma returned to her own again, weak and prostrate in bed. The stupor gradually cut her off from common affairs. It sent her to bed first because she could no longer stand up, and it crowded back her ideas and her memory till at last she was in the full swing of a delirium. What this illness cost Mr. and Mrs. Leighton in anxiety, probably no one knew. Elma had always covered up her claims to sympathy and petting, always been moderately well. Here she was with blazing cheeks and wandering eyes talking largely and at random about anything or every one.

Mr. Leighton used to sit by her and stroke her hair. Long years afterwards, she was to feel the touch of his fingers, hear the tones of his voice as he said, "Poor little Elma."

She faded gradually into the delirium which seemed to have cut her illness in two, the one illness where she lay with dry mouth and an everlasting headache, the other where she was merely hungry.

Mrs. Leighton was appalled by the worrying of Elma's mind. She went through some of her wild dreams with her, calling her back at places by the mere sound of her voice to a kind of sub-consciousness in which Elma grew infinitely relieved.

"Oh, is that you, mummy? Have I really been dreaming?"

She dreamt of Mabel and she dreamt of Adelaide Maud. But more than any one, she dreamt of Mr. Symington. Here is where the deceptiveness of a fever comes in. Elma pleaded so piteously with her mother to bring back Mr. Symington that Mrs. Leighton awoke to an entirely new and wrong idea of the state of Elma's affections.

"It's quite ridiculous, John," said she, "but that child, she was only a child, seems to have filled her head with notions of Mr. Symington."

"What! More of it?" asked poor Mr. Leighton.

"She begs and begs to have him back," said Mrs. Leighton.

"I've never made out why he left as he did," said Mr. Leighton. "There was always the idea with me that he cleared out for a reason. But this small child, why, she hadn't her hair up."

"She will soon be eighteen," said Mrs. Leighton.

He went into her room a little later. Elma lay with unseeing eyes staring at him. He could hardly bear it.

"Elma," he said vaguely, trying to recall her.

"Oh," she answered promptly, but still staring, "is that you, Sym–Sym–Symington!"

Her father choked down what he could of the lump that gathered, and moved quietly away.

These were dark days for every one. Elma had the best of it. She left the Symington groove after a day or so, and worked on to Isobel. Isobel invaded her mind. It was a blessing that Isobel was barred by real distaste to the business from going in to help with the nursing of Elma. What she said of her pointed to more than a mere dislike. It revolved into fear as the delirium progressed. Then a second nurse arrived, and between them the two began really to decrease the temperature. The first good news came, "Asleep for ten minutes," and after that there was no backward turn in the illness for Elma.

Throughout this time there had been the keenest inquiries made as to what

had caused the illness. Cuthbert was down and "made things hum" in the matter of wakening up the sanitary authorities and so on. But no flaw in the arrangement of the White House or anything near it could be discovered. Then Dr. Merryweather called one day.

"I have another patient in Miss Annie," he said.

Miss Annie! This gave a clue.

"Typhoid at her age is unusual," he said, "but she has not developed the power of resisting disease like ordinary people. She has been in a good condition for harbouring every germ that happened to be about. I'm afraid we cannot save her." He turned to Mrs. Leighton. His kind old face twitched suddenly.

"Oh, dear, dear," she exclaimed. "What will Miss Grace do? What will little Elma do?"

"Miss Grace is all right," said Dr. Merryweather. "I've seen to that. Elma must not know, of course."

"This looks like contraction from a common cause," said Cuthbert. "I'll be at it whatever it is. We don't want any one else sacrificed."

Dr. Merryweather looked at him gravely.

"I have just been getting at the tactics of the local government," said he. "You couldn't believe they could be so prompt in Ridgetown. Three weeks ago, a gardener living near Miss Annie complained of an atrocious stench coming from over the railway. It was so bad that when the local government body at his demand approached it, they had to turn and run. An open stream had been used as a common sewer and run into the railway cutting, where it had stagnated. Can you imagine the promptness of the local government? Evans, the gardener, threatened to report to you, Mr. Leighton, since your daughter was so ill and had visited so much at Miss Annie's. They managed to keep his mouth shut, and they have removed the sewer. Too late for Miss Annie."

"Too late for my little girl," said Mr. Leighton.

It seemed an extraordinary thing that the two daughters who had gone away, and given them so much anxiety, should be coming home radiantly independent, and Elma, sheltered at home, should be lying just lately rescued from death.

The same thought seemed to strike Dr. Merryweather in another connection.

"Ah, well," he said, "we would save some gentle souls a lot of suffering if we could. It's no use evading life, you see, and its consequences. Death has stolen into Miss Annie's beautiful bedroom, from an ugly sewer across the way. Nothing we could do for her now can save her."

Miss Annie died on a quiet morning when Elma lay dreaming of ham sandwiches. Elma never forgot that, nor how dreadful it seemed that she had never

asked for Miss Annie nor Miss Grace, but just dreamed of what she would eat.

"You had had a lot to stand," Nurse told her a week or two afterwards when she heard about Miss Annie for the first time, "and it's a compensation that's often given to us when we are ill, just to be peaceful and not think at all."

Dr. Merryweather had wakened up Miss Grace finally in a sharp manner.

"There's that poor child been ill all this time and you've never even seen her. Take her along some flowers and let her see that you are not grieving too much for Miss Annie. She won't get better if she worries about you."

Then to Elma.

"Cheer up Miss Grace when she comes. You have your life before you, and she has had to put all hers behind her. Don't let her be down if you can help it."

In this wise he pitted the two against one another, so that they met with great fortitude.

"Why, my dear, how pretty your hair is," Miss Grace had burst out.

Elma was lying on a couch near the window by this time. She looked infinitely fragile.

"Oh, Miss Grace, it is a wig," she replied.

Miss Grace laughed in a jerky hysterical sort of manner.

"Then I wish I wore a wig," said she.

Elma smiled.

"Do you know, that's what they all say. They come in and tell me in a most surprised manner, "Why, how well you are looking!" and say they never saw me so pretty and all that kind of thing. And then I look in my mirror, and I see quite plainly that I'm a perfect fright. But I don't care, you know. Mabel and Jean know now how ill I've been. I'm so glad they didn't before, aren't you? It would have spoiled Jean's coming home like a conqueror. They say she sings beautifully. And oh, Miss Grace, I've such a lot to tell you. One thing is about Mr. Symington. You know I never said why he went away. It was because Miss Meredith made him believe that Robin was engaged to Mabel, and she wasn't at all. It made her appear like a flirt, you know. Didn't it?"

Miss Grace nodded.

"Well, I've been thinking and thinking. I can't tell you how I've been dreaming about Mr. Symington. Well, now, I've been thinking, 'Couldn't we invite him to Isobel's wedding?'"

Miss Grace's eyes gleamed.

"Fancy Mr. Symington at breakfast at some outlandish place. A letter arrives. He opens it. 'Ha! The wedding invitation. Robin Meredith, the bounder!' I beg your pardon, Miss Grace. 'Robin Meredith to Isobel–what–niece of–why what's this?' What will he do, Miss Grace?"

"Come to the wedding, sure," said Miss Grace laughingly.

"Well, if I've to send the invitation myself, one is going to Mr. Symington."

Elma had not passed her dreaming hours in vain.

Besides, Miss Grace had got over the difficult part of meeting Elma again, and was right back in her old part of counsellor, evidently without a quiver of the pain that divided them. Yet, they both felt the barrier that was there, the barrier of that presence of Miss Annie which had always entered first into their conversations, and now could not be mentioned.

Elma thought of the visits that Miss Grace would have to make to her. She saw that Miss Grace had been warned not to agitate her. This was enough to enable her to take the matter entirely in her own hands with no agitation at all.

"I think you know, Miss Grace, that when one has been so near dying as I've been, and not minded–I mean I had no knowledge that I was so ill, and even didn't care much–since it was myself, you know, except for the trouble it gave to people—-"

Elma was becoming a little long-winded.

"I want to tell you that you must always tell me about Miss Annie, not mind just because they say I'm not to be agitated, or anything of that sort. I won't be a bit agitated if you tell me about Miss Annie."

"My dear love," Miss Grace stopped abruptly.

"Dr. Merryweather said—-" and she stopped again.

"Yes, Dr. Merryweather said the same to me, he said that on no account was I to speak to you of Miss Annie. Dr. Merryweather simply knows nothing about you and me."

Miss Grace shook her head drearily.

"You are a bad little invalid," said she.

But it broke the ice a little bit, and one day afterwards Miss Grace told her more than she could bear herself. Dr. Merryweather was right, Miss Grace broke down over the last loving message to Elma. She had a little pearl necklace for Elma to wear, and fastened it on without a word.

Then came Mrs. Leighton looking anxious.

"See, mummy, Miss Grace has given me a beautiful little necklace from Miss Annie."

All trace of Elma's childish nervousness had departed with her fever. She had looked right into other worlds, and it had made an easier thing of this one. Besides, Miss Grace must not be allowed to cry.

Miss Grace did not cry so much as one might have expected. Miss Annie's death was a thing she had feared for twenty-eight years, and Dr. Merryweather had given her no sympathy. He had almost made her think that Annie ought not to consider herself an invalid. How she connected typhoid fever with the neurotic illness which Dr. Merryweather would never acknowledge as an illness, it was

difficult to imagine. Certainly, she had the feeling that Annie in a pathetic manner had justified her invalidism at last. It was a sad way in which to recover one's self-respect, but in an unexplained way she felt that with Dr. Merryweather she had recovered her self-respect. She could refer to Miss Annie now, and awaken that twitching of his sympathies which one could see plainly in that rugged often inscrutable face, and feel thereby that she had not misplaced her confidence by giving up all these years to Annie. Indeed, the death of Miss Annie affected Dr. Merryweather far more than one could imagine. As also the sight of Elma, thinned down and fragile, her hair gone and a wig on.

He teased her unmercifully about the wig.

"So long as I look respectable when Mabel and Jean come home! Oh! Dr. Merryweather, please have me looking respectable when Mabel and Jean come home."

Dr. Merryweather promised to have her as fat as a pumpkin.

CHAPTER XXV
The Wild Anemone

Mabel and Jean had been successfully deceived up to a certain point in regard to Elma's illness. They were told the facts when the danger was past. It was made clear to them then that the fewer people at home in an illness of that sort the better, while skilled nurses were so conveniently to be had. Mabel pined a little over not having been there to nurse Elma, as though she had landed her sensitive little sister into an illness by leaving too much on her shoulders. The independent vitality of Jean constantly reassured her however.

"She would just have been worse with that scared face of yours at her bedside," Jean would declare. "Every time you think of Elma you get as white as though you were just about to perform in the Queen's Hall. You'll have angina pectoris if you don't look out."

Jean had made a great friend of a nurse who never talked of common things like heart disease or toothache. "Angina pectoris" and "periostitis" were used instead. When Jean wrote home in an airy manner in the midst of Elma's illness to say that she was suffering from an attack of "periostitis," Mrs. Leighton immediately wired, "Get a nurse for Jean if required."

"What in the wide world have you been telling mother?" asked Mabel with that alarming communication in her hand.

Jean was trying to learn fencing from an enthusiast in the corridor.

"Oh, well." Her face fell a trifle at the consideration of the telegram. "I did have toothache," said Jean.

Mabel stared at the telegram. "Mummy can't be losing her reason over Elma's being ill," she said. "She couldn't possibly suppose you would want a nurse for toothache. That's going a little too far, isn't it?"

Mabel was really quite anxious about her mother.

"Oh, well," said Jean lamely, "Nurse Shaw said it was periostitis."

"And you–"–Mabel's eyes grew round and indignant–"you really wrote and told poor mummy that you had perios–os—-"

"Titis," said Jean. "Of course, I did–why not?"

She was a trifle ashamed of herself, but the dancing eyes of the fencing enthusiast held her to the point.

"That's the worst of early Victorian parents," said this girl with a bright cheerful giggle. "One can't even talk the vernacular nowadays."

She made an unexpected lunge at Jean.

"Oh," cried Jean, "I must answer that telegram. Say I'm an idiot, Mabel, and that I've only had toothache."

Mabel for once performed the duties of an elder sister in a grim manner.

"Am an idiot," she wrote, "only had toothache an hour. Fencing match on, forgive hurry. Jean."

She read it out to the fencers.

"Oh, I say," said Jean with visible chagrin, "you are a little beggar, Mabel."

"Send it," cried the fencing girl. "One must be laughed at now and again–it's good for one. Besides, you can't be both a semi-neurotic invalid and a good fencer. Better give up the neurotic habit."

Jean stepped back in derision.

"I'm not neurotic," she affirmed.

"You wouldn't have sent that message about your perio–piérrot–what's the gentleman's name? if you hadn't been neurotic."

Mabel had scribbled off another message.

"Well," said Jean gratefully, "my own family don't talk to me like that."

"Oh, no," said the fencing girl coolly, "they run round you with hot bottles, and mustard blisters. All families do. They make you think about your toothache until you aren't pleased when you haven't got it. That's the benefit of being here. Here it's a bore to be ill."

She went suddenly on guard.

"Oh," said Jean, in willing imitation of that attitude, "if you only teach me

to fence, you may say what you like."

It was more the importance of Jean's estimate of herself than any real leanings towards being an invalid which made her look on an hour's depression as a serious thing, and an attack of toothache as an item of news which ought immediately to be communicated to her family. She criticized life entirely through her own feelings and experiences. Mabel and Elma had enough of the sympathetic understanding of the nature of others, to tune their own characters accordingly. But Jean, unless terrified, or hurt, or joyous herself never allowed these feelings to be transmitted from any one, or because of any one, she happened to love. It kept her from maturing as Mabel and even Elma had done. She would always be more or less of the self-centred person. It was a useful trait in connexion with singing for instance, and it seemed also as though it might make her a good fencer. But the flippant merry fencing enthusiast in front of her was right when she saw the pitfall ready for the Jean who should one day dedicate herself to her ailments. In the case of Mabel this very lack of sympathy in Jean helped her in a lonely manner to regain some of her lost confidence in herself. It never dawned once on Jean that Mabel was fighting down a trouble of her own. Mabel had bad nights and ghostly dreams, and a headache occasionally, which seemed as though it would put an end to any enthusiasm she might ever have had for such an occupation as piano playing. But in the morning one got up, and there were always the interests, the joys or troubles, or the quaint little oddities of other girls, to knock this introspection and worry into the background, and make Mabel her companionable self once more. It was better, after all, than the scrutiny of one's own family, even a kind one. Jean was merely conscious of change in any one when they refused a match or a drive or a walk with her. The world was of a piece when that happened–"stodgy"–and the interests of Jean were being neglected–a great crime.

Mabel despatched the telegram, and the fencing was resumed with vigour. The corridor at this end of the house contained a bay window, seated and cushioned, and more comfortable as a tea-room than many of the little bedrooms. They had arranged tea-cups, and were preparing that fascinating and delightful meal when a girl advanced from the far end of the corridor, in a lithe swinging manner. The fencing girl drew back her foil abruptly. "Who is that?" she asked, staring. The girls were conscious of a most refreshing and invigorating surprise. Elsie Clutterbuck stood there, with the wild sweetness of the open air in her bearing, her hair ruffled gently, her eyes shining in a pale setting.

"You beautiful wild anemone!" breathed the fencing girl in a whisper.

Mabel and Jean heard the soft words with surprise. It was a new light through which to look on Elsie. They had never quite dropped the pose of the benignant girls who had taken Elsie "out of herself." To them she was rather a

protégé than a friend; much as Mabel at least would have despised herself for that attitude had she detected it in herself. She acknowledged an immediate drop in her calculations, when the fencing girl did not ask as most people did, "Who is that queer little thing?" It was difficult in one sudden moment to adjust oneself to introducing Elsie as "You beautiful wild anemone!"

Jean, however, merely summed up the fencing girl as rather ignorant. "Why," she said frankly, "I declare it's Elsie!" and in a whisper declared, "There's nothing beautiful about Elsie."

They welcomed her heartily, curiously, and wondered if Lance's latest news of the family was true.

"Mother Buttercluck," he had written, "has come in for a little legacy. It's she who clucks now (grammar or no grammar) and the Professor chimes in as the butter portion merely. May heard about it. Can you imagine Mrs. C. saying, 'I'd love to have some one to lean on,' and the Buttercluck, who would have declared before–'On whom to lean. Pray do be more careful of your English,' not having a cluck left! Though I do think Elsie had knocked a little of the cluck out before the legacy arrived."

Elsie did not seem to be bursting with news. She sat in rather a grown-up, reliable way, opening her furry coat at their orders, and drawing off her gloves. Her hair was up in loose, heavy coils on her neck, and it parted in front with that restless rippling appearance which made one think of the open air. The tip-tilted nose, which had seemed the principal fault in the face which had always been termed plain in childhood, seemed now to lend a piquancy to her features. These were delicately irregular, and her eyebrows were too high, if one might rely on the analysis of Jean.

The fencing girl sat and stared at her with her foil balanced on a crossed knee. If one wanted to do the fencing girl a real kindness, to make her radiantly happy, then one introduced her to some one in whom she might be interested. Life was a garden to her, and the friends she made the flowers. She was not particular about plucking them either. "Oh, no indeed," she would say, "I've seen some one in the park to-day who is more sweet and lovely than any one human ought to be. I should love to know her, of course, but she was just as great a joy to look at. Why should you want to have everything that's beautiful? It's merely a form of selfishness."

Mabel and Jean imagined that it was more a pose on the part of the fencing girl than any talent of Elsie's which immediately impressed her on this afternoon. They were later to discover that a thrill of expectancy, of interest, was Elsie's first gift to strangers.

"Oh, no," breathed the fencing girl to herself, "you are not beautiful, really; you are a personality–that's it."

Elsie sat pulling her gloves through her white hands.

"Lance says Mrs. Clutterbuck has a legacy," said Jean bluntly. "I suppose it's true, but we are never sure of Lance, you know."

She passed a cup and some buttered toast.

"Oh, yes, it's true," said Elsie. "I do so envy mamma."

"Why? Doesn't she–haven't you the benefit of it too?" asked Mabel in surprise.

"Oh, yes. It isn't that, you know." Elsie swept forward, with a little furry cape falling up to her ears as she recovered a dropped glove. "It's giving papa a holiday. I've thought all my life how I should love to grow up and become an heiress, and give my papa a holiday."

"You thought that," asked Jean accusingly. "Come now–when you were climbing lamp-posts and skimming down rain-pipes—-"

"Yes, and breaking into other people's houses," said Elsie slowly.

"Did you do that too?" asked Jean.

"Once," said Elsie dreamily, "only once. I was a dreadful trial to my parents," she explained to the fencing girl.

"You weren't spanked enough," said Mabel, shaking her head at her.

"My papa was too busy, and mamma too concerned about him to attend to me," smiled Elsie. "Poor mamma! She knew if I told my father what I did, it would disturb his thoughts, and if his thoughts were disturbed he couldn't work, and if he couldn't work the rent wouldn't be paid."

"Oh," said Mabel with memories heaping on her, "had you really to worry about the rent?"

The fencing girl began to talk at last.

"It makes me tired," said she vigorously, "the way in which you people, brought up in provincial and suburban places, talk. Because you can't afford to be there unless your fathers have enough money to take you there, you think there's no struggle in the world. You ought to live a bit in towns where people are obliged to show the working side as well as the retired and affluent side. You poor thing, stuck in suburbia, among those Philistines, and thinking about the rent! I suppose they only thought you were bad tempered."

The fencing girl had landed them into a conversation more intimate than any they had attempted together.

"Oh," said Elsie, and she looked shyly at Mabel and Jean. "I was a tiny little thing when I got my first lesson. A lady and her daughter called on mamma the second week we were in Ridgetown. I came on them in the garden afterwards. They were going out at the gate, and they didn't see me coming in. This lady said to her daughter, quite amiably: 'It's no use, my dear; I suppose you observed they have only one maid.' They never called again."

The fencing girl bit her lip with an interrupted laugh.

"Isn't that suburbia?" she asked. "Now, isn't it?"

"It made me a little wild cat," said Elsie. "Everybody in Ridgetown had at least two maids, except ourselves."

"Do you know," said Jean, "I know the time when we would have wept at that if it had ever happened to us. It isn't a joke," she told the fencing girl.

Elsie gave a long, quiet laugh. "If I ever have children," she said, "I hope I may keep them from being silly about a trifle of that sort."

"That's one of the jokes of life though. You won't have children who need any support in that way.

"Won't I?" asked Elsie with round eyes.

"No, they'll all be quite different. They'll be giving you points on the simple life, and advising you to dispense with maids altogether," said the fencing girl. "I'm not joking. It's a fact, you know, that children are awfully unlike their parents. Are you like your mother?" she asked Elsie.

"Not a bit," said Elsie laughing.

"Don't study yourself merely in order to know about children. You may just have been a selfish little prig, you know," said the fencing girl cheerily. "Study them by the dozen, be public-spirited about it. Then some day you may be able to understand the soul of a child when you get it all to yourself. You won't just sit and say in a blank way, 'In my day children were different.'"

"Oh," cried Jean. "Now don't. If there's anything I hate, it's when Evelyn begins to preach about children."

"Oh, well," said the fencing girl with a shrug, "if Mrs.—-, whatever your mother's name is, had known as much about their little ways as I do, she would never have let you worry about that one maid. We are all wrong with domestic life at present. The one lot stays in too much and loses touch with the world, and the other lot are too busy touching the world to stay in enough. We are putting it right, however," she said amiably. "We are—-" She spread her hands in the direction of the company collected. "We are getting up our world at present. After that we may be of some use in it."

Elsie looked at her rather admiringly.

"My father would love to hear you talk," she said amiably.

"Talk," said the fencing girl in a fallen voice, "and I hate the talkers so!"

"Nevertheless," said Mabel, "given a friend of ours in for tea–who does the talking?"

"Evelyn," said Jean, "and invariably her own subjects too."

It seems that this girl was not always fencing.

She controlled the collecting of rents and practically managed the domestic matters in three streets of tenements of new buildings recently erected in a

working part of London. She was also engaged to be married.

"Doesn't this sort of independent life unsettle you for a quiet one?" she was often asked by her friends.

"And it's quite different," she would explain. "Knowing the stress and the difficulties of this side of it make me long for that little haven of a home we are getting ready at Richmond. I would bury myself there for ever, from a selfish point of view that is, and probably vegetate like the others. But I've made a pledge never to forget–never to forget what I've seen in London, and never to stop working for it somewhere or somehow."

"What about your poor husband?" asked Jean.

"He isn't poor," said the fencing girl with a grin. "He is getting quite rich. He fell in love with me at the tenements. He built them. I should think he would divorce me if I turned narrow-minded."

She gazed in a searching way at Elsie.

"You have the makings of a somebody," she said gravely, "more than these two, though they are perfectly charming."

"I want to go to the Balkans," said Elsie. She turned to Mabel. "Cousin Arthur declared he really would take me."

"Is Mr. Symington there now?" asked Jean. Mabel thanked her from the bottom of a heart that couldn't prompt a single word at that supreme moment.

"No, but he said he was going some day," said Elsie. That was all. Mabel had seen a blaze of sunshine and then blackness again.

"Oh," said the robust, unheeding Jean, "what do your people say to that?"

"Papa says he won't have me butchered," said Elsie with a radiant smile.

"Look here," said the fencing girl, with her eyes still searching that "wild flower of a face" of Elsie's. "Will your father come and see my tenements?"

The answer of Elsie became historic in the girls' club.

"I think he will," said she. "He was up the Ferris wheel last night."

CHAPTER XXVI
Under Royal Patronage

Mrs. Leighton made use of the fact of the Clutterbuck's being in London to write to the Professor's wife.

"We have been so anxious about Elma, who now however is picking up. But we have the saddest news of Miss Annie. It seems as though she would not live more than a day or two. If I have bad news to send to Mabel and Jean, may I send it through you? It would be such a kindness to me if I knew you were there to tell them."

Mrs. Clutterbuck responded in that loving tremulous way she had of delighting in being useful. She could not believe in her good fortune with the Professor. After all, it had been worry, concern about material things, which had clouded his affection for a time. He had never been able to give himself to the world, as he desired to give himself, because of that grind at lectures which he so palpably abhorred. Now even the lectures were a delight, since he had leisure besides where he did not need to reflect on the certainty of "the rainy day." He was once more the hero of her girlish dreams. How magnificent not to lose one's ideal! They both rejoiced in the young ardour of Elsie, whose courage made leaps at each new unfolding of the "loveliness of life."

It was very delightful now that the two Leightons should come under those gently stretching wings of the reinvigorated Professor's wife.

At the time of a call from Mrs. Clutterbuck, Mabel and Jean had just received tickets from Lady Emily for a concert at a great house. The concert, to those who bought guinea tickets, was not so important as the fact that royal ears would listen to it. Herr Slavska disposed of the affair in a speech which could not be taken down in words. His theme was the rush of the "stupids" to see a royal personage, and the tragedy of the poor "stars" of artists who could hardly afford the cab which protected their costumes. Yet some members of his profession, he averred, would rather lose a meal or two than lose the chance of seeing their name in red letters and of bowing to encores from royalty.

"And why not?" asked Jean. "I think it would be lovely to bow to royalty."

"Where is ze art?" he asked as a wind-up. "Nowhere!"

"That's nonsense, you know," Jean confided afterwards. "I think there must be a lot of art in being able to sing to kings and queens. Besides, why shouldn't they wave their royal hands, and produce us, as it were–like Aladdin, you know."

Jean already saw herself at Windsor.

Mabel merely concerned herself with the fact that Mr. Green was to play. He had not the scruples of Herr Slavska. "Although it's an abominable practice," said he. "It is the artists who make the sacrifice. Everybody else gets something for it. The crowd gets royalty, royalty gets music, charities get gold. We get momentary applause–that is all."

"That's what I'm living for," declared Jean, "just a little, a very little momentary applause. Then I would swell like a peacock, Mabel, I really should. The artists don't get nothing out of it after all. They get appreciation."

Mrs. Clutterbuck was intensely interested in the concert. "Do you mean to say there's to be a prince at it?" she asked.

There were to be princesses also, it seemed.

"Oh," said Mabel, "how lovely it would have been for Elsie and you to go."

She saw the experience that it would be for a little home bird of the Mrs. Clutterbuck type. She considered for a moment–"Couldn't she give up her ticket for one of them?"

Mrs. Clutterbuck saw the indecision in her face.

"No, my dear, no," said she, "I know the thought in your mind. I have a much better plan."

The pleasure of being at last able to dispense favours–transformed her face. She turned with an expectant, delighted look to Elsie.

"If we could go together," said she, "and it wouldn't be a bore to both of you to sit with two country cousins like ourselves, I should take two tickets. It would be charming."

This plan was received with the greatest acclamation.

"We ought to have a chaperon anyhow," said Jean.

It seemed the funniest thing in the world to Mabel that they should be about to be chaperoned by Mrs. Clutterbuck. In some unaccountable way it drew her more out of her loneliness than anything she had experienced in London. On the other hand, she was constantly reminding herself how much amused some people in Ridgetown would be if they only knew.

They drove to the concert on a spring day when the air had suddenly turned warm. The streets were sparkling with a radiance of budding leaves, of struggling blossom; and all the world seemed to be turning in at the great gates of the house beyond St. James'.

It was not to be expected that one should know these people, though, as Jean declared, "Every little boarding-house keeper in Bayswater could tell you who was stepping out of the carriage in front of you."

There was a great crowd inside; heated rooms and a wide vestibule, and a hall where a platform was arranged with crimson seats facing it and denoting royalty.

Mrs. Clutterbuck's timidity came on her with a rush. She could hardly produce her two tickets. It was Mabel who saved the situation and piloted them in as though she understood exactly where to go. There was a hush of expectancy in the beautifully costumed crowd within. Everybody looked past one with craning neck. Mabel began to laugh. "It's exactly as though they were built on a slant," she declared.

In the end they found seats on the stairs beside the wife of an ambassador.

"My dear," said Mrs. Clutterbuck in rather a breathless way to Mabel. "My

dear, just think of it."

Mabel immediately regretted having brought her there.

"But everybody is sitting on the stairs," she said gravely. "It's quite all right. Lady Emily told me she once took a seat in an elevator in somebody's house because there was no room elsewhere. She spent an hour going up and down, not having the courage to get out."

Mrs. Clutterbuck smiled nervously.

"It isn't that, my dear. It's the gown, that one in front of you. Every inch of the lace is hand-made."

Mrs. Clutterbuck was quite enervated by the discovery.

"Oh," said Mabel in quite a relieved way, "was that it? I began to blame myself for bringing you to the stairs."

"Isn't it fun?" said Elsie. "Much funnier looking at these people than it will be looking at royalty. I never saw so many lorgnettes."

A sudden movement made them rise. A group of princesses with bouquets appeared and took their seats on the red chairs.

"Oh," said Jean with a sigh, as they sat down again. "Think of the poor artists now."

She had grown quite pale.

"I don't think I shall ever be able to perform," she said. "My heart simply stops beating on an occasion of this sort."

The crowd parted again, and a singer, radiant in white chiffon with silver embroidery, and wearing a black hat with enormous plumes, ascended the platform. She curtseyed elaborately to the princesses, and casually bowed in the direction of the applause which reached her from other sources. She began to sing, and in that hall of reserved voices, of deferential attitudes, of eager, searching glances and general ceremonious curiosity, her voice rang out a clear, beautiful, alien thing. It danced into the shadows of minds merely occupied with staring, it filled up crevices as though she had appeared in an empty room. One moment every one had been girt with a kind of fashionable melancholy which precluded anything but polite commonplaces. The next minute something living had appeared, a liquid voice sang notes of joy, mockery and despair; it lit on things which cannot be touched upon with the speaking voice, and it brought tears to the eyes of one little princess.

Jean was shrouded in longing. Nothing so intimately delicious had ever come near her. She might as well shut up her music books and say good-bye to Herr Slavska. Elsie sat beside the lady in real lace. She was in the woods with the fresh air blowing over her; buttercups and daisies at her feet.

"Is she not then charming?" asked a voice at her side. The real lace had spoken at last. That was how they discovered afterwards that she was the wife

of an ambassador. The lady had her mind distracted first by the sheer beauty of a famous voice which she loved, next by the delicate profile of the face beside her–a type not usual in London.

Elsie turned her eyes with a start.

"It's like summer, the voice," she said simply.

"It's like the best method I've ever heard," said Jean darkly. (Oh, how to emulate such a creature!)

"Ah, yes. But she returns. And now, while yet she bows and does not sing–a leetle vulgar is it not?"

The ambassador's wife could discount her favourite it seemed. That was just the difficulty in art. To remain supreme in one art and yet recognize other forms of it, that was the fortune of few. The singer had enormous jewels at her neck.

"She would wear cabbage as diamonds," said the lady, "but with her voice one forgives."

Thereafter there was a procession of the most talented performers at that moment in London. Magicians with violins drew melodies in a faultless manner from smooth strings and a bow which seemed to be playing on butter. Technique was evident nowhere, only the easy lovely result of it. In an hour it became as facile a thing to play any instrument, sing any song, as though practice and discouragement did not exist in any art at all.

"Mr. Green played decorously and magnificently," said Elsie. "They are all a little decorous, aren't they?" she asked, "except that wonderful thing in the white and silver gown."

Nothing had touched the daring beauty of that voice.

Mrs. Clutterbuck leant forward to Elsie eagerly.

"I was right, Elsie," said she. "You know I was right."

"Right?" asked Elsie. Her eyes shone with a. dark glamour. "You mean about it's being so nice here, romantic and that sort of thing?"

"No," said Mrs. Clutterbuck. She sometimes had rather a superb way of treating Elsie's little imaginative extravagances. "I mean about mauve–mauve is the colour this year, don't you see?"

"Mamma," she said radiantly, "I quite forgot. I was simply wondering how long all this would last, or whether they'd suddenly cut us off the way Jean says they do."

"They do," said Jean, "at these charity concerts. One after another runs on and makes its little bow. And some are detained, you know, and then the programme just comes to an end."

"They seem to be going on all right," said Mrs. Clutterbuck placidly, "and mauve is the colour, you see."

Another singer appeared, and Jean's heaven was cleared of clouds by the evidence in this performer of a bad method. Now, indeed, it seemed an easy matter to believe that one could triumph over anything.

That first, victorious, delicious voice had trodden on every ambition Jean ever possessed. But the frailty of a newcomer set her once more on her enthusiastic feet.

"I should say it would be easy enough to get appearing at a concert like this," she said dimly to Elsie. Her eye was on the future, and the platform was cleared. At the piano sat Mr. Green, grown older a little, and more companionable as an accompanist; and in the centre, in radiant silver and white, and–and diamonds, sang Jean, the prima donna, Jean!

She was startled by the sudden departure of the ambassador's wife.

"For the leaving of the princess I wait not," said this lady. With a cool little nod to Elsie, she descended the crowded stairs.

Her remarks on the vulgarity of the singer rankled with Jean. The costume seemed so appropriate to that other fair dream.

"I didn't think her vulgar, did you?" she asked Elsie.

"Not on a platform, perhaps," said Elsie vaguely. Her thoughts invariably strayed from dress. "But in a drawing-room she would look, look—-"

"Well, what Elsie?" asked Jean impatiently.

Elsie's dreamy eyes came down on her suddenly. "In a drawing-room she would look like a lamp shade," she blurted.

It really was rather a tragedy for them that the golden voice should have been framed in so doubtful a setting.

Elsie's eyes were on the princesses.

"They have eyes like calm lakes," said she. "How clever it must be to look out and feel and know, only to express very often something entirely different. Don't you wonder what princesses say to themselves when they get alone together after an affair of this sort?"

"I know," said Mabel. "They say, 'I wonder what girls like these girls on the stairs say of us after we are gone; do they say we are charming, as the newspapers do, or do they say—-' But they couldn't think that, for they are charming, aren't they?" asked Mabel.

"Yes," said Elsie sadly. "But I never could keep a bird in a cage. It must be like being in a cage sometimes for them."

There was an abrupt movement among the royal party. The last of the illustrious performers had appeared, and it was time to go. Everybody rose once more. Then there was a hurried fight for a tea-room where countesses played hostess.

Mrs. Clutterbuck, now finally in the spirit of the thing, moved along

blithely. She spoke, however, in low modulated whispers as though she were attending some serious ceremony.

"I'm sure your mother would have enjoyed this," she said, as they sat down to ices served in filagree boats. "The countesses and, you know, the general air of the thing–so different to Ridgetown."

"Ridgetown!" The girl laughed immoderately. "We couldn't sit on the stairs at Ridgetown, could we?" Mrs. Clutterbuck was getting away from her subject.

"Take some tea, my dear," she said to Mabel in the tone of voice as one who should say, "you will need it." "It's invigorating after the ice," said the Professor's wife.

Mabel took tea.

Now that the great event of the concert was over, they were a little tired, and glad of the idea of fresh air.

"Miss Grace, dear–have you heard from Miss Grace lately?" asked Mrs. Clutterbuck.

"No. It's a funny thing," said Mabel. "We supposed it was because of Elma's illness, you know. Miss Grace would be in such a state. Shall we go now?"

They got out and arranged to walk through St. James' Park together.

"I had a message," said Mrs. Clutterbuck quietly, "about Miss Grace. I am to have another when I get back just now. Will you come with me? It's about Miss Annie. She has been very ill."

It was impossible for her to tell them that the same illness as Elma's had done its work there. They seemed to have no suspicion of that.

"Oh, poor Miss Annie!" said Mabel. "If I had only known!"

"That was just it; they couldn't tell you that too with all you had to hear about Elma. Elma is very well now, you understand, but Miss Annie–well, Miss Annie is not expected to live over to-night."

The news came to them in an unreal way. It was the break-up of their childhood. That Miss Annie should not always be there, the charming beautiful invalid, seemed impossible.

"Oh, but," said Mabel, "she has been so ill before, won't she get better?"

"She was never ill like this before," said Mrs. Clutterbuck. "We will see what the message says."

They found a wire at home. At the end of a sparkling day, it came to that. While they had listened to these golden voices, Miss Annie had—-

The telegram lay there to say that Miss Annie had died.

CHAPTER XXVII
The Home-Coming

Mr. Leighton departed from his first feelings of hurry where Mabel and Jean were concerned, and delayed their home coming till Elma was in a condition not to be retarded by any extra excitement.

They drove away at last from the club early in the morning, so that they had the entire house to see them off. It was very nearly as bad as leaving Ridgetown.

"I shall not be able to walk past your door for some days," said one red-haired girl. "Oh, don't I know that feeling?"

She was compelled to stay in London, with only a fortnight's holiday in summer time.

"I shall send you forget-me-nots by every post," said Jean. "You'll be in love with the new girl in a week."

"I won't," said the red-haired girl.

They had gifts from all of the girls stowed away somewhere. What a morning! Even the hall porter showed signs of dejection at their going.

"It will never be the same without you, miss," he said to Mabel.

One's own family were not so complimentary.

Mabel and Jean left in a heaped-up four-wheeler.

"I feel quite sick, you know," said Jean.

It was a historic statement, and Mabel had her own qualms. They left a houseful of good little friendly people, a dazzling, hard-working London, and they were going back–to the wedding of Isobel. Mabel had not got over the feeling that drama only exists in a brilliant manner in London, and that life in one's own home, though peaceful, was drab colour. It wouldn't be drab colour, it would be radiant of course, if happy unexpected things happened there. How it would lighten to the colour of rose, oh gorgeous life, if such a thing could ever happen now! But it wouldn't. All that would happen would be that Robin would marry Isobel and that she should keep on playing piano. Ah well, in any case, she could play piano a long way better than she ever did. And Jean could sing with a certain distinction of method. Not nearly ripe, this method, as Jean informed

every one, but on the way. Her voice would be worth hearing at twenty-five.

Much of the effect they would make on Ridgetown was invested in the boxes piled above them. All their spare time lately had been taken up in spending their allowance in clothes and panning things neatly out to London standards. It gave them an amount of reliance in themselves and in their return which was very exhilarating. Though what did it all matter with Miss Annie gone?

"It terrifies me to think of Ridgetown without Miss Annie. What shall we do there?" asked Jean mournfully.

"Yes, that's it," replied Mabel. "No one dying in London would make that difference. I shall think, as we are driving home, Miss Annie isn't there. Won't you?"

"And here they would only have a little more time for somebody else," said Jean.

They drove through the early morning streets with a tiny relief at their heart. On their next drive they would know everybody they passed.

"Oh, how deadly I felt when I came here!" said Jean. "Knowing no one, and thinking that if I died in the cab no one near me would care!"

They reached Ridgetown in the afternoon. A carriage was drawn up at the station gates. In it were Mrs. Leighton, Miss Grace and Elma.

Mabel stood transfixed.

"Oh, Elma," she said, "Elma!"

Elma knew it. She wasn't as fat as a pumpkin after all. And every one had kept on saying that she was fatter than any pumpkin. Mabel was the only one who had told the truth. She leaned over the folded hood of the carriage and hugged her gently.

"I should like to inform you Mabs, I'm as fat as a pumpkin."

But Mabel hung on to the carriage with her head down. No one had told her that Elma had been so ill as this.

Elma had the look of having been in a far country–why hadn't some one told her? Miss Grace, who had been away for some weeks with Adelaide Maud and had just got back in fairly good spirits, did some of the conversing which helped Mabel to recover herself.

Cuthbert and Betty came hurrying up from the wrong end of the train.

"Oh, and we missed you," wailed Betty, "and I wanted to be the first."

One could hug indiscriminately at Ridgetown Station. Jean was the next person to melt into tears. She had tried to tell Miss Grace how sorry she was.

Cuthbert began to restore order.

"You'd better take two in that carriage, crowded or not," said he. "There are boxes lying on the platform which will require a cab to themselves."

"It's our music," said Jean importantly and quite untruthfully.

"It's my new hat," said Mabel, with a return of her old dash.

She had gone round the carriage seeing each occupant separately, and there seemed to be no hurry for anything, merely the pleasure of meeting again.

Just then there was a whirl of wheels in the distance. A certain familiarity in the sound made four girls look at each other. Mrs. Leighton, who had no ear for wheels, stared in a surprised way at her daughters.

"Well," she said, "what are we all waiting for? We must get home sometime."

"Yes," asked Cuthbert lustily, "what in the wide world are we waiting for?"

A high wagonette and pair of horses drove up, and turned with a fine circle into line behind them. In the wagonette sat Adelaide Maud. Adelaide Maud was dressed in blue.

"That," said Elma, with a sigh of great contentment.

The three girls dashed at Adelaide Maud.

Elma laid her hand on Cuthbert's.

"Go and say how do you do to Adelaide Maud," said she.

For a minute or two she was left with Mrs. Leighton and Miss Grace. Then Cuthbert came to her.

"Get up," said he to Elma. "Get up. You're to go with Adelaide Maud."

"Who is this Adelaide Maud who interferes with every plan in connection with my family?" asked Mrs. Leighton. She had a resigned note in her voice. "Shall we ever get home," she kept asking.

A voice behind them broke in.

"I didn't tell him to be impolite, Mrs. Leighton," said Adelaide Maud. "I only asked to have Elma in my carriage."

Elma looked provokingly at Adelaide Maud.

"I'm so sorry," said she, "but I'm driving home with Cuthbert."

"It's not true," said Cuthbert. "She's doing nothing of the kind."

"Then I shall get in here," said Adelaide Maud calmly, and proceeded to step in.

Several people tried to stop her.

"I want to drive home with mummy," said Jean.

"And I mean to take Elma," said Mabel.

Mrs. Leighton leant back in the carriage.

"I should like to mention," she said, "that this is not a royal procession, and that we only take about two and a half minutes to get home in any case. What does it matter which carriage we go in?"

"Every second is of value," said Jean.

"Well, here you are, Jean, get in beside your mother," said Adelaide Maud. "And, Elma and Mabel, you come with me. And, Mr. Leighton, you look after Miss Grace. What could be more admirable?"

They did it because it seemed the simplest way out, except Cuthbert, who backed into the station and came up on a cab with the luggage. He looked vindictively at Adelaide Maud as he descended, as though he would say, "This is your doing."

The three conveyances were blocking the wide sweep of gravel in front of the White House.

Adelaide Maud patted one of the horses' heads in an unnecessary manner.

"I must congratulate you on your professorship," said she.

"Thank you," said Cuthbert.

"So nice for your family too, to have you here all summer."

"Excellent," said Cuthbert.

"I don't see how you can run a lectureship when you say so little." Adelaide Maud spoke very crisply, and in a nice cool manner.

Cuthbert looked stolidly at the men carrying in luggage.

"The students will respect me probably," he said grimly.

Adelaide Maud laughed a clear ringing laugh. Then she looked at Cuthbert once "straight in the eye" and ran indoors. Cuthbert began pulling boxes about with unnecessary violence.

They had tea in the drawing-room amidst the roses, for the tables were covered with them. Mabel did nothing but wander about and say, "Oh, oh, and isn't it lovely to be home."

But Jean sat right down and in a business-like manner began to describe London. Also, she was very sorry for Elma, because now she, Jean, knew what it was to be ill. She began to detail her symptoms to Elma.

"Oh, Jean, you little monkey," said Mabel. "Don't listen to her, she wasn't ill a bit." It was the only point on which Mabel and Jean really differed.

Isobel came sailing in. Nothing could have been nicer than the way she greeted them.

"Oh, Isobel, aren't you dying to hear me sing?" asked Jean. It never dawned on her but that Isobel, who had been so keen to get her off to a good master, put art first and everything else afterwards.

Mrs. Leighton would never forget the way in which Mabel received her. Mabs had developed into a finely balanced woman. There was no sign of her wanting to detract in the slightest from Isobel's happiness.

"Do let me see your ring. How pretty! And how it fits your hand, just a beautiful ring. Some engagement rings look as though they had only been made for fat Jewesses. Don't they? I love those tiny diamonds set round the big ones. Where are you going for your honeymoon?"

"I'm going first for my things," said Isobel. "I've got no further than that. Miss Meredith and I are taking a week in London next week."

That was her triumph, that she had "squared" Miss Meredith. Miss Meredith had really a lonely little heart beating beneath all her paltry ambitions. Always she had been stretching for what was very difficult of attainment. She had stretched for a wife for Robin, and she had stretched in vain. Then suddenly one day this undesirable Isobel had asked her to go to London to help with her trousseaux. No one perhaps knew what a strange and unlooked-for delight filled her heart, what gates of starchy reserve were opened to this new flood of gratitude rising within her. Robin had always, although influenced by her in an intangible way, treated her as though she were a useful piece of furniture. He so invariably discounted her services; it had made her believe that her only chance of keeping him at all was in imposing on him her hardest, most unlovable traits. That Isobel, of her own accord, should seek her advice, out of the crowd who were willing to confer it, really agitated her. From that moment she was Isobel's willing ally.

Isobel saw here the result of incalculable goodness as encouraged by Mr. Leighton. His words had stung her to an exalted notion of what she might do to show him that she could confer as well as receive. She should "ingratiate Sarah" in a thorough manner. The result of it surprised her more than she would confess. There were other ways of receiving benefits than by grabbing with both hands it seemed. Isobel began to think that unselfish people probably remained unselfish because they found it a paying business. Nothing would ever really relieve her mind of its mercenary element.

The funniest experience of her life was this new friendship with Sarah. Mr. Leighton noted it, and she saw that he noted it. She went one day to him in almost a contrite mood.

"I've begun to ingratiate Sarah," said she, "I believe I'm rather liking the experience."

Mr. Leighton knew better than to lecture her at all. He thought indeed that signs of relenting would not readily occur between either of them.

"Goodness is an admirable habit," he said lightly.

She thanked him for having fallen into her mood by this much.

"Well, anyhow, a little exhibition of it on my part has evidently been a welcome tonic to Sarah," she said.

Mabel and Jean found her easier than of yore. Only Elma carried the reserve formed by what she had gone through into the present moment of rapture. They made Mabel play and Jean sing, and Adelaide Maud and Jean performed a duet together.

Cuthbert pranced about and applauded heavily, and Adelaide Maud swung her crisp skirts and bowed low in a professional manner.

"If I can't sing," said she, "I can bow. So do you mind if I do it again?" So

she bowed again.

It was quite different to the old Adelaide Maud, who aired such starchy manners in their drawing-room.

Lance came in by an early train.

"Heard you were home," said he, "and ran in to see if you'd take some Broken Hills, or Grand Trunks, or Consolidated Johnnies, you know."

He produced a note-book.

"Now Mrs. Leighton promised to buy a whole mine of shares the other day, and she hasn't done it. How am I to get on with my admirable firm, if my best clients fail me in this way?"

Jean exploded into laughter. Lance as a stockbroker, what next!

"You needn't laugh," he said. "I made twenty-five pounds for the mater last week. Not your mater, mine!"

"Don't listen to Lance's illegal practices," said Elma.

Lance struck an attitude in front of Mabel.

"Oh, mother," he said, "how you've growed. I'm afraid of you. Wait till you see what Maclean will say!"

"Maclean?"

"Yes. Now, Elma, don't pretend to look blank about it. It was you who told me."

Elma groaned. (If it only were Mr. Maclean!)

"I told you nothing," she said. "You are not to be trusted, I've always known that, in Stock Exchange or out of it, I'd never tell you a single thing."

"Well, it was Aunt Katharine," said Lance with conviction. She had just appeared in the doorway.

"Well, well," she said in a fat, breathless way. "Well, you're home, and I am glad. Dear, how tall you both are! And is that the latest?" She looked at Mabel's hat. "Well, well. We've had enough trouble with you away. Elma will be ready for none of that nonsense for a year or two, that's one comfort. Jean, you are quite fat. Living in other people's houses seems to agree with you. Not the life we were accustomed to. Young people had to stay at home in my day."

"Now, Aunt Katharine," said Lance, who was a privileged person, "are they your girls, or Mrs. Leighton's, that you lecture them so?"

"Look here, Lance," said Elma, "Aunt Katharine isn't a Broken Hill, or a con–consolidated Johnnie. You just leave her alone, will you?"

"Elma's become beastly dictatorial since she was ill," said Lance savagely. "What's that confab in the corner?"

Mrs. Leighton was sitting with Adelaide Maud, and in the pause which ensued, everybody heard her say, "When Jean was a baby–no, it was when Elma was a baby, and Cuthbert, you know—-" just as the girls were afraid she would

five long years ago.

"Oh," said Cuthbert from the other end of the room, "my dear mother, if you go on with that—-"

"I can't imagine why they never want to know what they did when they were babies," said Mrs. Leighton, in an innocent manner. She disliked being stopped in any of these reminiscences. Adelaide Maud's eyes danced. "They were so much nicer when they were babies," sighed Mrs. Leighton.

Then she turned round on them all.

"You two girls have been home for an hour or more, and you never asked after your dear father."

Mabel giggled. Jean looked very serious.

Elma said suddenly, "They are hiding something, mummy," and the secret was out.

Mr. Leighton had met them pretty nearly half way. He had travelled with them, and in town had seen them into the train for Ridgetown.

"And he told me," said Mrs. Leighton, "that he had an important meeting which would keep him employed for the better part of the day."

"So he had," said Mabel.

"It's just like John," said Mrs. Leighton to Aunt Katharine. "One might have known he wouldn't stay away from these girls."

She smiled largely as she remembered his protestations of the morning.

"Oh, well," said Aunt Katharine dingily, "it would have been nicer of him to have told you. You never were very firm with John."

Robin Meredith came in the evening when they were assembled with Mr. Leighton in the drawing-room and the girls were playing once more. They played and sang with a fine new confidence and abandonment which made up to Mr. Leighton for long weary months of waiting. Mabel, mostly on account of her father's commendation, was quite composed and cheerful as she shook hands with Robin. Robin would not have minded the composure, but the cheerfulness wounded him a trifle. Mr. Leighton considered that his future life had more promise in it now that he saw Robin unnerved. If it were not for the beautiful ease of Mabel's manner, he should have felt uncertain as to the consequences of all that had happened. But Mabel was so serenely right in every way that his last fear melted.

Mabel herself began to wonder at her own placidity. She looked with thankfulness on the scene before her, all her family and Elma given back to her, every one loyal, untouched by the influence which she had so feared before, Isobel going to be married to a man from whom she was glad to feel herself freed, her home intact. Yet a bitter mist gathered in her mind and obliterated the joyousness. How wicked of her–to complain with everything here so lovely before

her.

No, not everything.

Mabel, in the darkness that night before falling asleep, held her hand to her eyes. No, everything had not come back to her yet.

CHAPTER XXVIII
Adelaide Maud

The Leighton's had been writing off the invitations for the wedding, and Elma was in her room with Adelaide Maud. This had been converted into a sitting-room so long as Elma remained a convalescent.

Elma had asked Isobel if she might have just one invitation for a special friend of her own. Now who was this friend, Mrs. Leighton wondered? She was surprised when Elma asked her, without any embarrassment for Mr. Symington's address.

"And don't tell who it is, please, Mummy, because I have a little plot of my own on hand."

She sealed and addressed this important missive quite blandly under her mother's eyes.

Mrs. Leighton could not make it out. She was inclined to fall into Aunt Katharine's ways and say, "In my young days, young people were not so blatant."

Mr. Leighton shook his head over her having allowed the invitation to go.

"You can't tell what net she may become entangled in," he said, "and Symington cleared out in a very sudden manner, you know." He could not get that out of his mind.

Mrs. Leighton harked back to the old formula. "Elma is only a child," she said, "with too much of a superb imagination. She will have a lot of fancies before she is done."

Elma saw her letter posted, with only Mrs. Leighton and Miss Grace in the secret. She felt completely relieved and happy. Nothing had pleased her so much for a long time.

"Why, Elma, your cheeks are getting pink at last," said Adelaide Maud.

She had come in to spend the afternoon with Elma while the others went to the dressmaker for the all-important gowns. Adelaide Maud had said she would

come if Elma were to be quite alone. And Elma meant to be quite alone until Cuthbert came down by an early train. Then, after Adelaide Maud was announced, she rather hoped that Cuthbert might appear.

"Are you sure they are pink," she asked Adelaide Maud, "because I used to be so anxious that I might look pale."

"You must have thought yourself very good looking lately then," said Adelaide Maud. "Elma," she asked suddenly, "why don't you girls sometimes call me Helen? I think you might by this time."

"I would rather call you Adelaide Maud," said Elma.

"But I can't be a Story Book for ever."

"I shouldn't want to call you Helen when you looked like Miss Dudgeon. Mrs. Dudgeon wouldn't like it, would she?"

Ridgetown traditions still hampered their friendship it seemed.

Adelaide Maud's head fell low.

"Do you know, Elma, in five minutes, if I just had one chance, in five minutes I could get my mother to say that it didn't matter whether you called me Helen or not. But I never get the chance."

"I did one lovely and glorious thing yesterday," said Elma. "Couldn't I do another to-day?"

"I don't know what you did yesterday, but you can't do anything for me to-day," said Adelaide Maud stiffly.

Cuthbert came strolling in. Adelaide Maud looked seriously annoyed.

"You told me you would be quite alone," she said to Elma.

"Oh, you don't mind about Cuthbert, do you?" asked Elma anxiously. "Besides, Cuthbert didn't know you were coming."

"I did," said Cuthbert shortly.

Adelaide Maud had risen a little, and at this she sat down in a very straight manner, with her head slightly raised. She and Elma were on a couch near a tea-table. Cuthbert took an easy chair opposite. Then Adelaide Maud began to laugh. She laughed with a ringing bright laugh that was very amusing to Elma, but Cuthbert remained quite unmoved.

Adelaide Maud looked at him.

"Oh, please laugh a little," she said humbly.

Cuthbert did not take his eyes away from her. He simply looked and said nothing.

"How are the invitations going on?" he asked Elma as though apparently proving that Adelaide Maud did not exist.

Elma clasped her hands.

"Beautifully. I've been allowed to ask all my 'particulars.'"

"Am I to be invited?" asked Adelaide Maud simply.

"Mrs. and Miss Dudgeon," said Elma in a hollow voice. "Do you think Mrs. Dudgeon will come?" she asked in a melancholy manner.

"Not if Mr. Leighton looks like that," said Adelaide Maud. She turned in a pettish manner away from him and gazed at Elma.

Elma burst out laughing.

"Oh, Cuthbert, I do think you are horrid to Adelaide Maud."

Adelaide Maud sat up again looking perfectly delighted.

"Now there," she said, "I have been waiting for years for some one to say that about Mr. Leighton. Thank you so much, dear. It's so perfectly true. For years I have been amiable and for years he has been–a—-"

"A brute," said Elma placidly.

"Yes," said Adelaide Maud. "And I've got to go on pretending to be a girl of spirit with a mamma who won't understand the situation, and–and–I get no encouragement at all. It's a horrid world," said Adelaide Maud.

Cuthbert rose from the easy chair, with a look in his eyes which Elma had never seen.

"All I can say is," he pretended to be speaking jocularly, "will the lady who has just spoken undertake to repeat these words, in private–in—-"

"No, she won't," said Adelaide Maud in a whisper.

Elma sat shaking in every limb. The one thought that passed through her mind was that if she didn't clear out, Cuthbert might kiss Adelaide Maud, and that would be awful. She crawled out of the room somehow or other. What the others were thinking of her she did not know. She wanted to reach something outside the door, and sank on a chair there. Oh, the selfishness of lovers! Adelaide Maud and Cuthbert were "making it up" while she sat shaking with her face in her hands in the long corridor.

Mrs. Leighton found her there some little time afterwards.

"Sh! mummy. Speak in a whisper, please."

"Well, I never. Who is ill now, I should like to know?"

"Adelaide Maud and Cuthbert."

She pulled her mother's head down to her and whispered in her ear.

"I didn't know it was coming, they were so cross with one another. And then I knew it was. And I just slipped out. And I'm shaking so that I'm afraid to get off this chair. I should never be able to get engaged myself–it's so–en–enervating."

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Leighton; "well, I never. Turned you out of your own room, my pet. Just like those Dudgeons."

"Oh, mummy, it's lovely. I don't mind. It's just being ill that made me shake. Aren't you glad it's Adelaide Maud?"

"Well–it never was anybody else, was it?" asked Mrs. Leighton blandly.

"Oh, mummy! You knew!"

Elma's whispers became most accusing.

Mrs. Leighton might have been as dense as possible in regard to her daughters, but Cuthbert's heart had always lain bare.

"Know?" asked she. "What do you think made Adelaide Maud run after you the way she did?"

"Oh, mummy. It wasn't only because of Cuthbert, was it?"

"Well, I sometimes thought it was," she said with a smile at her lips.

She looked at the shut door.

"But I can't have you stuck on a hall chair in the corridors for the afternoon, all on account of the Dudgeons," said she. "Besides, they'll be bringing up tea."

She knocked smartly on the door.

"Mamma, I never saw anything like your nerve," said Elma.

Cuthbert opened the door. He stood with the fine light of a conqueror shining in his eyes, the triumph of attainment in his bearing.

Mrs. Leighton's nerve broke down at the sight of him. It was true then.

"Oh, Cuthbert, what is this you have been doing?" wailed she. Her son was a man and had left her.

Without a word he led her into the arms of Adelaide Maud.

"And remember, please, Mrs. Leighton," said that personage finally, "that I would have been here long before if he had let me, and that I had practically to propose before he would have me. Surely that is humiliating enough for a Dudgeon."

"Cuthbert wanted to give you your proper position in life, dear, if possible."

"When all I wanted was himself–how silly of him," said Adelaide Maud.

"Would you mind my telling you that that poor child of mine who has just recovered from typhoid fever is sitting like a hall porter at your door, trembling like an aspen leaf," said Mrs. Leighton. "Won't you get her in?"

They laughed, but it really was no joke to Elma. She had known something of the sorrows of life lately, and had borne up under them, even under the great trial of Miss Annie's death; but because two people were in love with one another and had said so, she took to weeping. Cuthbert carried her in and petted her on his knee, and Adelaide Maud stood by and said what a selfish man he was, how thoughtless of others, and how really wicked it was of him to have allowed this to happen to Elma. She stood stroking Elma's hair and looking at Cuthbert, and Cuthbert patted Elma and looked at Adelaide Maud. Then Cuthbert caught Adelaide Maud's hand and she had to sit beside them, and then tea came and Elma was thankful.

"I know what it will be," she said. "You will never look at any of us again, just at each other."

Mrs. Leighton regarded the tea table.

"It appears," said she, "as if for the first time for years I might be allowed to pour out tea in my own house. You all seem so preoccupied."

"Mrs. Leighton," said Adelaide Maud, "you are perfectly sweet. You are the only one who doesn't reproach me, and I'm taking away your only son."

"May I ask when?" asked Cuthbert sedately, but his eyes were on fire.

"Don't you tell him, Helen," said Mrs. Leighton. "It's good for them not to be in too great a hurry."

"She called me Helen," said Adelaide Maud.

"Now, Elma! Elma–say Helen, or you'll spoil the happiest day of our lives."

"Say Helen, you monkey!" cried Cuthbert, giving her a large piece of cake and several lumps of sugar.

Elma took her cup and the cake in a helpless way.

"You just said that to get accustomed to the name yourself," she declared. "And if you don't mind, I would rather have toast to begin with."

Adelaide Maud giggled brightly and her hair shone like gold. Cuthbert stood looking, looking at her till a piece of cake sidled off the plate he was carrying.

"Mummy dear, do you like having tea with me all alone?" asked Elma.

That was what came of it in many ways. Cuthbert and Adelaide Maud had not a word for any one. But then they had been so long separated by social ties and an unfriendly world and "pride," as Helen put it, and various things. Mrs. Dudgeon took the news "carved in stone," and her daughters as something that merely could not be helped. Helen had always been crazy over these Leightons. Mrs. Dudgeon unbent to Mr. Leighton however. He was a man to whom people invariably offered the best, and for his own part he could never quite see where the point of view of other people came in where Mrs. Dudgeon was concerned. Cuthbert was already sufficiently established as rather a brilliant young university man, and a partnership in a large practice in town was being arranged for. Mrs. Dudgeon could unbend with some graciousness therefore, and, after all, Helen was the eldest of four, and none were married yet. "Time is a great leveller," said Adelaide Maud.

All the love and enthusiasm which had been saved from the engagement of Isobel were showered on the unheeding Cuthbert and Adelaide Maud.

"It isn't that I don't appreciate it," said Adelaide Maud. "I know how dreadful it would be to be without it, but oh! somehow there's so little time to attend to every one who is good to me."

Isobel, in a certain measure, was annoyed at the interruption to her own arrangements. In a day things seemed to change from her being the centre of interest, to the claims of Adelaide Maud coming uppermost. She looked on the

engagement as a complete bore. Robin seemed depressed with the news. She often wondered how far she could influence him, and turned rather a cold side to him for the moment. Then her ordinary wilfulness upheld her serenely. After all, once married to Robin, she would be independent of the domestic enthusiasms of the Leighton crowd. She was tired of the pose where she had to appear as one of them, and longed to assert herself differently as soon as possible.

As for the girls themselves–what had London or anything offered equal to this?

They could not believe in their luck in having Adelaide Maud as a sister.

Elma went in the old way to give the news to Miss Grace.

"Oh, I'm so pleased, my dear, so pleased," said poor lonely Miss Grace. "It makes up for so much, my dear, when one grows old, to see young people happy. We are so inclined to be extravagant of happiness when we are young. Some one ought always to be on the spot to pick up the little stray pieces we let drop and enable us to regain them again."

"Weren't you ever engaged to be married, Miss Grace?" Elma asked quite simply.

Miss Grace was not at all embarrassed in the usual way of old maids. She gazed over the white and gold drawing-room, and one saw the spark of flint in her eyes.

"Not engaged, dear, but all the inclination to be. Ah, yes, I had the inclination. And he invited me, but affairs at that time made it unsuitable."

"Oh, Miss Grace, only unsuitable?" Elma's heart went out to her. Beneath everything she knew it must be Miss Annie.

"Yes, dear. And the others found him different to what I did. Selfish and dictatorial, you know. Nothing he did seemed to fit in to what they expected. He grew annoyed with them. I sometimes hardly wonder at that. It made him appear to be what they really thought him. And in the end I asked him to go."

"Oh, Miss Grace!"

Elma's voice was a tragedy.

"It was not fair, it was not fair to him or to you. He didn't want to marry the others. What did it matter what they thought?"

"If he could have married me then, it wouldn't have mattered," said Miss Grace. "I knew that he was good and true, you see; so that I never doubted him. But he was poor, and they worried me nearly to my grave. I was very weak," said Miss Grace.

"And I suppose he went and married some one else in a fit of hopelessness," said Elma tragically. "What a nice wife you would have made, Miss Grace!"

Miss Grace started a trifle, and looked anxiously at Elma. She did not seem to hear the compliment.

"Oh, we all have our little stories," she said. "But don't be extravagant of your beautiful youth, my dear."

"I don't feel youthful or beautiful in any way," said Elma. "I think it's the fever. I feel as though I had been born a hundred years ago. I wish I could keep from shivering whenever anything either exciting or lovely happens. Now, I never was so happy in my life as I was yesterday over Cuthbert and Adelaide Maud, and I was so shaky that I simply burst into tears. What's the good of being youthful if one feels like that?"

"Wait till you have a holiday, dear, you will soon get over that."

Miss Grace did her best to cheer her up. Elma's thoughts ran back to the story she had heard.

"Miss Grace," she asked, "this man that you were engaged to, was he—-"

The door opened and Saunders appeared.

"Dr. Merryweather," said he.

Miss Grace rose in a direct manner. She controlled her voice with a little nervous cough.

"This is just the person to tell you that you ought to be off for a change," she said as they shook hands with Dr. Merryweather.

Miss Grace told him about Elma's shakiness as though it were a real disease. Mrs. Leighton had never looked upon it as anything more than "just a mannerism," as Miss Grace put it. Dr. Merryweather ran his keen eye over Elma's flushed face.

"You mustn't have too many engagements in your family," he said, "while you remain a convalescent."

He had been only then arranging with Mrs. Leighton that she should take Elma off for a trip.

"Mr. Leighton will go too," he said kindly. "I don't think any of you realize how much your parents have suffered recently."

"Oh, but when?" asked Elma in a most disappointed voice. "Not at once, I hope."

"Almost at once," said Dr. Merryweather. "Before this first wedding at least."

Elma's face fell a trifle.

"Oh, well, I suppose I must," she said. "But so much depends on my being just on the spot–up to Isobel's wedding, you know."

"I said, 'No more engagements,'" said Dr. Merryweather with his eye still on her flushed face.

"This isn't exactly an engagement," said Elma with a sigh. "I wish it were."

There was no explaining to Dr. Merryweather of course. There was even not much chance of enlightening Miss Grace. One could only remain a kind of

petted invalid and await developments. Now that Adelaide Maud was really one of them and Cuthbert in such a blissful state, it would seem as though nothing were required to make Elma perfectly happy. But there was this one trouble of Mabel's which only she could share. For of course one couldn't go about telling people that Mabel had set great store by the one man who had run away.

"If only George Maclean would play up," sighed Elma.

But almost every one played up except George Maclean.

CHAPTER XXIX
Mr. Symington

Mabel and Jean were to be bridesmaids at Isobel's wedding. Ridgetown had only one opinion for that proceeding. "It was just like the Leightons."

Aunt Katharine was more explicit.

"It's hardly decent," she said. "Do you want the man to show how many wives he could have had."

"To show one he couldn't have, more likely," said Mrs. Leighton shortly. She herself could not reconcile it to her ideas of what should have been. Mr. Leighton was adamant on the question, however. Isobel had set her heart on this marriage and the marriage was to be carried out. She was their guest and their responsibility. It would be scandalous if they did not uphold her as they would have done had there been none of this former acquaintance with Robin. It would seem as though they had attached unnecessary importance to what now was termed "nothing more than a flirtation." It was a pity they could not all like Robin as they ought to, or have been extremely fond of Isobel; but under the circumstances, they at least must all "play the game."

Isobel took the information tranquilly. It seemed to her that she might have been allowed to arrange her own bridesmaids, then she recognized where the wisdom of Mr. Leighton asserted itself on her side. There was much less chance of conjecture where she and Mabel showed up in friendly manner together with one another. She had one friend from London as her first bridesmaid, and after this the question of dresses obliterated everything.

Jean, it is true, had still a soul for other things. She moaned for her Slavska on every occasion. She rushed to mirrors in agony lest her chin or throat muscles

were getting into disrepair, and she talked already of having to renew her lessons.

"You are just like a cheap motor," said Betty at last, "always having to be done up. Why don't you keep on being a credit to your method like the expensive machines? They don't rattle themselves to bits in a week."

Betty was getting a little out of patience with life.

"I've had a ghastly time of it," she admitted to Mabel. "All the spunk is out of Elma, you know, and what with her being ill and Isobel engaged, I've led a lonely life. And now Jean can't talk of anything but her Slavska. I hate the man."

When Jean was not talking about Slavska, she was sending boxes of flowers to the club girls. Reams of thanks in long letters came by the morning posts. There was no doubt of the popularity of Jean.

"I should never be in deadly fear now of having to get on alone in life," she said. "There's such comfort in girls, you can't think."

Mabel had always remained a little more outside that radiantly friendly crowd, yet had quite as admiring a following. Mr. Leighton unendingly congratulated himself for letting them both have the experience. "Though never again," he declared, "never again, will I allow one of you away from home."

Then occurred Cuthbert's engagement. In a curious way it comforted Mr. Leighton. He was acquiring another daughter. Adelaide Maud loved that view of it best of all.

"If Mr. Leighton had been against me, I should have refused you," she explained to Cuthbert.

"You mean that I should," he corrected her. "Now what I am about to propose—-"

"Are you really going to propose, dear?" asked Adelaide Maud innocently. Cuthbert grinned.

"You are to be married to me in the autumn," said he.

Adelaide Maud cogitated.

"Well, failing a real proposal, a command of this sort may take its place. I shall endeavour to be ready for you in the autumn."

"They are the funniest pair," said Jean; "Helen is so cool and Cuthbert so domineering! And I used to be so stuck on engagements," she sighed.

All the girls were in Elma's room, where Isobel tried on some of her finery. Elma lay on the couch at the window. She had had her trip with Mr. and Mrs. Leighton, and had come home with some colour and a good deal more vitality. Yet still there was much to be desired. Dr. Merryweather thundered out advice about the wedding.

"She is not to be excited," he kept hammering at every one. Elma felt a culprit in this respect. Nothing excited her except the one fact which evidently could not be altered. She had sent an invitation to Mr. Symington which he had not

acknowledged in any shape or form. It seemed so ignominious. One could imagine that rather splendid and cultured person saying, "Oh, these young Leightons again! Don't trouble me with their children's weddings," or something to that effect. She grew cold as she thought of what Mabel's disgust would be when she heard of the flag she had held out (what more definite signal to "come on" could any one have given;) and of his utter disregard of that mild overture. She grew more and more troubled about it. So much so that Mrs. Leighton remarked to her husband as each list of acceptances came from home, and no word of Mr. Symington, "I believe that child is moping because he does not answer."

Mr. Leighton was all for the righting that time would accomplish. "She may forget this, whatever it is, in a day," said he. He said to Elma, however, "I hear Symington was asked. Shouldn't wonder if he were so far away that he hasn't had the letter."

That possibility gladdened her heart immediately. Perhaps after all he had not yet made his slighting remarks about the Leighton children. The Clutterbucks also were abroad, so that there seemed no chance of any of the connection being present.

Elma finally came home, and they had reached the Saturday afternoon before the wedding on the following Tuesday. A very finished example of the London girl had appeared as Isobel's first bridesmaid, and everybody was chatting incontinently. Jean ran on with her own views of things, since she usually found these of more interest than anything else.

"I feel now as though I wouldn't be engaged for a ransom," she said. "I think of all the men we know and how nice they are, but I don't want to be married to them."

"I should hope not," said Isobel. "Why should you!"

"All right, Isobel, I won't poach. But I'd rather give a concert than have a wedding."

It was her latest desire to give a concert in the Bechstein or Eolian Hall, when her voice was "ripe." She had even consulted an agent.

"If only papa would see it," she said, "it would cost £60, but I should get it all back again."

"Oh, one of these private concerts," said the London girl.

"Yes," broke in Mabel. "Where you pay £60 to an agent and he looks after everything including the people with whom you appear. You fill one part of the hall with your friends, and they fill up the rest. Free tickets, you know. Then each portion applauds like mad whatever you do. It all depends on who has most friends who gets the most encores. It is the duty of the rival crowd to remain silent when their own friend isn't performing."

"Oh, Mabel," said Jean.

"It's true," said the London girl. "And if a critic comes you treasure him, oh! you treasure him! There are seats and seats waiting for critics. This one poor man puts it as neatly as he can, Miss So-and-So sang "agreeably," then he rushes off to the most adjacent hall, and does the same for the next aspirant to musical honours."

"And you immediately buy a book for press cuttings," quoth Isobel.

"And only that poor one goes in."

"You are the most depressing crowd I ever met," said Jean despairingly.

"That's not all," said the London girl. "After paying for the other performers, you may happen to find that they have already paid the agent in order to appear with you."

"Oh, I believe a lot, but I won't believe that," said Jean.

"You may just as well," said the London girl, "because it happened to me. And it's very good business for the agent."

"Oh dear," cried Jean. "Do be silent about it then. With you in the house, do you think my father would ever allow me to give that concert."

"I sincerely hope he won't," said the London girl heartily.

Betty sat looking very glum.

"Why we should all be here discussing Jean's career, when there are far more important things to think about, I can't imagine. Jean, you might stop talking of your own affairs for once and help with Isobel's. Here's another box to be opened."

Jean stood pulling at the string.

"Still," she said obstinately, "if you have a voice and a fine method, and a man behind you like Slavska—-"

"Oh, put her out," wailed Betty.

A chorus of "Put her out" ensued. Cuthbert, coming in in the midst of this, without asking for particulars, took Jean in his arms, and carried her off.

"I think it's perfectly miraculous the strength that comes to engaged people," said Betty simply. "Cuthbert couldn't have moved Jean a few weeks ago."

They both returned at that moment, looking warm but satisfied.

"The pater is growling downstairs that he can't get one of you to play to him nowadays," said Cuthbert. "There are to be no more weddings he says."

"Oh, there never is to be no more anything," wailed Betty. "And I'm only half grown up. You've exhausted papa before one of you have done anything."

"Well, let Jean go and rehearse her concert," remarked Isobel calmly.

"I require a good accompanist," said Jean.

Elma had been looking out at the window. She heard the gate open, to four minor notes, containing the augmented fourth of the opening to the Berlioz "King of Thule," which they all loved. Somebody had said "Oil that gate," and Mr.

Leighton had objected because it reminded him of the "King of Thule." When Elma heard the magic notes, and looked out at the window, she could have dispensed with minor intervals for the rest of her existence.

Mr. Symington was coming up the drive.

Oh, Love of our Lives, and now this! She could at last recover from typhoid fever.

"I don't think any of you need go down to papa," said she. "There's an old johnny come to see him."

The bell rang at that moment.

Cuthbert approached her.

"I should fancy," said he, "that with all the good training you have had from Miss Grace, you would have known better than to talk of old johnnies. Who's the josser, anyway?"

"Cuthbert, my darling boy, you are just a little bit vulgar. Cuthbert, I've never been so happy in my life as I am at the present moment."

"So long as you don't weep about it, I don't mind," said Cuthbert.

Elma got up. "I think I could dance," said she.

"Do," said Cuthbert, and put his arm round her.

To the dismay of the girls, he swung Elma into the midst of the wedding trousseaux. Boxes were snatched up, tissue paper sent flying in all directions. Every girl in the room screamed maledictions on them both. This was quite unlike Elma, to be displaying her own feelings at the risk of anything else in the world. They stopped with a wild whirl.

"Elma wanted to dance," said Cuthbert coolly, "and as she hasn't had any exercise lately, I thought it would be good for her. Have some more?" he asked her.

A demon of delight danced in Elma's eyes.

"Why, certainly," she said politely.

There was no holding them in at all.

Elma had her first real lecture, from Mabel of all people.

"I think it's very inconsiderate of you, Elma–just when we are so busy. You might arrange to stop fooling with Cuthbert when these things are lying about. It isn't fair of you."

"Oh, Mabs," said Elma, "you don't know! I've been under the clouds so long–thunder clouds, with everything raining down on me, and hardly any sunshine at all. And just at the present moment I'm on top of the clouds, treading on air; I can't describe it. But even although you are so solemn, and Isobel is so vexed, and Jean is so haughty, and Betty is simply vicious, why, even in spite of that, I'd like another dance with Cuthbert."

Her eyes shone. (Oh, what–what was taking place down stairs?)

Cuthbert said "Come on," in a wild way. These spirits had been natural with him just lately.

But this time five girls intervened.

"Not if I know it," said Isobel.

And "Get you to your Adelaide Maud," cried Betty. So there was no more dancing for Elma just then.

"However," said she, "for the first time in my life, I think, I'm really looking forward to Tuesday night." They were to have a dance in honour of Isobel's wedding. "I think that whether Dr. Merryweather is alive or dead, I shall dance the whole evening." She began to adopt Jean's manner. "Do you know," she said to her, "I feel so inspired. I think I could go and compose an anthem!" (What were they saying downstairs?)

"Oh," said Betty. "She said that just before she took ill, you know. And I lay awake at night thinking she would die. Because I asked you, you know, just in fun, were you going to die because you wanted to write an anthem."

"On the contrary," said Elma, "I now want to write an anthem because I'm about to live."

"Look here, Elma," said Mabel sedately, "if you don't sit down and keep yourself quiet, I shall get Dr. Merryweather to come."

"If he has time," said Isobel drily.

"Time?" asked Mabel.

"Yes, before he gets married to Miss Grace."

That bomb burst itself to silence in the most complete pause that had fallen on the Leighton family for a long time. They began to collect their scattered senses with difficulty. Elma thought, "Mr. Symington in the drawing-room and Miss Grace going to be married! Am I alive or dead?"

"Didn't you notice?" said Isobel's calm voice. "Haven't you seen that Dr. Merryweather's heart is with Miss Grace? You could tell that from the colour of his gloves. Lemon yellow ever since Miss Annie died."

"Oh, Isobel," said Mabel gravely.

Elma remembered her asking, "And Miss Grace, this man, was he—-" and Saunders opening the door and announcing, "Dr. Merryweather." Was this something more than a coincidence, and was Isobel right? Surely Miss Grace would have let her know. Then the certainty that Miss Grace would far more easily let an alien like Isobel know, by reason of her own embarrassment, than a friend like Elma through frank and easy confidence, began to convince her. She heard the gate sing its little song of warning again at that moment. Miss Meredith tripped in.

Miss Meredith!

Elma put her head out at the open window.

"Oh, Miss Meredith, do come upstairs, we've such a lot to show you."

Sarah came safely up. (Oh the relief!) What if she met Mr. Symington, and this new castle of cards came tumbling down to more interference from that quarter. Besides, they were soon going to tea, and Mabel was still unwarned. Elma discreetly hoped that Mabel would not faint. As for herself, her shakiness seemed gone for ever. She was a lion, defending Mabel.

Miss Meredith floated about the room. "Perfectly sweet," she said one minute, and "Isn't it a dream?" the next. (What was Mr. Symington saying in the drawing-room?)

It came alarmingly near tea-time. Elma made everybody prink up a little. "We are all such frights," she said, "and there's some old johnny with papa in the drawing-room."

"I do believe you know who it is," said Betty, "and won't tell us." She was in a suspicious mood with society in general.

"I do," said Elma simply. "It's Mr. Symington."

Mabel did not faint. She was providentially with her back to the others, packing a tulle dress in tissue paper just then, and one has to be very particular with tulle. She was quite collected and calm when she finished. Miss Meredith was the colour of the Liberty green screen behind her. Her energy did not fail her in this crisis however.

"Why, it's nice Mr. Symington comes back," she said. "Is he coming to the wedding?"

"He is," said Elma. "He was my 'particular.' I asked Isobel if I might invite him."

"Who is he anyway?" asked Isobel, patting her hair gently in front of a mirror.

("Oh, Isobel, my friend, if you only knew that," Elma conferred with herself, "you wouldn't perhaps be the centre of attraction to-day.")

"He's a man who's great friends with the pater," said Jean unconcernedly. "He goes abroad a lot and writes up things and develops photos and has a place in Wales."

"A place in Wales, how nice!" said the London girl. "But it isn't the great Mr. Symington, is it?"

"Why, yes, I suppose it must be," said Jean.

"Of course it is," said Miss Meredith, socially active once more. "Mr. Symington is a very famous young man."

"Good gracious," said the London girl, "my curling tongs at once, please. These surprises are very demoralizing. Look at my hair."

They all made themselves beautiful for "the great Mr. Symington."

Mabel turned a pair of wide eyes on Elma. Elma nodded like a little mother,

with a wealth of smiles at her lips. (Oh, Mabel, play up!)

Cuthbert had found his mother coming out of the drawing-room.

"Well, you seem in good spirits," said she,

"Who is in there?" he asked.

"Mr. Symington."

"Oh, it's he, is it?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no particular reason," said Cuthbert. "Only Elma saw him coming in and called him an old johnny. I knew something was up."

"Elma?" asked Mrs. Leighton anxiously.

"Yes. And she's in great form about something. Haven't seen her so gay for an age."

Mrs. Leighton's eyes dropped. "Poor little girl," she said to herself. She thought it best to proceed upstairs, and break some of the surprise of Mr. Symington's arrival.

She found them in a room where boxes were piled in every direction. It was like her that in her present dilemma she should immediately begin to reprove them for their untidy habits.

"This room is really a disgrace," she said. "Just look at all these boxes! And it's tea-time and not one of you in the drawing-room with your father, the only afternoon he has too! Elma, what have you been doing to make your hair so untidy?"

"My hair is only a wig, and this is my room," said Elma firmly. "For the last ten minutes I have been trying to get to my own mirror. We are prinking ourselves up for the great Mr. Symington."

"Oh," said Mrs. Leighton. "So you know. Well, he only got the invitation a few days ago, when he was buried in Servia or some outlandish place. He came right on."

"For my wedding?" asked Isobel in cool surprise.

Miss Meredith gazed in a rather frightened manner at every one.

"No," said Elma. "Not altogether. There were others reasons." She determined to cut all the ground from under the feet of Sarah. "I arranged it with Mr. Symington," she said in an important voice. Then, with the airy manner of the London girl, she patted down the turbulent wig, which had so annoyed Mrs.

Leighton. ”He is a perfect duck,” she said lightly.

CHAPTER XXX
”Now here there dawneth”

The organ in the Ridgetown church pealed in a stately manner the wedding music from *Lohengrin.* Isobel, the bride, moved with exactitude slowly down the aisle with her three bridesmaids. Mr. Leighton, presumably leading her, was compelled to delay himself several times. Who could have known that the arm lying on his was manipulating matters so conscientiously! It was inimitably done. Isobel's *entourage* arranged itself in perfect order, and knowing that everything was properly completed, she raised her eyes to those of Robin just as the last chord sounded. This had been rigorously rehearsed, but nothing could have been better carried out. The ceremony of marriage commenced.

There were more dramas played out that day than what Ridgetown called ”the drama” of Mabel's acting bridesmaid to Isobel. Ridgetown was delightfully curious in noting that Robin, for instance, looked nervous and disturbed. The darting glances which had so unnerved the Leighton family long ago, dwelt on Isobel only occasionally. Robin would not be at his happiest till the ceremony was over.

Whether by accident or design, Miss Grace, who was unable to join the wedding party on account of her mourning, came in quietly to church with Dr. Merryweather. Here was drama enough if one liked to look further as Isobel had done. Then Mr. Symington had been ordered to be an usher. The groomsman, a Mr. Clive, a friend of the Merediths, was, of course, out of the usher part of the business. So Cuthbert and George Maclean and Lance and Mr. Symington were requisitioned. They had to show in the guests and give the cue to the organist, and take the bridesmaids out afterwards. Miss Meredith had been of opinion that they did not require so many ushers. The girls insisted on four at least.

Elma was not in the seventh heaven which she had inhabited a few days before. There was something still unravelled about Mr. Symington's attitude.

She was not to know, of course, that he had immediately placed himself in Mr. Leighton's hands in regard to Mabel. That much-startled person only thought of another complication–Mabel, when Elma had set her heart on him!

In a disturbed manner he had endeavoured to let Mr. Symington know that he might find difficulties in the way. He begged, above all things, that he might not rush matters.

"Give us time to think a little," he pleaded. "We have had so much of this sort of thing lately."

Mr. Symington would have preferred to have had it out then and there. "You understand," he said, "that I left this unsaid before, because I thought, in fact I was led definitely to understand that she was engaged to Meredith, and that my presence here was a trouble to her."

"Ah, that's it–perhaps," said Mr. Leighton. "It was not because of Meredith. There may be other reasons."

Mr. Symington's hopes went down at a rush.

When the girls crowded into the room for tea, his greeting and Mabel's consisted of a mere clasp of the hand on either side with no words spoken at all. But Mabel felt suddenly as though she could face the world. Was it strength he had given her by the mere touch of his hand? She could not raise her eyes to let him or anybody else see what was written there.

The deadlock puzzled the triumphant Elma. Miss Grace comforted her a little. "These things always come right–sooner or later."

These two good friends had not the firmness to probe that remark further, though Elma was dying to ask about Dr. Merryweather.

"I'd like to help them," said Elma instead, "but I should feel like the 'tactful woman' that Mr. Maclean was laughing at. He says that when tactful women write novels they are always making people drop handkerchiefs in order to help the heroine, or having a friend outside or something of that sort at the right moment. It made me feel so silly over sending the invitation to Mr. Symington. Especially," continued she sadly, "since he doesn't seem to be making much use of it. It's very enervating to be tactful, especially when your tact doesn't come off."

Miss Grace looked at her long and kindly.

"Don't bury your sympathies in the cause of others too much, dear," she said. "With some of us, with you and me for instance, it might become more of a weakness perhaps than a real virtue."

Elma immediately thought, "There is something in what Isobel said after all."

Instead of giving voice to it, she said, "I have bothered about Mabs, I know. But then, I haven't any affairs of my own, you see."

"Oh, dear child, never be sure, never be too sure about that," said Miss Grace.

A delightful feeling stole over Elma. Could it be possible that anything

exciting could ever happen to herself. But no–how could it?

"I think it's papa always telling us no woman ought to be married until she's twenty-three that de–demoralizes me so," she said. "And lately, since Mabs is nearly that age, he is actually running it on to twenty-five."

"Yes, but they never really mean it," said Miss Grace.

"Well, one thing I intend to see to is that Mr. Symington takes Mabel out of church after the wedding. Sarah wants him. And Sarah is not going to have him."

"I think you are quite right there," said Miss Grace.

Elma got hold of Mr. Symington herself. "I want you to do me a great favour," she said. "I want you to escort Mabel on Tuesday."

"It isn't a favour," he said. He pulled his big shoulders together and looked magnificent. He was browned and tanned with the sun. Only a slight frown between the eyes to be cleared away and then he would be the old Mr. Symington.

"Well, please do it like this. Ask Mabel if you may."

"Now?" asked Mr. Symington.

"If you like," said Elma.

They were on the lawn after dinner, and Mr. Symington in two days had hardly had a glimpse of Mabel, far less any conversation with her.

She was talking to Isobel.

He walked straight up to her.

"May I escort you out of church on Tuesday?" he asked.

Mabel looked up in a puzzled way, then her eyes lit with shyness and something much more brilliant than had been seen in them for a long time.

"Yes," she said simply.

(Could he know how her heart thumped to that quiet "yes"?)

"Thank you."

(Oh, after all, after all, could the sun shine after all!)

Isobel broke in coldly.

"I had understood from Robin that Mr. Symington would take Miss Meredith."

Mabel turned cold. She could not help it, for the life of her, she could not help it, she turned an appealing glance on Mr. Symington. This he had hardly required, but it helped him to a joyous answer.

"Oh, no, Miss Leighton. Some mistake. I'm bound to Miss Mabel."

Elma strolled up. "It's all because of Cuthbert's insisting on taking Helen. Cuthbert ought to have taken Mabel. Mr. Clive takes the first bridesmaid; Mr. Symington, Mabel; George Maclean, Jean."

"Who takes you?" asked Mr. Symington.

"Oh, I'm not in the procession," said Elma.

"Yes, you are." Mabel was quite animated now. "The whole family trails out in pairs with somebody or another."

George Maclean strolled up.

"I shall take Elma," he said.

"No, you won't! You take Jean."

"I won't be taken by George Maclean," cried Jean. "He's always horrid to me."

"Wire for Slavska," interpolated Betty.

"Is this my wedding, or whose is it?" asked Isobel.

They settled everything once more. The real result lay in Mr. Symington's determination about Mabel.

He came to Elma afterwards.

"Is there anything under the sun you want, which you haven't got?" he asked her. "Because I should like to present it to you here and now."

That cleared up things incalculably for the wedding. Elma sitting in front saw only Mabel, and Mabel's face was the colour of a pink rose. Mr. Symington took her out of church after the wedding, next to the first bridesmaid.

Aunt Katharine followed them with her lorgnette.

"They're a fine couple," she said to Elma. "It's a pity Mabel spoiled herself with this Meredith man. Mr. Symington might lead her out in earnest. I always told your mother what it would be."

There was no squashing of Aunt Katharine.

Mabel had begun to see land after having tossed on what had seemed an endless sea. She had been without any hope at all, but it was necessary to appear throughout as though she had some safe anchor holding her in port. The joy of delivery was almost more than she could bear. She became afraid of looking at Mr. Symington. After the arrival of the guests at the White House, she managed to slip out and disappear upstairs. Her own room had people in it helping to robe Isobel. She stole into the schoolroom. Too late of making up her mind, since Mr. Symington, seeing a trail of pale silken skirts disappear there, tried the only door open to him on that landing. He found Mabel.

"Oh," said she blankly. "I wanted to get away–away from downstairs for a little."

He had some difficulty in replying.

"So I noticed," he said.

They lamely waited. Mabel caught at a window cord and played with it.

"We ought to go downstairs," she whispered.

Why she spoke in a whisper she could not imagine.

Mr. Symington came close to her.

"Mabs," he said, "just for three minutes I mean to call you Mabs. And after

that–if you are offended–you can turn me off to the ends of the earth again. You know why I left before."

She bent her head a little.

"You didn't want me to go? You didn't want me to go! Say that much, won't you?"

She could not answer.

"I know what it means if you do," he said. "Oh don't I know what it means? Mabs, I'm going to make you care for me–as I do for you–can you possibly imagine how much I care for you–why won't you speak to me?"

Mabel never spoke to him at all.

He happened to take her hand just then, and the same confidence which had so strangely come to her a few days ago on his arrival, came to her once more. He took her hand, and time stood still.

Somebody outside, a vague time afterwards, called for Mabel. It dawned on them both that they were attending Isobel's wedding.

"We ought to go downstairs," whispered Mabel.

Her conversation was certainly very limited. They both smiled as they noticed this, a comprehensive, understanding, oh! a different smile to any they had ever allowed themselves.

"We will, when you've just once–Mabs–look up at me. Now–once."

Time stood still once more, but it took the last of the frown from between the eyes of Mr. Symington.

"Now for Isobel's wedding party," cried he.

Mr. Leighton was stunned a little with the news. "Only one stipulation," said he. "I want to tell Elma myself."

Mabel was terribly disappointed.

"Oh, papa–of all people–I wanted to tell Elma."

He was adamant however, even when Mr. Symington added his requests.

"You've interfered seriously enough between me and one of my daughters," Mr. Leighton said severely. "Leave me the other."

So nothing was mentioned until Mr. Leighton should tell Elma. Mrs. Leighton was nervous about the whole thing, yet in an underhand way very proud of Mabel.

"I can't see that any of you are at all suited to be the wife of a man like Mr. Symington," she said to Mabel pessimistically. "But your father thinks it is all right." She had had rather a long day with Aunt Katharine.

Elma saw that the clouds had lifted where Mabel was concerned, and Mr. Symington was in magnificent spirits. She thought they might have told her something, but she was sent to lie down with no news at all until the dance in the evening. Isobel left regally. There was not much of the usual scrimmage of

a wedding-leave-taking about her departure. Her toque and costume were irreproachable. Miss Meredith attended her dutifully, as though she were a bridesmaid herself. But with Robin she had felt too motherly for that. Indeed, some new qualities in Miss Meredith seemed to be coming uppermost.

Dancing was in full swing in the evening when Mr. Leighton methodically put on an overcoat and took Elma to sit out in the verandah. "It is to prevent your dancing too much," he told her.

Elma had the feeling of being manipulated as she had been when she was ill. What did all this mystery mean? She tucked in readily enough beside her father. The night was warm, with a clear moon, and the lights from the drawing-room and on the balcony shed pretty patches of colour on her white dress and cloak.

Mr. Leighton began to talk of Adelaide Maud of all people. She was there, with her sisters. They had at last dropped the armour of etiquette which had prevented more than one from ever appearing at the Leightons.

"I don't suppose any of you really know what that girl has come through," said Mr. Leighton. "All these years it has gone on. A constant criticism, you know. Mrs. Dudgeon found out long ago about Cuthbert, and what Cuthbert calls 'roasted' her continually. Adelaide Maud remained the fine magnificently true girl she is to-day. That is a difficult matter when one's own family openly despises the people one has set one's heart on. She never gave a sign of giving in either way–did she?"

"Not a sign," said Elma. "Adelaide Maud is a delicious brick, she always has been. The Story Books have come true at last."

"It does not sound like being in battle," said Mr. Leighton, in a pertinacious way. "But a battle of that sort is far more real than many of the fights we back up in a public manner. One relieves the poor, and you girls give concerts for hospitals, but who can give a concert to relieve the like of the trouble that Adelaide Maud has gone through? She never wavered."

Elma thought of another fight–should she tell her father?

"We talk about Ridgetown being a slow place, but what a drama can be lived through here!" went on Mr. Leighton. "Isobel, for instance, thinks there's nothing in life unless one attends fifty balls a month. Yet she lived her little drama in Ridgetown. And she has learned to be civil to Miss Meredith. There's another fight for you. It cost her several pangs, let me tell you."

("What did it all lead to?" thought Elma.)

"Oh, there were other fights too, papa, but one I think is over. Have you seen Mabel's face to-night?"

Mr. Leighton started.

Elma required some sort of confidant, "or I shall explode or something," she

explained. She told her father about Mr. Symington.

"And I've been worrying so because it seemed so sad about Mabel. And she never gave it away, did she? And when you all thought so much of Isobel when she first came, and Mabel was getting dropped all round, she never said a word, did she?"

"No," said Mr. Leighton, with a long-drawn impatient sort of relief in his voice. "No, but you did. You talked so much about the man all through your illness that your mother thought you were in love with him yourself. Ridiculous nonsense," he said testily. "And here have I been trying to brace you up to hearing that Mabel is engaged to him, and the scoundrel wishes to marry her at once."

Dr. Merryweather, who had said that Elma was not to be excited, ought to have been on the spot just then. She sat on her father's knee and hugged him.

"Oh, papa, papa, how glorious," said she. "Never mind, I shall always stay with you, I shall, I shall."

"Oh, will you?" said Mr. Leighton dismally. "Mabel said the same thing not so long ago."

Mrs. Leighton and Aunt Katharine came on the balcony, and behind them, Mabel and Mr. Symington.

"Isn't this a midsummer's night's dream?" sighed Elma, after the congratulations were over. "I shall get up in the morning ever afterwards, and I shall say, 'Now here there dawneth another blue day'–even although it's as black as midnight."

"Well, now that we're rid of Mabel," said Aunt Katharine placidly, "when will your turn come along?"

"Oh, Elma is going to stay with me," said Mr. Leighton.

"H'm. Well, she always admired Miss Grace," said Aunt Katharine. "There's nothing like being an old maid from the beginning."

Elma stirred herself gently, and laughed in the moonlight.

"Miss Grace is to be married to Dr. Merryweather," she said with a smile. It was her piece of news, reserved till now for a proper audience.

Miss Grace had told her anxiously in the course of the afternoon. "Oh," Elma had said, "how nice! Dr. Merryweather is such a duck!"

"Do you think so?" had asked Miss Grace seriously. "Miss Annie used to think he was a little loud in his manners."

Miss Grace would ever be loyal to Miss Annie. Adelaide Maud came out just then with Cuthbert. "How much finer to have been loyal to the like of Cuthbert!" Elma could not help the thought. Ah, well, there were fights and fights, and no doubt Miss Grace had won on her particular battlefield.

A new dance commenced indoors, and some came searching for partners.

"Mr. Leighton," said the voice of George Maclean, "won't you spare Elma

for this dance?"

They turned round to look at him.

"Elma wants to stay with me," said Mr. Leighton gravely, putting his arms round her.

"Hph!" said Aunt Katharine in an undertone. "It's another Miss Grace, sure enough."

"Why don't you go and dance?" asked Adelaide Maud of Elma.

There were her two ideals, Miss Grace and Adelaide Maud, crossing swords as it were with one another. And there was George Maclean waiting at the window of the drawing-room. A Strauss waltz struck up inside, one which she loved. Ah, well, there were several kinds of fights in the world. She felt in some inscrutable way that it was "weak" to stay with her father.

She went in with George Maclean.

Mr. Leighton pulled up a chair for his wife, as the others, including even Aunt Katharine, faded from the balcony.

"I take this as an omen, they are all leaving us," he said in a sad manner.

Mrs. Leighton sighed gently. "We did the same ourselves, didn't we, John?"

And with a Strauss waltz hammering out its joyous commanding rhythm, a son and daughter engaged, and Elma just deserted, Mr. Leighton replied very dismally indeed, "I suppose so."

"Hush," said Mrs. Leighton. "Who knows? This may be another."

It was Jean with a University acquaintance of Cuthbert's.

He placed her carefully in a chair and bent in a lounging manner over her.

"You see," said Jean in a high intense voice, "it's the method that does it."

"Ha," said Mr. Leighton joyously. "Herr Slavska may yet save me a daughter."

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