

ADA CAMBRIDGE

THE THREE
MISS KINGS

Ada Cambridge

The Three Miss Kings

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The Three Miss Kings An Australian Story

CHAPTER I. A DISTANT VIEW

On the second of January, in the year 1880, three newly-orphaned sisters, finding themselves left to their own devices, with an income of exactly one hundred pounds a year a-piece, sat down to consult together as to the use they should make of their independence.

The place where they sat was a grassy cliff overlooking a wide bay of the Southern Ocean – a lonely spot, whence no sign of human life was visible, except in the sail of a little fishing boat far away. The low sun, that blazed at the back of their heads, and threw their shadows and the shadow of every blade of grass into relief, touched that distant sail and made it shine like bridal satin; while a certain island rock, the home of sea-birds, blushed like a rose in the same necromantic light. As they sat, they could hear the waves breaking and seething on the sands and stones beneath them, but could only see the level plain of blue and purple water stretching from the toes of their boots to the indistinct horizon. That particular Friday was a terribly hot day for the colony, as weather records testify, but in this favoured spot it had been merely a little too warm for comfort, and, the sea-breeze coming up fresher and stronger as the sun went down, it was the perfection of an Australian summer evening at the hour of which I am writing.

"What I want," said Patty King (Patty was the middle one), "is to make a dash – a straight-out plunge into the world, Elizabeth – no shilly-shallying and dawdling about, frittering our money away before we begin. Suppose we go to London – we shall have enough to cover our travelling expenses, and our income to start fair with – surely we could live anywhere on three hundred a year, in the greatest comfort – and take rooms near the British Museum? – or in South Kensington? – or suppose we go to one of those intellectual German towns, and study music and languages? What do you think, Nell? I am sure we could do it easily if we tried."

"Oh," said Eleanor, the youngest of the trio, "I don't care so long as we go *somewhere*, and do *something*."

"What do you think, Elizabeth?" pursued the enterprising Patty, alert and earnest. "Life is short, and there is so much for us to see and learn – all these years and years we have been out of it so utterly! Oh, I wonder how we have borne it! How *have* we borne it – to hear about things and never to know or do them, like other people! Let us get into the thick of it at once, and recover lost time. Once in Europe, everything would be to our hand – everything would be possible. What do you think?"

"My dear," said Elizabeth, with characteristic caution, "I think we are too young and ignorant to go so far afield just yet."

"We are all over twenty-one," replied Patty quickly, "and though we have lived the lives of hermits, we are not more stupid than other people. We can speak French and German, and we are quite sharp enough to know when we are being cheated. We should travel in perfect safety, finding our way as we went along. And we *do* know something of those places – of Melbourne we know nothing."

"We should never get to the places mother knew – the sort of life we have heard of. And Mr. Brion and Paul are with us here – they will tell us all we want to know. No, Patty, we must not be reckless. We might go to Europe by-and-bye, but for the present let Melbourne content us. It will be as much of the world as we shall want to begin with, and we ought to get some experience before we spend our money – the little capital we have to spend."

"You don't call two hundred and thirty-five pounds a little, do you?" interposed Eleanor. This was the price that a well-to-do storekeeper in the neighbouring township had offered them for the little house which had been their home since she was born, and to her it seemed a fortune.

"Well, dear, we don't quite know yet whether it is little or much, for, you see, we don't know what it costs to live as other people do. We must not be reckless, Patty – we must take care of what we have, for we have only ourselves in the wide world to depend on, and this is all our fortune. I should think no girls were ever so utterly without belongings as we are now," she added, with a little break in her gentle voice.

She was half lying on the grass, leaning on her elbow and propping her head in her hand. The light behind her was growing momentarily less fierce, and the breeze from the quiet ocean more cool and delicious; and she had taken off her hat in order to see and breathe in freedom. A noble figure she was, tall, strong, perfect in proportion, fine in texture, full of natural dignity and grace – the product of several generations of healthy and cultured people, and therefore a truly well-bred woman. Her face was a little too grave and thoughtful for her years, perhaps – she was not quite eight-and-twenty – and it was not at all handsome, in the vulgar sense of the word. But a sweeter, truer, kinder face, with its wide, firm mouth and its open brows, and its candid grey eyes, one could not wish to see. She had smooth brown hair of excessive fineness and brightness (a peculiarity of good blood shared by all the sisters), and it was closely coiled in a knot of braids at the back of her head, without any of those curls and fringes about the temples that have since become the prevailing fashion. And she was dressed in a very common, loosely-made, black print gown, with a little frill of crape at her throat, and a leather belt round her by no means slender waist. Her feet were encased in large and clumsy boots, and her shapely hands, fine-skinned and muscular, were not encased at all, but were brown with constant exposure to sun and wind, and the wear and tear of miscellaneous housework. The impetuous Patty, who sat bolt upright clasping her knees, was like her, but with marked differences. She was smaller and slighter in make, though she had the same look of abundant health and vigour. Her figure, though it had never worn stays, was more after the pattern of modern womanhood than Elizabeth's, and her brilliant little face was exquisite in outline, in colour, in all the charms of bright and wholesome youth. Patty's eyes were dark and keen, and her lips were delicate and red, and her hair had two or three ripples in it, and was the colour of a half-ripe chestnut. And altogether, she was a very striking and unmistakeably handsome girl. She, too, wore a black print gown, and a straw sailor hat, with a black ribbon, tilted back on her head, and the same country-made boots, and the same brown and gloveless hands. Eleanor, again, with the general family qualities of physical health and refinement, had her own characteristics. She was slim and tall – as slim as Patty, and nearly as tall as Elizabeth, as was shown in her attitude as she lay full length on the grass, with her feet on the edge of the cliff, and her head on her elder sister's knee. She had a pure white skin, and sentimental blue eyes, and lovely yellow hair, just tinged with red; and her voice was low and sweet, and her manners gentle and graceful, and altogether she was one of the most pleasing young women that ever blushed unseen like a wild flower in the savage solitudes of the bush. This young person was not in black – because, she said, the weather was too hot for black. She wore an old blue gingham that had faded to a faint lavender in course of numerous washings, and she had a linen handkerchief loosely tied round her neck, and cotton gloves on her hands. She was the only one of the sisters to whom it had occurred that, having a good complexion, it was worth while to preserve it.

The parents of these three girls had been a mysterious couple, about whose circumstances and antecedents people knew just as much as they liked to conjecture, and no more. Mr. King had been on the diggings in the old days – that much was a fact, to which he had himself been known to testify; but where and what he had been before, and why he had lived like a pelican in the wilderness ever since, nobody knew, though everybody was at liberty to guess. Years and years ago, he came to this lone coast – a region of hopeless sand and scrub, which no squatter or free selector with a grain of sense would look at – and here on a bleak headland he built his rude house, piece by piece, in great

part with his own hands, and fenced his little paddock, and made his little garden; and here he had lived till the other day, a morose recluse, who shunned his neighbours as they shunned him, and never was known to have either business or pleasure, or commerce of any kind with his fellow-men. It was supposed that he had made some money at the diggings, for he took up no land (there was none fit to take up, indeed, within a dozen miles of him), and he kept no stock – except a few cows and pigs for the larder; and at the same time there was never any sign of actual poverty in his little establishment, simple and humble as it was. And it was also supposed – nay, it was confidently believed – that he was not, so to speak, "all there." No man who was not "touched" would conduct himself with such preposterous eccentricity as that which had marked his long career in their midst – so the neighbours argued, not without a show of reason. But the greatest mystery in connection with Mr. King was Mrs. King. He was obviously a gentleman, in the conventional sense of the word, but she was, in every sense, the most beautiful and accomplished lady that ever was seen, according to the judgment of those who knew her – the women who had nursed her in her confinements, and washed and scrubbed for her, and the tradesmen of the town to whom she had gone in her little buggy for occasional stores, and the doctor and the parson, and the children whom she had brought up in such a wonderful manner to be copies (though, it was thought, poor ones) of herself. And yet she had borne to live all the best years of her life, at once a captive and an exile, on that desolate sea-shore – and had loved that harsh and melancholy man with the most faithful and entire devotion – and had suffered her solitude and privations, the lack of everything to which she *must* have been once accustomed, and the fret and trouble of her husband's bitter moods – without a murmur that anybody had ever heard.

Both of them were gone now from the cottage on the cliff where they had lived so long together. The idolised mother had been dead for several years, and the harsh, and therefore not much loved nor much mourned, father had lain but a few weeks in his grave beside her; and they had left their children, as Elizabeth described it, more utterly without belongings than ever girls were before. It was a curious position altogether. As far as they knew, they had no relations, and they had never had a friend. Not one of them had left their home for a night since Eleanor was born, and not one invited guest had slept there during the whole of that period. They had never been to school, or had any governess but their mother, or any experience of life and the ways of the world save what they gained in their association with her, and from the books that she and their father selected for them. According to all precedent, they ought to have been dull and rustic and stupid (it was supposed that they were, because they dressed themselves so badly), but they were only simple and truthful in an extraordinary degree. They had no idea what was the "correct thing" in costume or manners, and they knew little or nothing of the value of money; but they were well and widely read, and highly accomplished in all the household arts, from playing the piano to making bread and butter, and as full of spiritual and intellectual aspirations as the most advanced amongst us.

CHAPTER II. A LONELY EYRIE

"Then we will say Melbourne to begin with. Not for a permanence, but until we have gained a little more experience," said Patty, with something of regret and reluctance in her voice. By this time the sun had set and drawn off all the glow and colour from sea and shore. The island rock was an enchanted castle no longer, and the sails of the fishing-boats had ceased to shine. The girls had been discussing their schemes for a couple of hours, and had come to several conclusions.

"I think so, Patty. It would be unwise to hurry ourselves in making our choice of a home. We will go to Melbourne and look about us. Paul Brion is there. He will see after lodgings for us and put us in the way of things generally. That will be a great advantage. And then the Exhibition will be coming – it would be a pity to miss that. And we shall feel more as if we belonged to the people here than elsewhere, don't you think? They are more likely to be kind to our ignorance and help us."

"Oh, we don't want anyone to help us."

"Someone must teach us what we don't know, directly or indirectly – and we are not above being taught."

"But," insisted Patty, "there is no reason why we should be beholden to anybody. Paul Brion may look for some lodgings for us, if he likes – just a place to sleep in for a night or two – and tell us where we can find a house – that's all we shall want to ask of him or of anybody. We will have a house of our own, won't we? – so as not to be overlooked or interfered with."

"Oh, of course!" said Eleanor promptly. "A landlady on the premises is not to be thought of for a moment. Whatever we do, we don't want to be interfered with, Elizabeth."

"No, my dear – you can't desire to be free from interference – unpleasant interference – more than I do. Only I don't think we shall be able to be so independent as Patty thinks. I fancy, too, that we shall not care to be, when we begin to live in the world with other people. It will be so charming to have friends!"

"Oh – friends!" Patty exclaimed, with a little toss of the head. "It is too soon to think about friends – when we have so much else to think about! We must have some lessons in Melbourne, Elizabeth. We will go to that library every day and read. We will make our stay there a preparation for England and Germany and Italy. Oh, Nell, Nell! think of seeing the great Alps and the Doge's Palace before we die!"

"Ah!" responded Eleanor, drawing a long breath.

They all rose from the grass and stood still an instant, side by side, for a last look at the calm ocean which had been the background of their simple lives. Each was sensible that it was a solemn moment, in view of the changes to come, but not a word was spoken to imply regret. Like all the rest of us, they were ungrateful for the good things of the present and the past, and were not likely to understand how much they loved the sea, that, like the nurse of Rorie Mhor, had lulled them to sleep every night since they were born, while the sound of its many waters was still in their ears.

"Sam Dunn is out late," said Eleanor, pointing to a dark dot far away, that was a glittering sail a little while ago.

"It is a good night for fishing," said Patty.

And then they turned their faces landward, and set forth on their road home. Climbing to the top of the cliff on the slope of which they had been sitting, they stood upon a wide and desolate heath covered in all directions with a short, stiff scrub, full of wonderful wild-flowers (even at this barren season of the year), but without a tree of any sort; a picturesque desert, but still a desert, though with fertile country lying all around it – as utterly waste as the irreclaimable Sahara. Through this the girls wended their way by devious tracks amongst the bushes, ankle deep in the loose sand;

and then again striking the cliff, reached a high point from which they had a distant view of human habitations – a little township, fringing a little bay; a lighthouse beyond it, with its little star shining steadily through the twilight; a little pier, running like a black thread through the silvery surf; and even a little steamer from Melbourne lying at the pier-head, veiling the rock-island, that now frowned like a fortress behind it, in a thin film of grey smoke from its invisible little funnels. But they did not go anywhere near these haunts of their fellow-men. Hugging the cliff, which was here of a great height, and honeycombed with caves in which the green sea-water rumbled and thundered like a great drum in the calm weather, and like a furious bombardment in a storm, they followed a slender track worn in the scant grass by their own light feet, until they came to a little depression in the line of the coast – a hollow scooped out of the great headland as if some Titanic monster of a prehistoric period had risen up out of the waves and bitten it – where, sheltered and hidden on three sides by grassy banks, sloping gently upward until they overtopped the chimneys, and with all the great plain of the sea outspread beneath the front verandah, stood the house which had been, but was to be no more, their home.

It was well worth the money that the storekeeper had offered for it. It was a really charming house, though people had not been accustomed to look at it in that light – though it was built of roughest weatherboard that had never known a paint-brush, and heavily roofed with great sheets of bark that were an offence to the provincial eye, accustomed to the chaste elegance of corrugated zinc. A strong, and sturdy, and genuine little house – as, indeed, it had to be to hold its own against the stormy blasts that buffeted it; mellowed and tanned with time and weather, and with all its honest, rugged features softened under a tender drapery of hardy English ivy and climbing plants that patient skill and care had induced to grow, and even to thrive in that unfriendly air. The verandah, supported on squat posts, was a continuation of the roof; and that roof, with green leaves curling upward over it, was so conspicuously solid, and so widely overspread and over-shadowed the low walls, that it was about all that could be seen of the house from the ridges of the high land around it. But lower down, the windows – nearly all set in rude but substantial door frames – opened like shy eyes in the shadow of the deep eaves of the verandah, like eyes that had expression in them; and the retiring walls bore on numerous nails and shelves a miscellaneous but orderly collection of bird-cages, flower boxes, boating and fishing apparatus, and odds and ends of various kinds, that gave a charming homely picturesqueness to the quaint aspect of the place. The comparatively spacious verandah, running along the front of the house (which had been made all front, as far as possible), was the drawing-room and general living room of the family during the greater part of the year. Its floor, of unplanned hardwood, dark with age and wear, but as exquisitely clean as sweeping and scrubbing could make it, was one of the loveliest terraces in the country for the view that it afforded – so our girls will maintain, at any rate, to their dying day. Now that they see it no more, they have passionate memories of their beloved bay, seen through a frame of rustling leaves from that lofty platform – how it looked in the dawn and sunrise, in the intensely blue noon, in the moonlight nights, and when gales and tempests were abroad, and how it sounded in the hushed darkness when they woke out of their sleep to listen to it – the rhythmic fall of breaking waves on the rocks below, the tremulous boom that filled the air and seemed to shake the foundations of the solid earth. They have no wish to get back to their early home and their hermit life there now – they have tasted a new wine that is better than the old; but, all the same, they think and say that from the lonely eyrie where they were nursed and reared they looked out upon such a scene as the wide world would never show them any more. In the foreground, immediately below the verandah, a little grass, a few sturdy shrubs, and such flowers as could keep their footing in so exposed a place, clothed the short slope of the edge of the cliff, down the steep face of which a breakneck path zig-zagged to the beach, where only a narrow strip of white sand, scarcely more than a couple of yards wide, was uncovered when the tide was out. Behind the house was a well-kept, if rather sterile, kitchen garden; and higher up the cliff, but still partly sheltered in the hollow, a very small farm-yard and one barren little paddock.

Through a back gate, by way of the farm-yard and kitchen garden, the sisters entered their domain when it was late enough to be called night, though the twilight lingered, and were welcomed with effusion by an ugly but worthy little terrier which had been bidden to keep house, and had faithfully discharged that duty during their absence. As they approached the house, a pet opossum sprang from the dairy roof to Eleanor's shoulder, and a number of tame magpies woke up with a sleepy scuffle and gathered round her. A little monkey-bear came cautiously down from the only gum tree that grew on the premises, grunting and whimpering, and crawled up Patty's skirts; and any quantity of cats and kittens appealed to Elizabeth for recognition. The girls spoke to them all by name, as if they had been so many children, cuffed them playfully for their forward manners, and ordered them to bed or to whatever avocations were proper to the hour. When a match was struck and the back-door opened, the opossum took a few flying leaps round the kitchen, had his ears boxed, and was flung back again upon the dairy roof. The little bear clung whining to his mistress, but was also put outside with a firm hand; and the cats and magpies were swept over the threshold with a broom. "*Brats!*" cried Patty with ferocious vehemence, as she closed the kitchen door sharply, at the risk of cutting off some of their noses; "what *are* we to do with them? They seem as if they *knew* we were going away, the aggravating little wretches. There, there" – raising the most caressing voice in answer to the whine of the monkey-bear – "don't cry, my pet! Get up your tree, darling, and have a nice supper and go to sleep."

Then, having listened for a few seconds at the closed door, she followed Elizabeth through the kitchen to the sitting-room, and, while her sister lit the lamp, stepped through the French window to sniff the salt sea air. For some time the humble members of the family were heard prowling disconsolately about the house, but none of them, except the terrier, appeared upon the verandah, where the ghost of their evil genius still sat in his old armchair with his stick by his side. They had been driven thence so often and with such memorable indignities that it would never occur to them to go there any more. And so the sisters were left in peace. Eleanor busied herself in the kitchen for awhile, setting her little batch of bread by the embers of the hearth, in view of a hot loaf for their early breakfast, while she sang some German ballads to herself with an ear for the refinements of both language and music that testified to the thoroughness of her mother's culture, and of the methods by which it had been imparted. Patty went to the dairy for a jug of milk for supper, which frugal meal was otherwise prepared by Elizabeth's hands; and at nine o'clock the trio gathered round the sitting-room table to refresh themselves with thick slices of bread and jam, and half-an-hour's gossip before they went to bed.

A pretty and pathetic picture they made as they sat round that table, with the dim light of one kerosene lamp on their strikingly fair faces – alone in the little house that was no longer theirs, and in the wide world, but so full of faith and hope in the unknown future – discussing ways and means for getting their furniture to Melbourne. That time-honoured furniture, and their immediate surroundings generally, made a poor setting for such a group – a long, low, canvas-lined room, papered with prints from the *Illustrated London News* (a pictorial European "history of our own times"), from the ceiling to the floor, the floor being without a carpet, and the glass doors furnished only with a red baize curtain to draw against the sea winds of winter nights. The tables and chairs were of the same order of architecture as the house; the old mahogany bureau, with its brass mounting and multitudinous internal ramifications, was ridiculously out of date and out of fashion (as fashion was understood in that part of the world); the ancient chintz sofa, though as easy as a feather bed, and of a capacity equal to the accommodation of Giant Blunderbore, was obviously home-made and not meant to be too closely criticised; and even the piano, which was a modern and beautiful instrument in itself, hid its music in a stained deal case than which no plain egg of a nightingale could be plainer. And yet this odd environment for three beautiful and cultured women had a certain dignity and harmoniousness about it – often lacking in later and more luxurious surroundings. It was in tune with those simple lives, and with the majestic solitude of the great headland and the sea.

CHAPTER III. PREPARATIONS FOR FLIGHT

Melbourne people, when they go to bed, chain up their doors carefully, and bar all their windows, lest the casual burglar should molest them. Bush people, no more afraid of the night than of the day, are often quite unable to tell you whether there is such a thing as an effective lock upon the premises. So our girls, in their lonely dwelling on the cliff, slept in perfect peace and security, with the wind from the sea blowing over their faces through the open door-windows at the foot of their little beds. Dan Tucker, the terrier, walked softly to and fro over their thresholds at intervals in the course of the night, and kept away any stray kitten that had not yet learned its proper place; that was all the watch and ward that he or they considered necessary.

At five o'clock in the morning, Elizabeth King, who had a little slip of a room to herself, just wide enough to allow the leaves of the French window at the end of it to be held back, when open, by buttons attached to the side walls, stirred in her sleep, stretched herself, yawned, and then springing up into a sitting posture, propped herself on her pillows to see the new day begin. It was a sight to see, indeed, from that point of view; but it was not often that any of them woke from their sound and healthy slumber at this time of the year, until the sun was high enough to shoot a level ray into their eyes. At five o'clock the surface of the great deep had not begun to shine, but it was light enough to see the black posts and eaves of the verandah, and the stems and leaves that twined about them, outlined sharply upon the dim expanse. Elizabeth's bed had no footrail, and there was no chair or dressing-table in the way to impede a clear view of sea and sky. As she lay, the line of the horizon was drawn straight across the doorway, about three feet above the edge of the verandah floor; and there a faint pink streak, with fainter flushes on a bank of clouds above it, showed where the sun was about to rise. The waves splashed heavily on the beach, and boomed in the great caves of the rocks below; the sea-gulls called to each other with their queer little cry, at once soft and shrill; and the magpies piped and chattered all around the house, and more cocks than could anyhow be accounted for crowed a mutual defiance far and near. And yet, oh, how still – how solemnly still – it was! I am not going to describe that sunrise, though I saw one exactly like it only this very morning. I have seen people take out their tubes and brushes, and sit down with placid confidence to paint sun-kissed hills, and rocks, and seas; and, if you woke them up early enough, they would "sketch" the pink and golden fire of this flaming dawn without a moment's hesitation. But I know better.

Ere the many-coloured transformation scene had melted in dazzle of daylight, Elizabeth was dressing herself by her still open window – throwing long shadows as she moved to and fro about the now sun-flooded room. Patty was busy in her dairy churning, with a number of her pets round the door, hustling each other to get at the milk dish set down for their breakfast – the magpies tugging at the cats and kittens by ears and tail, and the cats and kittens cuffing the magpies smartly. Eleanor, singing her German ballads still, was hard at work in the kitchen, baking delicate loaves for breakfast, and attending to kitchen matters generally. The elder sister's office on this occasion was to let out and feed the fowls, to sweep and dust, and to prepare the table for their morning meal. Never since they had grown out of childhood had they known the sensation of being waited upon by a servant, and as yet their system of education had been such that they did not know what the word "menial" meant. To be together with no one to interfere with them, and independent of everybody but themselves, was a habit whose origin was too remote for inquiry, and that had become a second nature and a settled theory of life – a sort of instinct of pride and modesty, moreover, though an instinct too natural to be aware of its own existence.

When the little loaves were done and the big ones put in the oven, Eleanor fetched a towel, donned a broad hat, and, passing out at the front of the house, ran lightly down the steep track on

the face of the cliff to their bath-house on the beach – a little closet of rough slabs built in the rock above high water; whence she presently emerged in a scanty flannel garment, with her slender white limbs bare, and flung herself like a mermaid into the sea. There were sharks in that bay sometimes, and there were devil-fish too (Sam Dunn had spread one out, star-wise, on a big boulder close by, and it lay there still, with its horrible arms dangling from its hideous bag of a body, to be a warning to these venturesome young ladies, who, he fully expected, would be "et up" some day like little flies by a spider); but they found their safety in the perfect transparency of the water, coming in from the great pure ocean to the unsullied rocks, and kept a wary watch for danger. While Eleanor was disporting herself, Patty joined her, and after Patty, Elizabeth; and one by one they came up, glowing and dripping, like – no, I *won't* be tempted to make that familiar classical comparison – like nothing better than themselves for artistic purposes. As Elizabeth, who was the last to leave the water, walked up the short flight of steps to her little dressing closet, straight and stately, with her full throat and bust and her nobly shaped limbs, she was the very model that sculptors dream of and hunt for (as many more might be, if brought up as she had been), but seldom are fortunate enough to find. In her gown and leather belt, her beauty of figure, of course, was not so obvious: the raiment of civilisation, however simple, levelled it from the standard of Greek art to that of conventional comparison with other dressed-up women – by which, it must be confessed, she suffered.

Having assumed this raiment, she followed her sisters up the cliff path to the house; and there she found them talking volubly with Mrs. Dunn, who had brought them, with Sam's best respects, a freshly caught schnapper for their breakfast. Mrs. Dunn was their nearest neighbour, their only help in domestic emergencies, and of late days their devoted and confidential friend. Sam, her husband, had for some years been a ministering angel in the back yard, a purveyor of firewood and mutton, a killer of pigs, and so on; and he also had taken the orphan girls under his protection, so far as he could, since they had been "left."

"Look at this!" cried Eleanor, holding it up – it took both hands to hold it, for it weighed about a dozen pounds; "did you ever see such a fish, Elizabeth? Breakfast indeed! Yes, we'll have it to breakfast to-day and to-morrow too, and for dinner and tea and supper. Oh, how stupid Sam is! Why didn't he send it to market? Why didn't he take it down to the steamer? He's not a man of business a bit, Mrs. Dunn – he'll never make his fortune this way. Get the pan for me, Patty, and set the fat boiling. We'll fry a bit this very minute, and you shall stay and help us to eat it, Mrs. Dunn."

"Oh, my dear Miss Nelly – "

"Elizabeth, take charge of her, and don't let her go. Don't listen to her. We have not seen her for three whole days, and we want her to tell us about the furniture. Keep her safe, and Patty and I will have breakfast ready in a minute."

And in a short time the slice of schnapper was steaming on the table – a most simply appointed breakfast table, but very clean and dainty in its simplicity – and Mrs. Dunn sat down with her young *protégées*, and sipped her tea and gave them matronly advice, with much enjoyment of the situation.

Her advice was excellent, and amounted to this – "Don't you go for to take a stick o' that there furniture out o' the place." They were to have an auction, she said; and go to Melbourne with the proceeds in their pockets. Hawkins would be glad o' the beds, perhaps, with his large family; as Mrs. Hawkins had a lovely suite in green rep, she wouldn't look at the rest o' the things, which, though very comf'able, no doubt – very nice indeed, my dears – were not what *ladies and gentlemen* had in their houses *now-a-days*. "As for that there bureau" – pointing to it with her teaspoon – "if you set that up in a Melbourne parlour, why, you'd just have all your friends laughing at you."

The girls looked around the room with quick eyes, and then looked at each other with half-grave and half amused dismay. Patty spoke up with her usual promptness.

"It doesn't matter in the least to us what other people like to have in their houses," said she. "And that bureau, as it happens, is very valuable, Mrs. Dunn: it belonged to one of the governors

before we had it, and Mr. Brion says there is no such cabinet work in these days. He says it was made in France more than a hundred years ago."

"Yes, my dear. So you might say that there was no such stuff now-a-days as what them old gowns was made of, that your poor ma wore when she was a girl. But you wouldn't go for to wear them old gowns now. I daresay the bureau was a grand piece o' furniture once, but it's out o' fashion now, and when a thing is out o' fashion it isn't worth anything. Sell it to Mr. Brion if you can; it would be a fine thing for a lawyer's office, with all them little shelves and drawers. He might give you a five-pound note for it, as he's a friend like, and you could buy a handsome new cedar chiffonnier for that."

"Mrs. Dunn," said Eleanor, rising to replenish the worthy matron's plate, with Patty's new butter and her own new bread, "we are not going to sell that bureau – no, not to anybody. It has associations, don't you understand? – and also a set of locks that no burglar could pick if he tried ever so. We are not going to sell our bureau – nor our piano –"

"Oh, but, my dear Miss Nelly –"

"My dear Mrs. Dunn, it cost ninety guineas, I do assure you, only five years ago, and it is as modern and fashionable as heart could wish."

"Fashionable! why, it might as well be a cupboard bedstead, in that there common wood. Mrs. Hawkins gave only fifty pounds for hers, and it is real walnut and carved beautiful."

"We are not going to sell that piano, my dear woman." Though Nelly appeared to wait meekly upon her elder sisters' judgment, it often happened that she decided a question that was put before them in this prompt way. "And I'll tell you for why," she continued playfully. "You shut your eyes for five minutes – wait, I'll tie my handkerchief over them" – and she deftly blindfolded the old woman, whose stout frame shook with honest giggles of enjoyment at this manifestation of Miss Nelly's fun. "Now," said Nelly, "don't laugh – don't remember that you are here with us, or that there is such a thing as a cupboard bedstead in the world. Imagine that you are floating down the Rhine on a moonlight night – no, by the way, imagine that you are in a drawing-room in Melbourne, furnished with a lovely green rep suite, and a handsome new cedar chiffonnier, and a carved walnut piano – and that a beautiful, fashionable lady, with scent on her pocket-handkerchief, is sitting at that piano. And – and listen for a minute."

Whereupon, lifting her hands from the old woman's shoulders, she crossed the room, opened the piano noiselessly, and began to play her favourite German airs – the songs of the people, that seem so much sweeter and more pathetic and poetic than the songs of any other people – mixing two or three of them together and rendering them with a touch and expression that worked like a spell of enchantment upon them all. Elizabeth sat back in her chair and lost herself in the visions that appeared to her on the ceiling. Patty spread her arms over the table and leaned towards the piano, breathing a soft accompaniment of German words in tender, sighing undertones, while her warm pulses throbbed and her eyes brightened with the unconscious passion that was stirred in her fervent soul. Even the weather-beaten old charwoman fell into a reverent attitude as of a devotee in church.

"There," said Eleanor, taking her hands from the keys and shutting up the instrument, with a suddenness that made them jump. "Now I ask you, Mrs. Dunn, as an honest and truthful woman – *can* you say that that is a piano to be *sold*?"

"Beautiful, my dear, beautiful – it's like being in heaven to hear the like o' that," the old woman responded warmly, pulling the bandage from her eyes. "But you'd draw music from an old packing case, I do believe." And it was found that Mrs. Dunn was unshaken in her conviction that pianos were valuable in proportion to their external splendour, and their tone sweet and powerful by virtue solely of the skill of the fingers that played upon them. If Mr. King had given ninety guineas for "that there" – about which she thought there must be some mistake – she could only conclude that his rural innocence had been imposed upon by wily city tradesmen.

"Well," said Nelly, who was now busy collecting the crockery on the breakfast table, "we must see if we can't furbish it up, Mrs. Dunn. We can paint a landscape on the front, perhaps, and tie some

pink satin ribbons on the handles. Or we might set it behind a curtain, or in a dark corner, where it will be heard and not seen. But keep it we must – both that and the bureau. You would not part with those two things, Elizabeth?"

"My dear," said Elizabeth, "it would grieve me to part with anything."

"But I think," said Patty, "Mrs. Dunn may be right about the other furniture. What would it cost to take all our things to Melbourne, Mrs. Dunn?"

"Twice as much as they are worth, Miss Patty – three times as much. Carriage is awful, whether by sea or land."

"It is a great distance," said Patty, thoughtfully, "and it would be very awkward. We cannot take them with us, for we shall want first to find a place to put them in, and we could not come back to fetch them. I think we had better speak to Mr. Hawkins, Elizabeth, and, if he doesn't want them, have a little auction. We must keep some things, of course; but I am sure Mr. Hawkins would let them stay till we could send for them, or Mr. Brion would house them for us."

"We should feel very free that way, and it would be nice to buy new things," said Eleanor.

"Or we might not have to buy – we might put this money to the other," said Patty. "We might find that we did not like Melbourne, and then we could go to Europe at once without any trouble."

"And take the pianner to Europe along with you?" inquired Mrs. Dunn. "And that there bureau?"

CHAPTER IV. DEPARTURE

They decided to sell their furniture – with the exception of the piano and the bureau, and sundry treasures that could be bestowed away in the latter capacious receptacle; and, on being made acquainted with the fact, the obliging Mr. Hawkins offered to take it as it stood for a lump sum of £50, and his offer was gratefully accepted. Sam Dunn was very wroth over this transaction, for he knew the value of the dairy and kitchen utensils and farm-yard appliances, which went to the new tenant along with the household furniture that Mrs. Dunn, as a candid friend, had disparaged and despised; and he reproached Elizabeth, tenderly, but with tears in his eyes, for having allowed herself to be "done" by not taking Mr. Brion's advice upon the matter, and shook his head over the imminent fate of these three innocent and helpless lambs about to fling themselves into the jaws of the commercial wolves of Melbourne. Elizabeth told him that she did not like to be always teasing Mr. Brion, who had already done all the legal business necessary to put them in possession of their little property, and had refused to take any fee for his trouble; that, as they had nothing more to sell, no buyer could "do" them again; and that, finally, they all thought fifty pounds a great deal of money, and were quite satisfied with their bargain. But Sam, as a practical man, continued to shake his head, and bade her remember him when she was in trouble and in need of a faithful friend – assuring her, with a few strong seafaring oaths (which did not shock her in the least, for they were meant to emphasise the sincerity of his protestations), that she and her sisters should never want, if he knew it, while he had a crust of bread and a breath in his body.

And so they began to pack up. And the fuss and confusion of that occupation – which becomes so irksome when the charm of novelty is past – was full of enjoyment for them all. It would have done the travel-worn cynic good to see them scampering about the house, as lightly as the kittens that frisked after them, carrying armfuls of house linen and other precious chattels to and fro, and prattling the while of their glorious future like so many school children about to pay a first visit to the pantomime. It was almost heartless, Mrs. Dunn thought – dropping in occasionally to see how they were getting on – considering what cause had broken up their home, and that their father had been so recently taken from them that she (Mrs. Dunn) could not bring herself to walk without hesitation into the house, still fancying she should see him sitting in his arm-chair and looking at her with those hard, unsmiling eyes, as if to ask her what business she had there. But Mr. King had been a harsh father, and this is what harsh fathers must expect of children who have never learned how to dissemble for the sake of appearances. They revered his memory and held it dear, but he had left them no associations that could sadden them like the sight of their mother's clothes folded away in the long unopened drawers of the wardrobe in her room – the room in which he had slept and died only a few weeks ago.

These precious garments, smelling of lavender, camphor, and sandalwood, were all taken out and looked at, and tenderly smoothed afresh, and laid in a deep drawer of the bureau. There were treasures amongst them of a value that the girls had no idea of – old gowns of faded brocade and embroidered muslin, a yellow-white Indian shawl so soft that it could be drawn through a wedding ring, yellower lace of still more wonderful texture, and fans, and scarfs, and veils, and odds and ends of ancient finery, that would have been worth considerably more than their weight in gold to a modern art collector. But these reminiscences of their mother's far-off girlhood, carefully laid in the bottom of the drawer, were of no account to them compared with the half-worn gowns of cheap stuff and cotton – still showing the print of her throat and arms – that were spread so reverently on the top of them; and compared with the numerous other memorials of her last days – her workbox, with its unfinished bit of needlework, and scissors and thimble, and tapes and cottons, just as she had

left it – her Prayer-Book and Bible – her favourite cup, from which she drank her morning tea – her shabby velvet slippers, her stiff-fingered gardening gloves – all the relics that her children had cherished of the daily, homely life that they had been privileged to share with her; the bestowal of which was carried on in silence, or with tearful whispers, while all the pets were locked out of the room, as if it had been a religious function. When this drawer was closed, and they had refreshed their saddened spirits with a long walk, they set themselves with light hearts to fill the remainder of the many shelves and niches of the bureau with piles of books and music, painting materials, collections of wild flowers and shells and seaweeds, fragments of silver plate that had lain there always, as far as they knew, along with some old miniatures and daguerreotypes in rusty leather cases, and old bundles of papers that Mr. Brion had warned them to take care of – and with their own portfolios of sketches and little personal treasures of various kinds, their father's watch, and stick, and spurs, and spectacles – and so on, and so on.

After this, they had only to pack up their bed and table linen and knives and forks, which were to go with them to Melbourne, and to arrange their own scanty wardrobes to the best advantage.

"We shall certainly want some clothes," said Eleanor, surveying their united stock of available wearing apparel on Elizabeth's bedroom floor. "I propose that we appropriate – say £5 – no, that might not be enough; say £10 – from the furniture money to settle ourselves up each with a nice costume – dress, jacket, and bonnet complete – so that we may look like other people when we get to Melbourne."

"We'll get there first," said Patty, "and see what is worn, and the price of things. Our black prints are very nice for everyday, and we can wear our brown homespuns as soon as we get away from Mrs. Dunn. She said it was disrespectful to poor father's memory to put on anything but black when she saw you in your blue gingham, Nelly. Poor old soul! one would think we were a set of superstitious heathen pagans. I wonder where she got all those queer ideas from?"

"She knows a great deal more than we do, Patty," said wise Elizabeth, from her kneeling posture on the floor.

They packed all their clothes into two small but weighty brass-bound trunks, leaving out their blue ginghams, their well-worn water-proofs, and their black-ribbed sailor hats to travel in. Then they turned their attention to the animals, and suffered grievous trouble in their efforts to secure a comfortable provision for them after their own departure. The monkey-bear, the object of their fondest solicitude, was entrusted to Sam Dunn, who swore with picturesque energy that he would cherish it as his own child. It was put into a large cage with about a bushel of fresh gum leaves, and Sam was adjured to restore it to liberty as soon as he had induced it to grow fond of him. Then Patty and Eleanor took the long walk to the township to call on Mrs. Hawkins, in order to entreat her good offices for the rest of their pets. But Mrs. Hawkins seized the precious opportunity that they offered her for getting the detailed information, such as only women could give, concerning the interior construction and capabilities of her newly-acquired residence, and she had no attention to spare for anything else. The girls left, after sitting on two green rep chairs for nearly an hour, with the depressing knowledge that their house was to be painted inside and out, and roofed with zinc, and verandahed with green trellis-work; and that there was to be a nice road made to it, so that the family could drive to and from their place of business; and that it was to have "Sea View Villa" painted on the garden gate posts. But whether their pets were to be allowed to roam over the transformed premises (supposing they had the heart to do so) was more than they could tell. So they had an anxious consultation with Elizabeth, all the parties concerned being present, cuddled and fondled on arms and knees; and the result was a determination *not* to leave the precious darlings to the tender mercies of the Hawkins family. Sam Dunn was to take the opossum in a basket to some place where there were trees, a river, and other opossums, and there turn him out to unlearn his civilisation and acquire the habits and customs of his unsophisticated kinsfolk – a course of study to which your pet opossum submits himself very readily as a rule. The magpies were also to be left to shift for themselves, for

they were in the habit of consorting with other magpies in a desultory manner, and they could "find" themselves in board and lodging. But the cats – O, the poor, dear, confiding old cats! O, the sweet little playful kitties! – the girls were distracted to know what to do for *them*. There were so many of them, and they would never be induced to leave the place – that rocky platform so barren of little birds, and those ancient buildings where no mouse had been allowed so much as to come into the world for years past. They would not be fed, of course, when their mistresses were gone. They would get into the dairy and the pantry, and steal Mrs. Hawkins's milk and meat – and it was easy to conjecture what would happen *then*. Mrs. Hawkins had boys moreover – rough boys who went to the State school, and looked capable of all the fiendish atrocities that young animals of their age and sex were supposed to delight in. Could they leave their beloved ones to the mercy of *boys*? They consulted Sam Dunn, and Sam's advice was —

Never mind. Cats and kittens disappeared. And then only Dan Tucker was left. Him, at any rate, they declared they would never part with, while he had a breath in his faithful body. He should go with them to Melbourne, bless his precious heart! – or, if need were, to the ends of the earth.

And so, at last, all their preparations were made, and the day came when, with unexpected regrets and fears, they walked out of the old house which had been their only home into the wide world, where they were utter strangers. Sam Dunn came with his wood-cart to carry their luggage to the steamer (the conveyance they had selected, in preference to coach and railway, because it was cheaper, and they were more familiar with it); and then they shut up doors and windows, sobbing as they went from room to room; stood on the verandah in front of the sea to solemnly kiss each other, and walked quietly down to the township, hand in hand, and with the terrier at their heels, to have tea with Mr. Brion and his old housekeeper before they went on board.

CHAPTER V. ROCKED IN THE CRADLE OF THE DEEP

Late in the evening when the sea was lit up with a young moon, Mr. Brion, having given them a great deal of serious advice concerning their money and other business affairs, escorted our three girls to the little jetty where the steamer that called in once a week lay at her moorings, ready to start for Melbourne and intermediate ports at five o'clock next morning. The old lawyer was a spare, grave, gentlemanly-looking old man, and as much a gentleman as he looked, with the kindest heart in the world when you could get at it: a man who was esteemed and respected, to use the language of the local paper, by all his fellow-townsmen, whether friends or foes. They Anglicised his name in speaking it, and they wrote it "Bryan" far more often than not, though nothing enraged him more than to have his precious vowels tampered with; but they liked him so much that they never cast it up to him that he was a Frenchman.

This good old man, chivalrous as any paladin, in his shy and secret way, always anxious to hide his generous emotions, as the traditional Frenchman is anxious to display them, had done a father's part by our young orphans since their own father had left them so strangely desolate. Sam Dunn had compassed them with sweet observances, as we have seen; but Sam was powerless to unravel the web of difficulties, legal and otherwise, in which Mr. King's death had plunged them. Mr. Brion had done all this, and a great deal more that nobody knew of, to protect the girls and their interests at a critical juncture, and to give them a fair and clear start on their own account. And in the process of thus serving them he had become very much attached to them in his old-fashioned, reticent way; and he did not at all like having to let them go away alone in this lonely-looking night.

"But Paul will be there to meet you," he said, for the twentieth time, laying his hand over Elizabeth's, which rested on his arm. "You may trust to Paul – as soon as the boat is telegraphed he will come to meet you – he will see to everything that is necessary – you will have no bother at all. And, my dear, remember what I say – let the boy advise you for a little while. Let him take care of you, and imagine it is I. You may trust him as absolutely as you trust me, and he will not presume upon your confidence, believe me. He is not like the young men of the country," added Paul's father, putting a little extra stiffness into his upright figure. "No, no – he is quite different."

"I think you have instructed us so fully, dear Mr. Brion, that we shall get along very well without having to trouble Mr. Paul," interposed Patty, in her clear, quick way, speaking from a little distance.

The steamer, with her lamps lit, was all in a clatter and bustle, taking in passengers and cargo. Sam Dunn was on board, having seen the boxes stowed away safely; and he came forward to say good-bye to his young ladies before driving his cart home.

"I'll miss ye," said the brawny fisherman, with savage tenderness; "and the missus'll miss ye. Darned if we shall know the place with you gone out of it. Many's the dark night the light o' your winders has been better'n the lighthouse to show me the way home."

He pointed to the great headland lying, it seemed now, so far, far off, ghostly as a cloud. And presently he went away; and they could hear him, as he drove back along the jetty, cursing his old horse – to which he was as much attached as if it had been a human friend – with blood-curdling ferocity.

Mr. Brion stayed with them until it seemed improper to stay any longer – until all the passengers that were to come on board had housed themselves for the night, and all the baggage had been snugly stowed away – and then bade them good-bye, with less outward emotion than Sam had displayed, but with almost as keen a pang.

"God bless you, my dears," said he, with paternal solemnity. "Take care of yourselves, and let Paul do what he can for you. I will send you your money every quarter, and you must keep accounts

– keep accounts strictly. And ask Paul what you want to know. Then you will get along all right, please God."

"O yes, we shall get along all right," repeated Patty, whose sturdy optimism never failed her in the most trying moments.

But when the old man was gone, and they stood on the tiny slip of deck that was available to stand on, feeling no necessity to cling to the railings as the little vessel heaved up and down in the wash of the tide that swirled amongst the piers of the jetty – when they looked at the lights of the town sprinkled round the shore and up the hillsides, at their own distant headland, unlighted, except by the white haze of the moon, at the now deserted jetty, and the apparently illimitable sea – when they realised for the first time that they were alone in this great and unknown world – even Patty's bold heart was inclined to sink a little.

"Elizabeth," she said, "we *must* not cry – it is absurd. What is there to cry for? Now, all the things we have been dreaming and longing for are going to happen – the story is beginning. Let us go to bed and get a good sleep before the steamer starts so that we are fresh in the morning – so that we don't lose anything. Come, Nelly, let us see if poor Dan is comfortable, and have some supper and go to bed."

They cheered themselves with the sandwiches and the gooseberry wine that Mr. Brion's housekeeper had put up for them, paid a visit to Dan, who was in charge of an amiable cook (whom the old lawyer had tipped handsomely), and then faced the dangers and difficulties of getting to bed. Descending the brass-bound staircase to the lower regions, they paused, their faces flushed up, and they looked at each other as if the scene before them was something unfit for the eyes of modest girls. They were shocked, as by some specific impropriety, at the noise and confusion, the rough jostling and the impure atmosphere, in the morsel of a ladies' cabin, from which the tiny slips of bunks prepared for them were divided only by a scanty curtain. This was their first contact with the world, so to speak, and they fled from it. To spend a night in that suffocating hole, with those loud women their fellow passengers, was a too appalling prospect. So Elizabeth went to the captain, who knew their story, and admired their faces, and was inclined to be very kind to them, and asked his permission to occupy a retired corner of the deck. On his seeming to hesitate – they being desperately anxious not to give anybody any trouble – they assured him that the place above all others where they would like to make their bed was on the wedge-shaped platform in the bows, where they would be out of everybody's way.

"But, my dear young lady, there is no railing there," said the captain, laughing at the proposal as a joke.

"A good eight inches – ten inches," said Elizabeth. "Quite enough for anybody in the roughest sea."

"For a sailor perhaps, but not for young ladies who get giddy and frightened and seasick. Supposing you tumbled off in the dark, and I found you gone when I came to look for you in the morning."

"We tumble off!" cried Eleanor. "We never tumbled off anything in our lives. We have lived on the cliffs like the goats and the gulls – nothing makes us giddy. And I don't think anything will make us seasick – or frightened either."

"Certainly not frightened," said Patty.

He let them have their way – taking a great many (as they thought) perfectly unnecessary precautions in fixing up their quarters in case of a rough sea – and himself carried out their old opossum rug and an armful of pillows to make their nest comfortable. So, in this quiet and breezy bedchamber, roofed over by the moonlit sky, they lay down with much satisfaction in each other's arms, unwatched and unmolested, as they loved to be, save by the faithful Dan Tucker, who found his way to their feet in the course of the night. And the steamer left her moorings and worked out of the bay into the open ocean, puffing and clattering, and danced up and down over the long waves,

and they knew nothing about it. In the fresh air, with the familiar voice of the sea around them, they slept soundly under the opossum rug until the sun was high.

CHAPTER VI.

PAUL

They slept for two nights on the tip of the steamer's nose, and they did not roll off. They had a long, delightful day at sea, no more troubled with seasickness than were the gulls to which they had compared themselves, and full of inquiring interest for each of the ports they touched at, and for all the little novelties of a first voyage. They became great friends with the captain and crew, and with some children who were amongst the passengers (the ladies of the party were indisposed to fraternise with them, not being able to reconcile themselves to the cut and quality of the faded blue gingham gowns, or to those eccentric sleeping arrangements, both of which seemed to point to impecuniosity – which is so closely allied to impropriety, as everybody knows). They sat down to their meals in the little cabin with wonderful appetites; they walked the deck in the fine salt wind with feet that were light and firm, and hearts that were high and hopeful and full of courage and enterprise. Altogether, they felt that the story was beginning pleasantly, and they were eager to turn over the pages.

And then, on the brightest of bright summer mornings, they came to Melbourne.

They did not quite know what they had expected to see, but what they did see astonished them. The wild things caught in the bush, and carried in cages to the Eastern market, could not have felt more surprised or dismayed by the novelty of the situation than did these intrepid damsels when they found themselves fairly launched into the world they were so anxious to know. For a few minutes after their arrival they stood together silent, breathless, taking it all in; and then Patty – yes, it *was* Patty – exclaimed:

"Oh, *where* is Paul Brion?"

Paul Brion was there, and the words had no sooner escaped her lips than he appeared before them. "How do you do, Miss King?" he said, not holding out his hand, but taking off his hat with one of his father's formal salutations, including them all. "I hope you have had a pleasant passage. If you will kindly tell me what luggage you have, I will take you to your cab; it is waiting for you just here. Three boxes? All right. I will see after them."

He was a small, slight, wiry little man, with decidedly brusque, though perfectly polite manners; active and self-possessed, and, in a certain way of his own, dignified, notwithstanding his low stature. He was not handsome, but he had a keen and clever face – rather fierce as to the eyes and mouth, which latter was adorned with a fierce little moustache curling up at the corners – but pleasant to look at, and one that inspired trust.

"He is not a bit like his father," said Patty, following him with Eleanor, as he led Elizabeth to the cab. Patty was angry with him for overhearing that "Where is Paul Brion?" – as she was convinced he had done – and her tone was disparaging.

"As the mother duck said of the ugly duckling, if he is not pretty he has a good disposition," said Eleanor. "He is like his father in that. It was very kind of him to come and help us. A press man must always be terribly busy."

"I don't see why we couldn't have managed for ourselves. It is nothing but to call a cab," said Patty with irritation.

"And where could we have gone to?" asked her sister, reproachfully.

"For the matter of that, where are we going now? We haven't the least idea. I think it was very stupid to leave ourselves in the hands of a chance young man whom we have hardly ever seen. We make ourselves look like a set of helpless infants – as if we couldn't do without him."

"Well, we can't," said Eleanor.

"Nonsense. We don't try. But," added Patty, after a pause, "we must begin to try – we must begin at once."

They arrived at the cab, in which Elizabeth had seated herself, with the bewildered Dan in her arms, her sweet, open face all smiles and sunshine. Paul Brion held the door open, and, as the younger sisters passed him, looked at them intently with searching eyes. This was a fresh offence to Patty, at whom he certainly looked most. Impressions new and strange were crowding upon her brain this morning thick and fast. "Elizabeth," she said, unconscious that her brilliant little countenance, with that flush of excitement upon it, was enough to fascinate the gaze of the dullest man; "Elizabeth, he looks at us as if we were curiosities – he thinks we are dowdy and countryfied and it amuses him."

"My dear," interposed Eleanor, who, like Elizabeth, was (as she herself expressed it) reeking with contentment, "you could not have seen his face if you think that. He was as grave as a judge."

"Then he pities us, Nelly, and that is worse. He thinks we are queer outlandish creatures — *frights*. So we are. Look at those women on the other side of the street, how differently they are dressed! We ought not to have come in these old clothes, Elizabeth."

"But, my darling, we are travelling, and anything does to travel in. We will put on our black frocks when we get home, and we will buy ourselves some new ones. Don't trouble about such a trifle *now*, Patty – it is not like you. Oh, see what a perfect day it is! And think of our being in Melbourne at last! I am trying to realise it, but it almost stuns me. What a place it is! But Mr. Paul says our lodgings are in a quiet, airy street – not in this noisy part. Ah, here he is! And there are the three boxes all safe. Thank you so much," she said warmly, looking at the young man of the world, who was some five years older than herself, with frankest friendliness, as a benevolent grandmamma might have looked at an obliging schoolboy. "You are very good – we are very grateful to you."

"And very sorry to have given you so much trouble," added Patty, with the air of a young duchess.

He looked at her quickly, and made a slight bow. He did not say that what he had done had been no trouble at all, but a pleasure – he did not say a word, indeed; and his silence made her little heart swell with mortification. He turned to Elizabeth, and, resting his hands on the door-frame, began to explain the nature of the arrangements that he had made for them, with business-like brevity.

"Your lodgings are in Myrtle Street, Miss King. That is in East Melbourne, you know – quite close to the gardens – quite quiet and retired, and yet within a short walk of Collins Street, and handy for all the places you want to see. You have two bedrooms and a small sitting-room of your own, but take your meals with the other people of the house; you won't mind that, I hope – it made a difference of about thirty shillings a week, and it is the most usual arrangement. Of course you can alter anything you don't like when you get there. The landlady is a Scotchwoman – I know her very well, and can recommend her highly – I think you will like her."

"But won't you come with us?" interposed Elizabeth, putting out her hand. "Come and introduce us to her, and see that the cabman takes us to the right place. Or perhaps you are too busy to spare the time?"

"I – I will call on you this afternoon, if you will permit me – when you have had your lunch and are rested a little. Oh, I know the cabman quite well, and can answer for his taking you safely. This is your address" – hastily scribbling it on an envelope he drew from his pocket – "and the landlady is Mrs. M'Intyre. Good morning. I will do myself the pleasure of calling on you at four or five o'clock."

He thereupon bowed and departed, and the cab rattled away in an opposite direction. Patty deeply resented his not coming with them, and wondered and wondered why he had refused. Was he too proud, or too shy, or too busy, or too indifferent? Did he feel that it was a trouble to him to have to look after them? Poor Paul! He would have liked to come, to see them comfortably housed and settled; but the simple difficulty was that he was afraid to risk giving them offence by paying the cab fare, and would not ride with them, a man in charge of three ladies, without paying it. And Patty was not educated to the point of appreciating that scruple. His desertion of them in the open street was a grievance to her. She could not help thinking of it, though there was so much else to think of.

The cab turned into Collins Street and rattled merrily up that busy thoroughfare in the bright sunshine. They looked at the brilliant shop windows, at the gay crowd streaming up and down the pavements, and the fine equipages flashing along the road-way at the Town Hall, and the churches, and the statues of Burke and Wills – and were filled with admiration and wonder. Then they turned into quieter roads, and there was the Exhibition in its web of airy scaffolding, destined to be the theatre of great events, in which they would have their share – an inspiring sight. And they went round a few corners, catching refreshing glimpses of green trees and shady alleys, and presently arrived at Myrtle Street – quietest of suburban thoroughfares, with its rows of trim little houses, half-a-dozen in a block, each with its tiny patch of garden in front of it – where for the present they were to dwell.

Mrs. M'Intyre's maid came out to take the parcels, and the landlady herself appeared on the doorstep to welcome the new-comers. They whispered to themselves hurriedly, "Oh, she has a nice face!" – and then Patty and Elizabeth addressed themselves to the responsible business of settling with the cabman.

"How much have we to pay you?" asked Patty with dignity.

"Twelve shillings, please, miss," the man gaily replied.

Elizabeth looked at her energetic sister, who had boasted that they were quite sharp enough to know when they were being cheated. Upon which Patty, with her feathers up, appealed to the landlady. Mrs. M'Intyre said the proper sum due to him was just half what he had asked. The cabman said that was for one passenger, and not for three. Mrs. M'Intyre then represented that eighteen-pence apiece was as much as he could claim for the remaining two, that the luggage was a mere nothing, and that if he didn't mind what he was about, &c. So the sum was reduced to nine shillings, which Elizabeth paid, looking very grave over it, for it was still far beyond what she had reckoned on.

Then they went into the house – the middle house of a smart little terrace, with a few ragged fern trees in the front garden – and Mrs. M'Intyre took them up to their rooms, and showed them drawers and cupboards, in a motherly and hospitable manner.

"This is the large bedroom, with the two beds, and the small one opens off it; so that you will all be close together," said she, displaying the neat chambers, one of which was properly but a dressing-closet; and our girls, who knew no luxury but absolute cleanliness, took note of the whiteness of the floors and bedclothes, and were more than satisfied. "And this is your sitting-room," she proceeded, leading the way to an adjoining apartment pleasantly lighted by a French window, which opened upon a stone (or, rather, what looked like a stone) balcony. It had a little "suite" in green rep like Mrs. Hawkins's, and Mrs. Dunn's ideal cedar-wood chiffonier; it had also a comfortable solid table with a crimson cloth, and a print of the ubiquitous Cenci over the mantelpiece. The carpet was a bed of blooming roses and lilies, the effect of which was much improved by the crumb cloth that was nailed all over it. It was a tiny room, but it had a cosy look, and the new lodgers agreed at once that it was all that could be desired. "And I hope you will be comfortable," concluded the amiable landlady, "and let me know whenever you want anything. There's a bathroom down that passage, and this is your bell, and those drawers have got keys, you see, and lunch will be ready in half-an-hour. The dining-room is the first door at the bottom of the stairs, and – phew! that tobacco smoke hangs about the place still, in spite of all my cleaning and airing. I never allow smoking in the house, Miss King – not in the general way; but a man who has to be up o' nights writing for the newspapers, and never getting his proper sleep, it's hard to grudge him the comfort of his pipe – now isn't it? And I have had no ladies here to be annoyed by it – in general I don't take ladies, for gentlemen are so much the most comfortable to do for; and Mr. Brion is so considerate, and gives so little trouble – "

"What! Is Mr. Paul Brion lodging here?" broke in Patty impetuously, with her face aflame.

"Not now," Mrs. M'Intyre replied. "He left me last week. These rooms that you have got were his – he has had them for over three years. He wanted you to come here, because he thought you would be comfortable with me" – smiling benignly. "He said a man could put up anywhere."

She left them, presently; and as soon as the girls found themselves alone, they hurriedly assured each other that nothing should induce them to submit to this. It was not to be thought of for a moment. Paul Brion must be made to remove the mountainous obligation that he had put them under, and return to his rooms instantly. They would not put so much as a pocket handkerchief in the drawers and cupboards until this point had been settled with him.

At four o'clock, when they had visited the bathroom, arranged their pretty hair afresh, and put on the black print gowns – when they had had a quiet lunch with Mrs. M'Intyre (whose other boarders being gentlemen in business, did not appear at the mid-day meal), prattling cheerfully with the landlady the while, and thinking that the cold beef and salads of Melbourne were the most delicious viands ever tasted – when they had examined their rooms minutely, and tried the sofas and easy-chairs, and stood for a long while on the balcony looking at the other houses in the quiet street – at four o'clock Paul Brion came; and the maid brought up his card, while he gossiped with Mrs. M'Intyre in the hall. He had no sooner entered the girls' sitting-room than Elizabeth hastened to unburden herself. Patty was burning to be the spokeswoman for the occasion, but she knew her place, and she remembered the small effect she had produced on him in the morning, and proudly held aloof. In her sweet and graceful way, but with as much gravity and earnestness as if it were a matter of life and death, Elizabeth explained her view of the situation. "Of course we cannot consent to such an arrangement," she said gently; "you must have known we could never consent to allow you to turn out of your own rooms to accommodate us. You must please come back again, Mr. Brion, and let us go elsewhere. There seem to be plenty of other lodgings to be had – even in this street."

Paul Brion's face wore a pleasant smile as he listened. "Oh, thank you," he replied lightly. "But I am very comfortable where I am – quite as much so as I was here – rather more, indeed. For the people at No. 6 have set up a piano on the other side of that wall" – pointing to the cedar chiffonnier – "and it bothered me dreadfully when I wanted to write. It was the piano drove me out – not you. Perhaps it will drive you out too. It is a horrible nuisance, for it is always out of tune; and you know the sort of playing that people indulge in who use pianos that are out of tune."

So their little demonstration collapsed. Paul had gone away to please himself. "And has left *us* to endure the agonies of a piano out of tune," commented Patty.

As the day wore on, reaction from the mood of excitement and exaltation with which it began set in. Their spirits flagged. They felt tired and desolate in this new world. The unaccustomed hot dinner in the evening, at which they sat for nearly an hour in company with strange men who asked them questions, and pressed them to eat what they didn't want, was very uncongenial to them. And when, as soon as they could, they escaped to their own quarters, their little sitting-room, lighted with gas and full of hot upstairs air, struck them with its unsympathetic and unhomelike aspect. The next door piano was jingling its music-hall ditties faintly on the other side of the wall, and poor Dan, who had been banished to the back yard, was yelping so piteously that their hearts bled to hear him. "We must get a house of our own at once, Elizabeth – at *once*," exclaimed Eleanor – "if only for Dan's sake."

"We will never have pets again – never!" said Patty, with something like an incipient sob in her voice, as she paced restlessly about the room. "Then we shall not have to ill-treat them and to part from them." She was thinking of her little bear, and the opossum, and the magpies, who were worse off than Dan.

And Elizabeth sat down at the table, and took out pencil and note-book with a careworn face. She was going to keep accounts strictly, as Mr. Brion had advised her, and they not only meant to live within their income, as a matter of course, but to save a large part of it for future European contingencies. And, totting up the items of their expenditure for three days – cost of passage by steamer, cost of provisions on board, cab fare, and the sum paid for a week's board and lodging in advance – she found that they had been living for that period at the rate of about a thousand a year.

So that, upon the whole, they were not quite so happy as they had expected to be, when they went to bed.

CHAPTER VII. A MORNING WALK

But they slept well in their strange beds, and by morning all their little troubles had disappeared. It was impossible not to suppose that the pets "at home" were making themselves happy, seeing how the sun shone and the sea breezes blew; and Dan, who had reached years of discretion, was evidently disposed to submit himself to circumstances. Having a good view of the back yard, they could see him lolling luxuriously on the warm asphalt, as if he had been accustomed to be chained up, and liked it. Concerning their most pressing anxiety – the rapid manner in which money seemed to melt away, leaving so little to show for it – it was pointed out that at least half the sum expended was for a special purpose, and chargeable to the reserve fund and not to their regular income, from which at present only five pounds had been taken, which was to provide all their living for a week to come.

So they went downstairs in serene and hopeful spirits, and gladdened the eyes of the gentlemen boarders who were standing about the dining-room, devouring the morning's papers while they waited for breakfast. There were three of them, and each placed a chair promptly, and each offered handsomely to resign his newspaper. Elizabeth took an *Argus* to see what advertisements there were of houses to let; and then Mrs. M'Intyre came in with her coffee-pot and her cheerful face, and they sat down to breakfast. Mrs. M'Intyre was that rare exception to the rule, a boarding-house keeper who had private means as well as the liberal disposition of which the poorest have their share, and so her breakfast was a good breakfast. And the presence of strangers at table was not so unpleasant to our girls on this occasion as the last.

After breakfast they had a solemn consultation, the result being that the forenoon was dedicated to the important business of buying their clothes and finding their way to and from the shops.

"For we must have *bonnets*," said Patty, "and that immediately. Bonnets, I perceive, are the essential tokens of respectability. And we must never ride in a cab again."

They set off at ten o'clock, escorted by Mrs. M'Intyre, who chanced to be going to the city to do some marketing. The landlady, being a very fat woman, to whom time was precious, took the omnibus, according to custom; but her companions with one consent refused to squander unnecessary threepences by accompanying her in that vehicle. They had a straight road before them all the way from the corner of Myrtle Street to the Fishmarket, where she had business; and there they joined her when she had completed her purchases, and she gave them a fair start at the foot of Collins Street before she left them.

In Collins Street they spent the morning – a bewildering, exciting, anxious morning – going from shop to shop, and everywhere finding that the sum they had brought to spend was utterly inadequate for the purpose to which they had dedicated it. They saw any quantity of pretty soft stuffs, that were admirably adapted alike to their taste and means, but to get them fashioned into gowns seemed to treble their price at once; and, as Patty represented, they must have one, at any rate, that was made in the mode before they could feel it safe to manufacture for themselves. They ended by choosing – as a measure of comparative safety, for thus only could they know what they were doing, as Patty said – three ready-made costumes that took their fancy, the combined cost of which was a few shillings over the ten pounds. They were merely morning dresses of black woollen stuff; lady-like, and with a captivating style of "the world" about them, but in the lowest class of goods of that kind dispensed in those magnificent shops. Of course that was the end of their purchases for the day; the selection of mantles, bonnets, gloves, boots, and all the other little odds and ends on Elizabeth's list was reserved for a future occasion. For the idea of buying anything on twenty-four hours' credit was never entertained for a moment. To be sure, they did ask about the bonnets, and were shown a great number, in spite of their polite anxiety not to give unprofitable trouble; and not one that they liked

was less than several pounds in price. Dismayed and disheartened, they "left it" (Patty's suggestion again); and they gave the rest of their morning to the dressmaker, who undertook to remodel the bodices of the new gowns and make them fit properly. This fitting was not altogether a satisfactory business, either; for the dressmaker insisted that a well-shaped corset was indispensable – especially in these days, when fit was everything – and they had no corsets and did not wish for any. She was, however, a dressmaker of decision and resource, and she sent her assistant for a bundle of corsets, in which she encased her helpless victims before she would begin the ripping and snipping and pulling and pinning process. When they saw their figures in the glass, with their fashionable tight skirts and unwrinkled waists, they did not know themselves; and I am afraid that Patty and Eleanor, at any rate, were disposed to regard corsets favourably and to make light of the discomfort they were sensibly conscious of in wearing them. Elizabeth, whose natural shape was so beautiful – albeit she is destined, if the truth must be told, to be immensely stout and heavy some day – was not seduced by this specious appearance. She ordered the dressmaker, with a quiet peremptoriness that would have become a carriage customer, to make the waists of the three gowns "free" and to leave the turnings on; and she took off the borrowed corset, and drew a long breath, inwardly determining never to wear such a thing again, even to have a dress fitted – fashion or no fashion.

It was half-past twelve by this time, and at one o'clock Mrs. M'Intyre would expect them in to lunch. They wanted to go home by way of those green enclosures that Paul Brion had told them of, and of which they had had a glimpse yesterday – which the landlady had assured them was the easiest thing possible. They had but to walk right up to the top of Collins Street, turn to the right, where they would see a gate leading into gardens, pass straight through those gardens, cross a road and go straight through other gardens, which would bring them within a few steps of Myrtle Street – a way so plain that they couldn't miss it if they tried. Ways always do seem so to people who know them. Our three girls were self-reliant young women, and kept their wits about them very creditably amid their novel and distracting surroundings. Nevertheless they were at some loss with respect to this obvious route. Because, in the first place, they didn't know which was the top of Collins Street and which the bottom.

"Dear me! we shall be reduced to the ignominious necessity of asking our way," exclaimed Eleanor, as they stood forlornly on the pavement, jostled by the human tide that flowed up and down. "If only we had Paul Brion here."

It was very provoking to Patty, but he *was* there. Being a small man, he did not come into view till he was within a couple of yards of them, and that was just in time to overhear this invocation. His ordinarily fierce aspect, which she had disrespectfully likened to that of Dan when another terrier had insulted him, had for the moment disappeared. The little man showed all over him the pleased surprise with which he had caught the sound of his own name.

"Have you got so far already?" he exclaimed, speaking in his sharp and rapid way, while his little moustache bristled with such a smile as they had not thought him capable of. "And – and can I assist you in any way?"

Elizabeth explained their dilemma; upon which he declared he was himself going to East Melbourne (whence he had just come, after his morning sleep and noontide breakfast), and asked leave to escort them thither. "How fortunate we are!" Elizabeth said, turning to walk up the street by his side; and Eleanor told him he was like his father in the opportuneness of his friendly services. But Patty was silent, and raged inwardly.

When they had traversed the length of the street, and were come to the open space before the Government offices, where they could fall again into one group, she made an effort to get rid of him and the burden of obligation that he was heaping upon them.

"Mr. Brion," she began impetuously, "we know where we are now quite well –"

"I don't think you do," he interrupted her, "seeing that you were never here before."

"Our landlady gave us directions – she made it quite plain to us. There is no necessity for you to trouble yourself any further. You were not going this way when we met you, but exactly in the opposite direction."

"I am going this way now, at any rate," he said, with decision. "I am going to show your sisters their way through the gardens. There are a good many paths, and they don't all lead to Myrtle Street."

"But we know the points of the compass – we have our general directions," she insisted angrily, as she followed him helplessly through the gates. "We are not quite idiots, though we do come from the country."

"Patty," interposed Elizabeth, surprised, "I am glad of Mr. Brion's kind help, if you are not."

"Patty," echoed Eleanor in an undertone, "that haughty spirit of yours will have a fall some day."

Patty felt that it was having a fall now. "I know it is very kind of Mr. Brion," she said tremulously, "but how are we to get on and do for ourselves if we are treated like children – I mean if we allow ourselves to hang on to other people? We should make our own way, as others have to do. I don't suppose *you* had anyone to lead you about when *you* first came to Melbourne" – addressing Paul.

"I was a man," he replied. "It is a man's business to take care of himself."

"Of course. And equally it is a woman's business to take care of herself – if she has no man in her family."

"Pardon me. In that case it is the business of all the men with whom she comes in contact to take care of her – each as he can."

"Oh, what nonsense! You talk as if we lived in the time of the Troubadours – as if you didn't *know* that all that stuff about women has had its day and been laughed out of existence long ago."

"What stuff?"

"That we are helpless imbeciles – a sort of angelic wax baby, good for nothing but to look pretty. As if we were not made of the same substance as you, with brains and hands – not so strong as yours, perhaps, but quite strong enough to rely upon when necessary. Oh!" exclaimed Patty, with a fierce gesture, "I do so *hate* that man's cant about women – I have no patience with it!"

"You must have been severely tried," murmured Paul (he was beginning to think the middle Miss King a disagreeable person, and to feel vindictive towards her). And Eleanor laughed cruelly, and said, "Oh, no, she's got it all out of books."

"A great mistake to go by books," said he, with the air of a father. "Experience first – books afterwards, Miss Patty." And he smiled coolly into the girl's flaming face.

CHAPTER VIII. AN INTRODUCTION TO MRS. GRUNDY

Patty and her sisters very nearly had their first quarrel over Paul Brion. Patty said he was impertinent and patronising, that he presumed upon their friendless position to pay them insulting attentions – that, in short, he was a detestable young man whom she, for one, would have nothing more to do with. And she warned Elizabeth, in an hysterical, high-pitched voice, never to invite him into their house unless she wished to see her (Patty) walk out of it. Elizabeth, supported by Eleanor, took up the cudgels in his defence, and assured Patty, kindly, but with much firmness, that he had behaved with dignity and courtesy under great provocation to do otherwise. They also pointed out that he was his father's representative; that it would be ungracious and unladylike to reject the little services that it was certainly a pleasure to him to render, and unworthy of them to assume an independence that at present they were unable to support. Which was coming as near to "words" as was possible for them to come, and much nearer than any of them desired. Patty burst into tears at last, which was the signal for everything in the shape of discord and division to vanish. Her sisters kissed and fondled her, and assured her that they sympathised with her anxiety to be under obligations to nobody from the bottom of their hearts; and Patty owned that she had been captious and unreasonable, and consented to forgive her enemy for what he hadn't done and to be civil to him in future.

And, as the days wore on, even she grew to be thankful for Paul Brion, though, of course, she would never own to it. Their troubles were many and various, and their helpless ignorance more profound and humiliating than they could have believed possible. I will not weary the reader by tracing the details of the process by which they became acquainted with the mode and cost of living "as other people do," and with the ways of the world in general; it would be too long a story. How Patty discovered that the cleverest fingers cannot copy a London bonnet without some previous knowledge of the science of millinery; how she and her sisters, after supplying themselves grudgingly with the mere necessities of a modern outfit, found that the remainder of their "furniture money," to the last pound note, was spent; how, after weary trampings to and fro in search of a habitable house in a wholesome neighbourhood, they learned the ruinous rates of rent and taxes and (after much shopping and many consultations with Mrs. M'Intyre) the alarming prices of furniture and provisions; how they were driven to admit, in spite of Patty, that that landlady on the premises, whom Eleanor had declared was not to be thought of, might be a necessary safeguard against worse evils; and how they were brought to ask each other, in surprise and dismay, "Is it possible that we are poor people after all, and not rich, as we supposed?" – all these things can be better imagined than described. Suffice it to say, they passed through much tribulation and many bitter and humbling experiences during the early months of their sojourn in Melbourne; but when at last they reached a comparatively safe haven, and found themselves once more secure under their own control, able to regulate their needs and their expenditure, and generally to understand the conditions and possibilities of their position, Elizabeth and Eleanor made a solemn declaration that they were indebted for this happy issue to the good offices and faithful friendship of Paul Brion alone, and Patty – though she turned up her nose and said "Pooh!" – though she hated to be indebted to him, or to anybody – agreed with them.

They settled down to their housekeeping by very slow degrees. For some time they stayed with Mrs. M'Intyre, because there really seemed nothing else to do that was at all within their means; and from this base of operations they made all those expeditions of inquiry into city habits and customs, commercial and domestic, which were such conspicuous and ignominious failures. As the sense of their helplessness grew upon them, they grudgingly admitted the young man (who was always at hand, and yet never intruded upon or pestered them) to their counsels, and accepted, without seeming to accept, his advice; and the more they condescended in this way the better they got on. Gradually they

fell into the habit of depending on him, by tacit consent – which was the more easy to do because, as his father had promised, he did not presume upon their confidence in him. He was sharp and brusque, and even inclined to domineer – to be impertinent, as Patty called it – when they did submit their affairs to his judgment; but not the smallest suspicion of an unauthorised motive for his evident devotion to their interests appeared in his face, or voice, or manner, which were those of the man of business, slightly suggesting occasionally the imperious and impartial "nearest male relative." They grew to trust him – for his father's sake, they said, but there was nothing vicarious about it; and that they had the rare fortune to be justified in doing so, under such unlikely circumstances, made up to them for whatever ill luck they might otherwise have seemed to encounter in these days. It was he who finally found them their home, after their many futile searches – half a house in their own street and terrace, vacated by the marriage and departure to another colony of the lady who played the piano that was out of tune. No. 6, it appeared, had been divided into flats; the ground floor was occupied by the proprietor, his wife, and servant; and the upper, which had a gas stove and other kitchen appliances in a back room, was let unfurnished for £60 a year. Paul, always poking about in quest of opportunities, heard of this one and pounced upon it. He made immediate inquiries into the character and antecedents of the landlord of No. 6, the state of the drains and chimneys, and paint and paper, of the house; and, having satisfied himself that it was as nearly being what our girls wanted as anything they would be likely to find, called upon Elizabeth, and advised her to secure it forthwith. The sisters were just then adding up their accounts – taking stock of their affairs generally – and coming to desperate resolutions that something must be done; so the suggested arrangement, which would deliver them from bondage and from many of their worst difficulties, had quite a providential opportuneness about it. They took the rooms at once – four small rooms, including the improvised kitchen – and went into them, in defiance of Mrs. M'Intyre's protestations, before they had so much as a bedstead to sleep upon; and once more they were happy in the consciousness that they had recovered possession of themselves, and could call their souls their own. Slowly, bit by bit, the furniture came in – the barest necessities first, and then odds and ends of comfort and prettiness (not a few of them discovered by Paul Brion in out-of-the-way places, where he "happened" to be), until the new little home grew to look as homelike as the old one. They sent for the bureau and the piano, which went a long way towards furnishing the sitting-room; and they bought a comfortable second-hand table and some capacious, cheap, wickerwork chairs; and they laid a square of matting on the floor, and made some chintz curtains for the window, and turned a deal packing-case into an ottoman, and another into a set of shelves for their books; and over all these little arrangements threw such an air of taste, such a complexion of spotless cleanliness and fastidious neatness, as are only seen in the homes of "nice" women, that it takes nice people to understand the charm of.

One day, when their preparations for regular domestic life were fairly completed, Patty, tired after a long spell of amateur carpentering, sat down to the piano to rest and refresh herself. The piano had been tuned on its arrival in Melbourne; and the man who tuned it had stared at her when she told him that it had been made to her mother's order, and showed him the famous name above the key-board. He would have stared still more had he heard what kind of magic life she could summon into the exquisite mechanism boxed up in that poor-looking deal case. All the sisters were musicians, strange to say; taught by their mother in the noble and simple spirit of the German school, and inheriting from her the sensitive ear and heart to understand the dignity and mystery, if not the message (which nobody understands) of that wonderful language which begins where words leave off. To "play the piano" was no mere conventional drawing-room performance with them, as they themselves were no conventional drawing-room misses; a "piece" of the ordinary pattern would have shocked their sense of art and harmony almost as much as it might have shocked Mozart and Mendelssohn, and Schubert and Schumann, and the other great masters whose pupils they were; while to talk and laugh, either when playing or listening, would have been to them like talking and laughing over their prayers. But, of the three, Patty was the most truly musical, in the serious meaning of

the word, inasmuch as her temperament was warmer than those of her sisters, her imagination more vivid, her senses generally more susceptible to delicate impressions than theirs. The "spirits of the air" had all their supernatural power over her receptive and responsive soul, and she thrilled like an Æolian harp to the west wind under the spell of those emotions that have no name or shape, and for which no imagery supplies a comparison, which belong to the ideal world, into which those magic spirits summon us, and where the sacred hours of our lives – the sweetest, the saddest, the happiest – are spent.

To-day she sat down, suddenly prompted by the feeling that she was fagged and tired, and began to play mechanically a favourite Beethoven sonata; but in five minutes she had played her nerves to rest, and was as steeped in dreams as the great master himself must have been when he conceived the tender passages that only his spiritual ears could hear. Eleanor, who had been sewing industriously, by degrees let her fingers falter and her work fall into her lap; and Elizabeth, who had been arranging the books in the new book-shelves, presently put down her duster to come and stand behind the music-stool, and laid her large, cool hands on Patty's head. None of them spoke for some time, reverencing the Presence in their quiet room; but the touch of her sister's palms upon her hair brought the young musician out of her abstractions to a sense of her immediate surroundings again. She laid her head back on Elizabeth's breast and drew a long sigh, and left off playing. The gesture said, as plainly as words could have said it, that she was relieved and revived – that the spirit of peace and charity had descended upon her.

"Elizabeth," she said presently, still keeping her seat on the music-stool, and stroking her cheek with one of her sister's hands while she held the other round her neck, "I begin to think that Paul Brion has been a very good friend to us. Don't you?"

"I am not beginning," replied Elizabeth. "I have thought it every day since we have known him. And I have wondered often how you could dislike him so much."

"I don't dislike him," said Patty, quite amiably.

"I have taken particular notice," remarked Eleanor from the hearthrug, "and it is exactly three weeks since you spoke to him, and three weeks and five days since you shook hands."

Patty smiled, not changing her position or ceasing to caress her cheek with Elizabeth's hand. "Well," she said, "don't you think it would be a graceful thing to ask him to come and have tea with us some night? We have made our room pretty" – looking round with contentment – "and we have all we want now. We might get our silver things out of the bureau, and make a couple of little dishes, and put some candles about, and buy a bunch of flowers – for once – what do you say, Nelly? He has *never* been here since we came in – never farther than the downstairs passage – and wouldn't it be pleasant to have a little house warming, and show him our things, and give him some music, and – and try to make him enjoy himself? It would be some return for what he has done for us, and his father would be pleased."

That she should make the proposition – she who, from the first, had not only never "got on" with him, but had seemed to regard him with active dislike – surprised both her sisters not a little; but the proposition itself appeared to them, as to her, to have every good reason to recommend it. They thought it a most happy idea, and adopted it with enthusiasm. That very evening they made their plans. They designed the simple decorations for their little room, and the appropriate dishes for their modest feast. And, when these details had been settled, they remembered that on the following night no Parliament would be sitting, which meant that Paul would probably come home early (they knew his times of coming and going, for he was back at his old quarters now, having returned in consequence of the departure of the discordant piano, and to oblige Mrs. M'Intyre, he said); and that decided them to send him his invitation at once. Patty, while her complaisant mood was on her, wrote it herself before she went to bed, and gave it over the garden railing to Mrs. M'Intyre's maid.

In the morning, as they were asking which of them should go to town to fetch certain materials for their little *fête*, they heard the door bang and the gate rattle at No. 7, and a quick step that they

knew. And the slavey of No. 6 came upstairs with Paul Brion's answer, which he had left as he passed on his way to his office. The note was addressed to "Miss King," whose amanuensis Patty had carefully explained herself to be when writing her invitation.

"MY DEAR MISS KING, – You are indeed very kind, but I fear I must deny myself the pleasure you propose – than which, I assure you, I could have none greater. If you will allow me, I will come in some day with Mrs. M'Intyre, who is very anxious to see your new menage. And when I come, I hope you will let me hear that new piano, which is such an amazing contrast to the old one. – Believe me, yours very truly,
"PAUL BRION."

This was Paul Brion's note. When the girls had read it, they stood still and looked at each other in a long, dead silence. Eleanor was the first to speak. Half laughing, but with her delicate face dyed in blushes, she whispered under her breath, "Oh – oh, don't you see what he means?"

"He is quite right – we must thank him," said Elizabeth, gentle as ever, but grave and proud. "We ought not to have wanted it – that is all I am sorry for."

But Patty stood in the middle of the room, white to the lips, and beside herself with passion. "That we should have made such a mistake! – and for *him* to rebuke us!" she cried, as if it were more than she could bear. "That *I* should have been the one to write that letter! Elizabeth, I suppose he is not to blame – "

"No, my dear – quite the contrary."

"But, all the same, I will never forgive him," said poor Patty in the bitterness of her soul.

CHAPTER IX. MRS. AARONS

There was no room for doubt as to what Paul Brion had meant. When the evening of the next day came – on which there was no Parliament sitting – he returned to No. 7 to dinner, and after dinner it was apparent that neither professional nor other engagements would have prevented him from enjoying the society of his fair neighbours if he had had a mind for it. His sitting-room opened upon the balcony – so did theirs; there was but a thin partition between them, and the girls knew not only when he was at home, but to a great extent what he was doing, by the presence and pungency of the odour from his pipe. When only faint whiffs stole into their open window from time to time, he was in his room, engaged – it was supposed – upon those wonderful leading articles which were, to them, the great feature of the paper to whose staff he belonged. At such times – for the houses in Myrtle Street were of a very lath-and-plastery order – they were careful to make no noise, and especially not to open their piano, that he might pursue his arduous labours undisturbed. But sometimes on these "off" nights he sat outside his window or strolled up and down the few feet of space allotted to him; and they would hear the rustle of the leaves of books on the other side of the partition, and the smell of his pipe would be very strong. This indicated that he had come home to rest and relax himself; on which occasions, prompted by some subtle feminine impulse, they would now and then indulge themselves with some of their best music – tacitly agreeing to select the very finest movements from the works of those best-beloved old masters whose majestic chimes rang out the dark evening of the eighteenth century and rang in the new age of art and liberty whose morning light we see – so as not to suggest, except by extreme comparison, the departed lady who played conventional rubbish on the instrument that was out of tune. That Paul Brion did not know Bach and Spohr, even by name and fame (as he did not), never for a moment occurred to them. How were they to know that the science and literature of music, in which they had been so well instructed, were not the usual study of educated people? They heard that he ceased to walk up and down his enclosure when they began to play and sing, and they smelt that his pipe was as near their window as it could get until they left off. That was enough.

To-night, then, he was strolling and sitting about his section of the balcony. They heard him tramping to and fro for a full hour after dinner, in a fidgetty manner; and then they heard him drag a chair through his window, and sit down on it heavily. It occurred to them all that he was doing nothing – except, perhaps, waiting for a chance to see and speak to them. A little intercourse had taken place of late in this way – a very little. One night, when Elizabeth had gone out to remonstrate with Dan for barking at inoffensive dogs that went by in the street below, Paul, who had been leaning meditatively on his balustrade, bent his head a little forward to ask her if she found the smell of his tobacco unpleasant. She assured him that none of them minded it at all, and remarked that the weather was warm. Upon which he replied that the thermometer was so and so, and suggested that she must miss the sea breezes very much. She said they missed them very much indeed, and inquired if he had heard from his father lately, and whether he was well. He was glad to inform her that his father, from whom he had just heard, was in excellent health, and further, that he had made many inquiries after her and her sisters. She thanked Mr. Brion sincerely, and hoped he (Mr. Paul) would give him their kindest regards when he wrote again and tell him they were getting on admirably. Mr. Paul said he would certainly not forget it. And they bade each other a polite good-night. Since then, both Elizabeth and Eleanor had had a word to say to him occasionally, when he and they simultaneously took the air after the day was over, and simultaneously happened to lean over the balustrade. Patty saw no harm in their doing so, but was very careful not to do it herself or to let him suppose that she was conscious

of his near neighbourhood. She played to him sometimes with singular pleasure in her performance, but did not once put herself in the way of seeing or speaking to him.

To-night, not only she, but all of them, made a stern though unspoken vow that they would never – that they *could* never – so much as say good-night to him on the balcony any more. The lesson that he had taught them was sinking deeply into their hearts; they would never forget it again while they lived. They sat at their needlework in the bright gaslight, with the window open and the venetian blind down, and listened to the sound of his footstep and the dragging of his chair, and clearly realised the certainty that it was not because he was too busy that he had refused to spend the evening with them, but because he had felt obliged to show them that they had asked him to do a thing that was improper. Patty's head was bent down over her sewing; her face was flushed, her eyes restless, her quick fingers moving with nervous vehemence. Breaking her needle suddenly, she looked up and exclaimed, "Why are we sitting here so dull and stupid, all silent, like three scolded children? Play something, Nellie. Put away that horrid skirt, and play something bright and stirring – a good rousing march, or something of that sort."

"The Bridal March from 'Lohengrin,'" suggested Elizabeth, softly.

"No," said Patty; "something that will brace us up, and not make us feel small and humble and sat upon." What she meant was "something that will make Paul Brion understand that we don't feel small and humble and sat upon."

Eleanor rose, and laid her long fingers on the keyboard. She was not in the habit of taking things much to heart herself, and she did not quite understand her sister's frame of mind. The spirit of mischief prompted her to choose the saddest thing in the way of a march that she could recall on the spur of the moment – that funeral march of Beethoven's that Patty had always said was capable of reducing her to dust and ashes in her most exuberant moments. She threw the most heartbreaking expression that art allowed into the stately solemnity of her always perfectly balanced execution, partly because she could never render such a theme otherwise than reverently, but chiefly for the playful purpose of working upon Patty's feelings. Poor Patty had "kept up" and maintained a superficial command of herself until now, but this unexpected touch of pathos broke her down completely. She laid her arm on the table, and her pretty head upon her arm, and broke into a brief but passionate fit of weeping, such as she had never indulged in in all her life before. At the sound of the first sob Eleanor jumped up from the music-stool, contrite and frightened – Elizabeth in another moment had her darling in her arms; and both sisters were seized with the fear that Patty was sickening for some illness, caught, probably, in the vitiated atmosphere of city streets, to which she had never been accustomed.

In the stillness of the night, Paul Brion, leaning over the balustrade of the verandah, and whitening his coat against the partition that divided his portion of it from theirs, heard the opening bars of the funeral march, the gradually swelling sound and thrill of its impassioned harmonies, as of a procession tramping towards him along the street, and the sudden lapse into untimely silence. And then he heard, very faintly, a low cry and a few hurried sobs, and it was as if a lash had struck him. He felt sure that it was Patty who had been playing (he thought it must always be Patty who made that beautiful music), and Patty who had fallen a victim to the spirit of melancholy that she had invoked – simply because she always *did* seem to him to represent the action of the little drama of the sisters' lives, and Elizabeth and Eleanor to be the chorus merely; and he had a clear conviction, in the midst of much vague surmise, that he was involved in the causes that had made her unhappy. For a little while he stood still, fixing his eyes upon a neighbouring street lamp and scowling frightfully. He heard the girls' open window go down with a sharp rattle, and presently heard it open again hastily to admit Dan, who had been left outside. Then he himself went back, on tiptoe, to his own apartment, with an expression of more than his usual alert determination on his face.

Entering his room, he looked at his watch, shut his window and bolted it, walked into the adjoining bedchamber, and there, with the gas flaring noisily so as to give him as much light as

possible, made a rapid toilet, exchanging his loose tweeds for evening dress. In less than ten minutes he was down in the hall, with his latch key in his pocket, shaking himself hurriedly into a light overcoat; and in less than half an hour he was standing at the door of a good-sized and rather imposing-looking house in the neighbouring suburb, banging it in his peremptory fashion with a particularly loud knocker.

Within this house its mistress was receiving, and she was a friend of his, as might have been seen by the manner of their greeting when the servant announced him, as also by the expression of certain faces amongst the guests when they heard his name – as they could not well help hearing it. "Mr. —*Paul*— BRION," the footman shouted, with three distinct and well-accentuated shouts, as if his lady were entertaining in the Town Hall. It gave Mrs. Aarons great pleasure when her domestic, who was a late acquisition, exercised his functions in this impressive manner.

She came sailing across the room in a very long-tailed and brilliant gown – a tall, fair, yellow-haired woman, carefully got up in the best style of conventional art (as a lady who had her clothes from Paris regardless of expense was bound to be) – flirting her fan coquettishly, and smiling an unmistakeable welcome. She was not young, but she looked young, and she was not pretty, but she was full of sprightly confidence and self-possession, which answered just as well. Least of all was she clever, as the two or three of her circle, who were, unwillingly recognised; but she was quick-witted and vivacious, accomplished in the art of small talk, and ready to lay down the law upon any subject, and somehow cleverness was assumed by herself and her world in general to be her most remarkable and distinguishing characteristic. And, finally, she had no pretensions to hereditary distinction – very much the contrary, indeed; but her husband was rich (he was standing in a retired corner, a long-nosed man with dark eyes rather close together, amongst a group of her admirers, admiring her as much as any of them), and she had known the social equivalent for money obtainable by good management in a community that must necessarily make a table of precedence for itself; and she had obtained it. She was a woman of fashion in her sphere, and her friends were polite enough to have no recollection of her antecedents, and no knowledge of the family connections whose existence she found it expedient to ignore. It must be said of her that her reputation, subject to the usual attacks of scandal-loving gossips who were jealous of her success, was perfectly untarnished; she was too cold and self-contained to be subject to the dangers that might have beset a less worldly woman in her position (for that Mr. Aarons was anything more than the minister to her ambitions and conveniences nobody for a moment supposed). Nevertheless, to have a little court of male admirers always hanging about her was the chief pleasure, and the attracting and retaining of their admiration the most absorbing pursuit of her life. Paul Brion was the latest, and at present the most interesting, of her victims. He had a good position in the press world, and had recently been talked of "in society" in connection with a particularly striking paper signed "P. B.," which had appeared in the literary columns of his journal. Wherefore, in the character of a clever woman, Mrs. Aarons had sought him out and added him to the attractions of her *salon* and the number of sympathetic friends. And, in spite of his hawk eyes, and his keen discernment generally, our young man had the ordinary man's belief that he stood on a pedestal among his rivals, and thought her the kindest and most discriminating and most charming of women.

At least he had thought so until this moment. Suddenly, as she came across the room to meet him, with her long train rustling over the carpet in a queenly manner, and a gracious welcome in her pale blue eyes, he found himself looking at her critically – comparing her complacent demeanour with the simple dignity of Elizabeth King, and her artificial elegance with the wild-flower grace of Eleanor, who was also tall and fair – and her studied sprightliness with Patty's inspired vigour – and her countenance, that was wont to be so attractive, with Patty's beautiful and intellectual face.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Aarons, shaking hands with him impressively, "you have remembered my existence, then, *at last!* Do you know how many weeks it is since you honoured me with your company? —*five*. And I wonder you can stand there and look me in the face."

He said it had been his misfortune and not his fault – that he had been so immersed in business that he had had no time to indulge in pleasure.

"Don't tell me. You don't have business on Friday evenings," said Mrs. Aarons promptly.

"Oh, don't I?" retorted Mr. Brion (the fact being that he had spent several Friday evenings on his balcony, smoking and listening to his neighbours' music, in the most absolute and voluptuous idleness). "You ladies don't know what a press-man's life is – his nose to the grindstone at all hours of the night and day."

"Poor man! Well, now you are here, come and sit down and tell me what you have been doing."

She took a quick glance round the room, saw that her guests were in a fair way to support the general intercourse by voluntary contributions, set the piano and a thin-voiced young lady and some "Claribel" ditties going, and then retired with Paul to a corner sofa for a chat. She was inclined to make much of him after his long absence, and he was in a mood to be more effusive than his wont. Nevertheless, the young man did not advance, as suspicious observers supposed him to be doing, in the good graces of his charming friend – ready as she was to meet him half-way.

"Of course I wanted very much to see you – it seems an awful time since I was here – but I had another reason for coming to-night," said Paul, when they had comfortably settled themselves (he was the descendant of countless gentlefolk and she had not even a father that she could conveniently call her own, yet was she constrained to blush for his bad manners and his brutal deficiency in delicacy and tact). "I want to ask a favour of you – you are always so kind and good – and I think you will not mind doing it. It is not much – at least to you – but it would be very much to them – "

"To whom?" inquired Mrs. Aarons, with a little chill of disappointment and disapproval already in her voice and face. This was not what she felt she had a right to expect under the present combination of circumstances.

"Three girls – three sisters, who are orphans – in a kind of way, wards of my father's," explained Paul, showing a disposition to stammer for the first time. "Their name is King, and they have come to live in Melbourne, where they don't know anyone – not a single friend. I thought, perhaps, you would just call in and see them some day – it would be so awfully kind of you, if you would. A little notice from a woman like *you* would be just everything to them."

"Are they nice? – that is to say, are they the sort of people whom one would – a – care to be responsible for – you know what I mean? Are they *ladies*?" inquired Mrs. Aarons, who, by virtue of her own extraction, was bound to be select and exclusive in her choice of acquaintances.

"Most certainly," replied Paul, with imprudent warmth. "There can be no manner of doubt about that. *Born* ladies."

"I don't ask what they were born," she said quickly, with a toss of the head. "What are they *now*? Who are their connections? What do they live on?"

Paul Brion gave a succinct and graphic sketch of the superficial history and circumstances of his father's "wards," omitting various details that instinct warned him might be accounted "low" – such, for instance, as the fact that the single maidservant of the house they lived in was nothing more to them than their medium of communication with the front door. He dwelt (like the straightforward blunderer that he was) on their personal refinement and their high culture and accomplishments, how they studied every day at the Public Library, taking their frugal lunch at the pastry-cook's – how they could talk French and German like "natives" – how they played the piano in a way that made all the blood in one's veins tingle – how, in short, they were in all things certain to do honour and credit to whoever would spread the wing of the matron and chaperon over them. It seemed to him a very interesting story, told by himself, and he was quite convinced that it must touch the tender woman's heart beating under that pretty dress beside him.

"You are a mother yourself," he said (as indeed she was – the mother of four disappointing little Aaronses, who were *all* long-nosed and narrow-eyed and dark, each successive infant more the image of its father than the last), "and so you can understand their position – you know how to feel

for them." He thought this an irresistible plea, and was unprepared for the dead silence with which it was received. Glancing up quickly, he saw that she was by no means in the melting mood that he had looked for.

"Of course, if you don't wish it – if it will be troubling you too much – " he began, with his old fierce abruptness, drawing himself together.

"It is not that," said she, looking at her fan. "But now I know why you have stayed away for five weeks."

"Why *I* have stayed away – oh! I understand. But I told you they were living *alone*, did I not? Therefore I have never been into their house – it is quite impossible for me to have the pleasure of their society."

"Then you want me to take them up, so that you can have it here? Is that it?"

The little man was looking so ferocious, and his departure from her side appeared so imminent, that she changed her tone quickly after putting this question. "Never mind," she said, laying her jewelled fingers on his coat sleeve for a moment, "I will not be jealous – at least I will try not to be. I will go and call on them to-morrow, and as soon as they have called on me I will ask them to one of my Fridays. Will that do?"

"I don't wish you for a moment to do what would be at all unpleasant to yourself," he said, still in a hurt, blunt tone, but visibly softening.

"It won't be unpleasant to me," she said sentimentally, "if it will please you."

And Paul went home at midnight, well satisfied with what he had done, believing that a woman so "awfully kind" as Mrs. Aaron would be a shield and buckler to those defenceless girls.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST INVITATION

Mrs. Aarons kept her promise, and called upon the Kings on Saturday. Mrs. M'Intyre saw her get down at the gate of No. 6, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, watched the brougham which had brought her trundling slowly up and down the street for half-an-hour, and then saw her get into it and drive off; which facts, communicated to Paul Brion, gave him the greatest satisfaction.

He did not see his neighbours for several days after. He heard their piano, and their footsteps and voices on the verandah; but, whenever he essayed to go outside his own room for a breath of fresh air, they were sure to retire into theirs immediately, like mice into a hole when the cat has frightened them. At last he came across them in an alley of the Fitzroy Gardens, as he and they were converging upon Myrtle Street from different points. They were all together as usual – the majestic Elizabeth in the middle, with her younger sisters on either side of her; and they were walking home from an organ recital in the Town Hall to their tea, and a cosy evening over a new book, having spent most of the morning at the Public Library, and had their mid-day dinner at Gunsler's. As he caught sight of them, he was struck by the change in their outward appearance that a few weeks of Melbourne experience had brought about, and pleased himself with thinking how much their distinguished aspect must have impressed that discerning woman of the world, who had so kindly condescended to take them up. They were dressed in their new gowns, and bonneted, booted, and gloved, in the neatest manner; a little air of the mode pervaded them now, while the primitive purity of their taste was still unadulterated. They had never looked more charming, more obviously "born ladies" than to-day, as he saw them after so long an interval.

The three black figures stood the shock of the unexpected meeting with admirable fortitude. They came on towards him with no faltering of that free and graceful gait that was so noticeable in a city full of starched and whale-boned women, and, as he lifted his hat, bowed gravely – Elizabeth only giving him a dignified smile, and wishing him a good evening as she went by. He let them pass him, as they seemed to wish to pass him; then he turned sharply and followed them. It was a chance he might not get again for months, perhaps, and he could not afford to let it slip.

"Miss King," he called in his imperative brusque way; and at the sound of his voice Elizabeth looked back and waited for him to join her, while her younger sisters, at a sign from Patty, walked on at a brisk pace, leaving her in command of the situation. "Miss King," said Paul earnestly, "I am so glad to have an opportunity of speaking to you – I have been wanting all the week to see you, that I might thank you for your kindness in asking me to tea."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, whose face was scarlet, "don't mention it, Mr. Brion. We thought of it merely as a – a little attention – a sort of acknowledgment – to your father; that it might please him, perhaps, for you to see that we had settled ourselves, as he could not do so himself."

"It would have pleased *me*, beyond everything in the world, Miss King. Only – only –"

"Yes, I know. We forgot that it was not quite *de rigueur* – or, rather, we had not learned about those things. We have been so out of the world, you see. We were dreadfully ashamed of ourselves," she added candidly, with a little embarrassed laugh, "but you must set it down to our ignorance of the laws of propriety, and not suppose that we consciously disregarded them."

"The laws of propriety!" repeated Paul hotly, his own face red and fierce. "It is Schiller, I think, who says that it is the experience of corruption which originated them. I hate to hear you speak of impropriety, as if you could even conceive the idea of it!"

"Well, we are not in Arcadia now, and we must behave ourselves accordingly," said Elizabeth, who was beginning to feel glad in her gentle heart that she had been able to make this explanation. "I think we are getting corrupted with wonderful rapidity. We have even been *called upon*, quite as

if we were people of fashion and consequence, by a lady who was dressed in the most magnificent manner, and who came in her carriage. Her name was Aarons – Mrs. Aarons. She said she had heard of our being here, and thought she would like to make our acquaintance."

"Did she?" responded Paul warmly, thinking how nice and delicate it was of Mrs. Aarons to respect his anxious wish that his name and interposition should not be mentioned, which was certainly more than he had expected of her. "And were you all at home when she called?"

"As it happened – yes. It was on Saturday afternoon, when we are generally rather busy."

"And have you returned her call yet?"

"No. We don't mean to return it," said Elizabeth composedly; "we did not like her enough to wish to make an acquaintance of her. It is no good to put ourselves out, and waste our own time and theirs, for people whom we are sure not to care about, and who would not care about us, is it?"

"But I think you would like her if you knew her, Miss King," pleaded Paul, much disturbed by this threatened downfall of his schemes. "I am sure – at least, I have always heard, and I can speak a little from personal knowledge – that she is a particularly nice woman; thoroughly kind and amiable, and, at the same time, having a good position in society, and a remarkably pleasant house, where you might meet interesting people whom you *would* like. Oh, don't condemn her at first sight in that way! First impressions are so seldom to be trusted. Go and call, at any rate – indeed, you know, you ought to do that, if only for form's sake."

"For politeness, do you mean? Would it be rude not to return her call?"

"It would be thought so, of course."

"Ah, I was not sure – I will call then. I don't *mind* calling in the least. If she has done us a kindness, it is right to acknowledge it in whatever is the proper way. It was my sisters – especially Patty – who took a dislike to her, and particularly wished not to see her again. Patty thought she asked too many questions, and that she came from some motive of curiosity to pry into our affairs. She was certainly a little impertinent, I thought. But then, perhaps, ladies in 'the world' don't look at these things as we have been accustomed to do," added Elizabeth humbly.

"I don't think they do," said Paul.

By this time they had reached the gate through which Patty and Eleanor had passed before them out of the gardens. As they silently emerged into the road, they saw the pair flitting along the pavement a considerable distance ahead of them, and when they turned the corner into Myrtle Street both the slender black figures had disappeared. Paul wondered to see himself so irritated by this trifling and inevitable circumstance. He felt that it would have done him good to speak to Patty, if it were only to quarrel with her.

Elizabeth bade him good-night when she reached the gate of No. 6, where the hall door stood open – putting her warm, strong hand with motherly benevolence into his.

"Good-night, Miss King. I am so glad to have seen you," he responded, glaring fiercely at the balcony and the blank window overhead. "And – and you will return that call, won't you?"

"O yes – of course. We will walk there on Monday, as we come home from the Library. We are able to find our way about in Melbourne very well now, with the help of the map you were so kind as to give us when we first came. I can't tell you how useful that has been."

So, with mutual friendship and goodwill, they parted – Elizabeth to join her sisters upstairs, where one was already setting the tea-kettle to boil on the gas stove, and the other spreading a snow-white cloth on the sitting-room table – Paul Brion to get half-an-hour's work and a hasty dinner before repairing to the reporters' gallery of "the House."

He did not see them again for a long time, and the first news he heard of them was from Mrs. Aarons, whom he chanced to meet when she was shopping one fine morning in Collins Street.

"You see, I remembered my promise," she said, when matters of more personal moment had been disposed of; "I went to see those extraordinary *protégées* of yours."

"Extraordinary – how extraordinary?" he inquired stiffly.

"Well, I put it to you —*are* they not extraordinary?"

He was silent for a few seconds, and the points of his moustache went up a little. "Perhaps so – now you mention it," he said. "Perhaps they *are* unlike the – the usual girl of the period with whom we are familiar. But I hope you were favourably impressed with your visit. Were you?"

"No, I wasn't. I will be frank with you – I wasn't. I never expected to find people living in that manner – and dressing in that manner. It is not what I am used to."

"But they are very lady-like – if I am any judge – and that is the chief thing. Very pretty too. Don't you think so?"

"O *dear* no! The middle one has rather nice eyes perhaps – though she gives herself great airs, I think, considering her position. And the youngest is not bad looking. *Miss King* is *plain*, decidedly. However, I told you I would do something for them, and I have kept my word. They are coming to my next Friday. And I do *hope*," proceeded Mrs. Aarons, with an anxious face, "that they will dress themselves respectably for the reputation of my house. Do you know anyone who could speak to them about it? Could you give them a hint, do you think?"

"*I!* – good gracious! I should like to see myself at it," said Paul, grimly. "But I don't think," he added, with a fatuity really pitiable in a man of his years and experience, "that there is any danger of their not looking nice. They must have had their old frocks on when you saw them."

CHAPTER XI. DISAPPOINTMENT

How they should dress themselves for Mrs. Aaron's Friday was a question as full of interest for our girls as if they had been brought up in the lap of wealth and fashion. They were not so ignorant of the habits and customs of "the world" as not to know that evening dress was required of them on this occasion, and they had not seen so many shop windows and showrooms without learning something of its general features as applied to their sex and to the period. Great were the discussions that went on over the momentous subject. Even their studies at the Public Library lost their interest and importance, it is to be feared, for a day or two, while they were anxiously hesitating, first, whether they should accept the invitation, and, secondly, in what costume they should make their first appearance in polite society. The former of these questions was settled without much trouble. Elizabeth's yearning for "friends," the chance of discovering whom might be missed by missing this unusual opportunity; Patty's thirst for knowledge and experience in all available fields, and Eleanor's habit of peaceably falling in with her sisters' views, overcame the repugnance that all of them entertained to the idea of being patronised by, or beholden for attentions that they could not reciprocate to, Mrs. Aaron, against whom they had conceived a prejudice on the first day of contact with her which a further acquaintance had not tended to lessen. But the latter question was, as I have said, a matter of much debate. Could they afford themselves new frocks? – say, black grenadines that would do for the summer afterwards. This suggestion was inquired into at several shops and of several dressmakers, and then relinquished, but not without a struggle. "We are just recovering ourselves," said Elizabeth, with her note-book before her and her pencil in her hand; "and if we go on as we are doing now we shall be able to save enough to take us to Europe next year without meddling with our house-money. But if we break our rules – well, it will throw us back. And it will be a bad precedent, Patty."

"Then we won't break them," said Patty valiantly. "We will go in our black frocks. Perhaps," she added, with some hesitation, "we can find something amongst our mother's things to trim us up a little."

"She would like to see us making ourselves look pretty with her things," said Eleanor.

"Yes, Nelly. That is what I think. Come along and let us look at that bundle of lace that we put in the bottom drawer of the bureau. Elizabeth, does lace so fine as that *go* with woollen frocks, do you think? We must not have any incongruities if we can help it."

Elizabeth thought that plain white ruffles would, perhaps, be best, as there was so much danger of incongruities if they trusted to their untrained invention. Whereupon Patty pointed out that they would have to buy ruffles, while the lace would cost nothing, which consideration, added to their secret wish for a little special decoration, now that the occasion for it had arisen – the love of adornment being, though refined and chastened, an ingredient of their nature as of every other woman's – carried the day in favour of "mother's things."

"And I think," said Patty, with dignity, when at last Friday came and they had spread the selected finery on their little beds, "I think that ladies ought to know how to dress themselves better than shop-people can tell them. When they want to make themselves smart, they should think, first, what they can afford and what will be suitable to their position and the occasion, and then they should think what would look pretty in a picture. And they should put on *that*."

Patty, I think, was well aware that she would look pretty in a picture, when she had arrayed herself for the evening. Round the neck of her black frock she had loosely knotted a length of fine, yellow-white Brussels lace, the value of which, enhanced by several darns that were almost as invisibly woven as the texture itself, neither she nor her sisters had any idea of. Of course it did not "go" with the black frock, even though the latter was not what mourning was expected to be, but its delicacy

was wonderfully thrown up by its contrast with that background, and it was a most becoming setting for the wearer's brilliant face. Patty had more of the priceless flounce sewn on her black sleeves (the little Vandal had cut it into lengths on purpose), half of it tucked in at the wrists out of sight; and the ends that hung over her breast were loosely fastened down with a quaint old silver brooch, in which a few little bits of topaz sparkled. Elizabeth was not quite so magnificent. She wore a fichu of black lace over her shoulders – old Spanish, that happened just then to be the desire and despair of women of fashion, who could not get it for love or money; it was big enough to be called a shawl, and in putting it on Patty had to fold and tack it here and there with her needle, to keep it well up in its proper place. This was fastened down at the waist with a shawl-pin shaped like a gold arrow, that her grandmother had used to pin her Paisley over her chest; and, as the eldest daughter, Elizabeth wore her mother's slender watch-chain wound round and round her neck, and, depending from it, an ancient locket of old red gold, containing on its outward face a miniature of that beautiful mother as a girl, with a beading of little pearls all round it. Eleanor was dressed up in frills of soft, thick Valenciennes, taken from the bodice of one of the brocaded gowns; which lace, not being too fragile to handle, Elizabeth, ignorant as yet of the artistic excellence of the genuine coffee-colour of age, had contrived to wash to a respectable whiteness. And to Eleanor was given, from the little stock of family trinkets, a string of pearls, fastened with an emerald clasp – pearls the size of small peas, and dingy and yellow from never having been laid out on the grass, as, according to a high authority, pearls should be. Upon the whole, their finery, turned into money, would probably have bought up three of the most magnificent costumes worn in Melbourne that night; yet it can scarcely be said to have been effective. Neither Mrs. Aarons nor her lady friends had the requisite experience to detect its quality and understand what we may call its moral value. Only one person amongst the company discovered that Eleanor's pearls were real, and perhaps only that one had been educated in lace, save rudimentally, in the Melbourne shops. And amongst the *nouveaux riches*, as poor gentlefolks well know, to have no claims to distinction but such as are out of date is practically to have none.

Late in the evening, Paul Brion, who had not intended to go to this particular Friday, lest his presence should betray to the sisters what he was so anxious to conceal from them, found that he could not resist the temptation to see with his own eyes how they were getting on; and when he had entered the room, which was unusually crowded, and had prowled about for a few minutes amongst the unpleasantly tall men who obstructed his view in all directions, he was surprised and enraged to see the three girls sitting side by side in a corner, looking neglected and lonely, and to see insolent women in long-tailed satin gowns sweeping past them as if they had not been there. One glance was enough to satisfy *him* that there had been no fear of their not looking "nice." Patty's bright and flushed but (just now) severe little face, rising so proudly from the soft lace about her throat and bosom, seemed to him to stand out clear in a surrounding mist, apart and distinct from all the faces in the room – or in the world, for that matter. Elizabeth's dignified serenity in an uncomfortable position was the perfection of good breeding, and made a telling contrast to the effusive manners of those about her; and fair Eleanor, sitting so modestly at Elizabeth's side, with her hands, in a pair of white silk mittens, folded in her lap, was as charming to look at as heart of man could desire. Other men seemed to be of his opinion, for he saw several hovering around them and looking at them with undisguised interest; but the ladies, who, he thought, ought to have felt privileged to take them up, appeared to regard them coldly, or to turn their backs upon them altogether, literally as well as metaphorically. It was plain that Mrs. Aarons had introduced them to nobody, probably wishing (as was indeed the case – people of her class being morbidly sensitive to the disgrace of unfashionable connections) not to own to them more than she could help.

He withdrew from their neighbourhood before they saw him, and went to seek his hostess, swelling with remonstrant wrath. He found her on a sofa at the other end of the room, talking volubly (she was always voluble, but now she was breathless in her volubility) to a lady who had never before honoured her Fridays, and who, by doing so to-night, had gratified an ambition that had long been

paramount amongst the many ambitions which, enclosed in a narrow circle as they were, served to make the interest and occupation of Mrs. Aarons's life. She looked up at Paul as he approached her, and gave him a quick nod and smile, as if to say, "I see you, but you must be perfectly aware that I am unable to attend to you just now." Paul understood her, and, not having the honour of Mrs. Duff-Scott's acquaintance himself, fell back a little behind the sofa and waited for his opportunity. As he waited, he could not help overhearing the conversation of the two ladies, and deriving a little cynical amusement therefrom.

"And, as soon as I heard of it, I *begged* my husband to go and see if it was *really* a genuine example of Derby-Chelsea; and, you see, it *was*," said Mrs. Aarons, with subdued enthusiasm – almost with tears of emotion.

"It was, indeed," assented Mrs. Duff-Scott earnestly. "There was the true mark – the capital D, with the anchor in the middle of it. It is extremely rare, and I had no hope of ever possessing a specimen."

"I *knew* you would like to have it. I said to Ben. '*Do* go and snatch it up at once for Mrs. Duff-Scott's collection.' And he was so pleased to find he was in time. We were so afraid someone might have been before us. But the fact is, people are so ignorant that they have no idea of the value of things of that sort – fortunately."

"I don't call it fortunate at all," the other lady retorted, a little brusquely. "I don't like to see people ignorant – I am quite ready to share and share." Then she added, with a smile, "I am sure I can never be sufficiently obliged to Mr. Aarons for taking so much trouble on my account. I must get him into a corner presently, and find out how much I am in his debt – though, of course, no money can represent the true worth of such a treasure, and I shall always feel that I have robbed him."

"Oh, pray, pray don't talk of *payment*," the hostess implored, with a gesture of her heavily-ringed hands. "You will hurt him *dreadfully* if you think of such a thing. He feels himself richly paid, I assure you, by having a chance to do you a little service. And such a mere *trifle* as it is!"

"No, indeed, it is not a trifle, Mrs. Aarons – very far from it. The thing is much too valuable for me to – to" – Mrs. Duff-Scott hesitated, and her face was rather red – "to deprive you of it in that way. I don't feel that I can take it as a present – a bit of *real* Derby-Chelsea that you might never find a specimen of again – really I don't."

"Oh, *please*" – and Mrs. Aarons's voice was at once reproachful and persuasive – "*please!* I know you wouldn't wish to hurt us."

A little more discussion ensued, which Paul watched with an amused smile; and Mrs. Duff-Scott gave in.

"Well, if you insist – but you are really too good. It makes me quite uncomfortable to take such a treasure from you. However, perhaps, some day I may be able to contribute to *your* collection."

Like her famous model, Mrs. Ponsonby de Tompkins, Mrs. Aarons stalked her big game with all kinds of stratagems, and china was the lure with which she had caught Mrs. Duff-Scott. This was a lady who possessed not only that most essential and valuable qualification of a lady, riches, but had also a history that was an open page to all men. It had not much heraldic emblazonment about it, but it showed a fair and honourable record of domestic and public circumstances that no self-respecting woman could fail to take social credit for. By virtue of these advantages, and of a somewhat imperious, though generous and unselfish, nature, she certainly did exercise that right to be "proud" which, in such a case, the most democratic of communities will cheerfully concede. She had been quite inaccessible to Mrs. Aarons, whom she was wont to designate a "person," long after that accomplished woman had carried the out-works of the social citadel in which she dwelt, and no doubt she would have been inaccessible to the last. Only she had a weakness – she had a hobby (to change the metaphor a little) that ran away with her, as hobbies will, even in the case of the most circumspect of women; and that hobby, exposed to the seductions of a kindred hobby, broke down and trampled upon the barriers of caste. It was the Derby-Chelsea specimen that had brought Mrs.

Duff-Scott to occupy a sofa in Mrs. Aarons's drawing-room – to their mutual surprise, when they happened to think of it.

She rose from that sofa now, slightly perturbed, saying she must go and find Mr. Aarons and acknowledge the obligation under which he had placed her, while all the time she was cudgelling her brains to think by what means and how soon she could discharge it – regretting very keenly for the moment that she had put herself in the way of people who did not understand the fine manners which would have made such a dilemma impossible. Her hostess jumped up immediately, and the two ladies passed slowly down the room in the direction of the corner where our neglected girls were sitting. Paul followed at a respectful distance, and was gratified to see Mrs. Duff-Scott stop at the piano, in place of hunting for her host (who was never a conspicuous feature of these entertainments), and shake hands cordially with a tall German in spectacles who had just risen from the music-stool. He had come to Mrs. Aarons's Friday in a professional capacity, but he was a sufficiently great artist for a great lady to make an equal of him.

"Ah, my dear Herr Wüllner," she said, in a very distinct voice, "I was listening, and I thought I could not be mistaken in your touch. Heller's *Wanderstunden*, wasn't it?" And they plunged head first into musical talk such as musical people (who never care in the least how much unmusical people may be bored by it) love to indulge in whenever an occasion offers, while Mrs. Aarons stood by, smiling vaguely, and not understanding a word of it. Paul Brion listened to them for a few minutes, and a bright idea came into his head.

CHAPTER XII. TRIUMPH

Our girls still sat in their corner, but a change had come over them within the last few minutes. A stout man sitting near them was talking to Elizabeth across Eleanor's lap – Eleanor lying back in her seat, and smiling amiably as she listened to them; and Miss King was looking animated and interested, and showed some signs of enjoying herself at last. Patty also had lost her air of angry dignity, and was leaning a little forward, with her hands clasped on her knees, gazing at Herr Wüllner's venerable face with rapt enthusiasm. Paul, regarding her for a moment, felt himself possessed of sufficient courage to declare his presence, and, waiting until he could catch her eye, bowed pleasantly. She looked across at him with no recognition at first, then gave a little start, bent her head stiffly, and resumed her attentive perusal of Herr Wüllner's person. "Ah," thought Paul, "the old fellow has woke her up. And she wants him to play again." Mrs. Duff-Scott had dropped into a chair by the piano, and sat there contentedly, talking to the delighted musician, who had been as a fish out of water since he came into the room, and was now swimming at large in his native element again. She was a distinguished looking matron of fifty or thereabouts, with a handsome, vivacious, intelligent face and an imposing presence generally; and she had an active and well-cultivated mind which concerned itself with many other things than china. Having no necessity to work, no children on whom to expend her exuberant energies, and being incapable of finding the ordinary woman's satisfaction in the ordinary routine of society pleasures, she made ardent pursuits for herself in several special directions. Music was one. Herr Wüllner thought she was the most enlightened being in female shape that he had ever known, because she "understood" music – what was really music and what was not (according to his well-trained theories). She had, in the first place, the wonderful good sense to know that she could not play herself, and she held the opinion that people in general had no business to set themselves up to play, but only those who had been "called" by Divine permission and then properly instructed in the science of their art. "We won't look at bad pictures, nor read trashy books," she would say. "Why should our artistic sense be depraved and demoralised through our ears any more than through our eyes? Mothers should know better, my dear Herr Wüllner, and keep the incapables in the background. All girls should learn, if they *like* learning – in which case it does them good, and delights the domestic circle; but if at sixteen they can't play – what *we* call play – after having had every chance given them, they should leave off, so as to use the time better, or confine their performances to a family audience." And Mrs. Duff-Scott had the courage of her convictions, and crushed unrelentingly those presumptuous amateurs (together with their infatuated mammas) who thought they could play when they couldn't, and who regarded music as a mere frivolous drawing-room amusement for the encouragement of company conversation. Herr Wüllner delighted in her. The two sat talking by the piano, temporarily indifferent to what was going on around them, turning over a roll of music sheets that had had a great deal of wear and tear, apparently. Mrs. Aarons sat beside them, fanning herself and smiling, casting about her for more entertaining converse. And Paul Brion stood near his hostess, listening and watching for his opportunity. Presently it came.

Mrs. Duff-Scott lifted up a sheet of crabbed manuscript as yellowed by time as Patty's Brussels lace, and said: "This is not quite the thing for a mixed audience, is it?"

"Ah, no, you are right; it is the study of Haydn that a friend of mine asked of me yesterday, and that I propose to read to him to-night," said Herr Wüllner, in that precise English and with that delicate pronunciation with which the cultivated foreigner so often puts us to shame. "It is, you perceive, an arrangement for one violin and a piano only – done by a very distinguished person for a lady who was for a short time my pupil, when I was a young man. You have heard it with the four-stringed instruments at your house; that was bad – bad! Ach! that second violin squeaked like the squeaking

of a pig, and it was always in the wrong place. But in good hands it is sublime. This" – and he sighed as he added more sheets to the one she held and was steadily perusing – "this is but a crippled thing, perhaps; the piano, which should have none of it, has it all – and no one can properly translate that piano part – not one in ten thousand. But it is well done. Yes, it is very well done. And I have long been wanting my friend to try it with me."

"And what about the young lady for whom it was written? – which part did she take?"

"The piano – the piano. But then she had a wonderful execution and sympathy – it was truly wonderful for a lady, and she so young. Women play much better now, as a rule, but I never hear one who is an amateur play as she did. And so quick – so quick! It was an inspiration with her. Yes, this was written on purpose for that lady – I have had it ever since – it has never been published. The manuscript is in her own hand. She wrote out much of her music in her own hand. It was many, many years ago, and I was a young man then. We were fellow-pupils before I became her master, and she was my pupil only for a few weeks. It was a farce – a farce. She did not play the violin, but in everything else she was better than I. Ah, she was a great genius, that young lady. She was a great loss to the world of art."

"Did she die, Herr Wüllner?"

"She eloped," he said softly, "she ran away with a scapegrace. And the ship she sailed in was lost at sea."

"Dear me! How very sad. Well, you must make your friend try it over, and, if you manage it all right, bring him with you to my house on Monday evening and let me hear it."

"That shall give me great pleasure," said the old man, bowing low.

"You have your violin with you, I suppose?" she asked.

"It is in the hall, under my cloak. I do not bring it into this room," he replied.

"Why not?" she persisted. "Go and fetch it, Herr Wüllner, and let Mrs. Aarons hear you play it" – suddenly bethinking herself of her hostess and smiling upon that lady – "if she has never had that treat before."

Mrs. Aarons was eager to hear the violin, and Herr Wüllner went himself, though reluctantly, to fetch his treasure from the old case that he had hidden away below. When he had tuned up his strings a little, and had tucked the instrument lovingly under his chin, he looked at Mrs. Duff-Scott and said softly, "What?"

"Oh," cried Mrs. Aarons, striking in, "play that – you know – what you were talking of just now – what Mrs. Duff-Scott wanted so much to hear. *I* want to hear it too."

"Impossible – impossible," he said quickly, almost with a shudder. "It has a piano part, and there is no one here to take that."

Then Paul Brion broke in, conscious that he was running heavy risks of all sorts, but resolved to seize his chance.

"I think there *is* someone who could play it," he said to Mrs. Aarons, speaking with elaborate distinctness. "The Miss Kings – one of them, at any rate –"

"Nonsense," interrupted Mrs. Aarons, sharply, but under her breath. "Not at all likely." She was annoyed by the suggestion, and wished to treat it as if unheard (it was unreasonable, on the face of it, of course); but Mrs. Duff-Scott caught at it in her direct way. "Who are they? Which are the Miss Kings?" she asked of Paul, putting up her eye-glass to see what manner of man had taken upon himself to interfere.

"My dear lady," sighed Herr Wüllner, dropping his bow dejectedly, "it is out of the question, absolutely. It is not normal music at its best – and I have it only in manuscript. It is impossible that any lady can attempt it."

"She will not attempt it if she cannot do it, Herr Wüllner," said Paul. "But you might ask her."

Mrs. Duff-Scott had followed the direction of his eyes, and her attention was violently arrested by the figures of the three girls sitting together, who were so remarkably unlike the majority of Mrs.

Aarons's guests. She took note of all their superficial peculiarities in a moment, and the conviction that the lace and the pearls were real flashed across her like an inspiration. "Is it the young lady with the bright eyes?" she inquired. "What a charming face! Yes, Herr Wüllner, we *will* ask her. Introduce her to me, Mrs. Aarons, will you?"

She rose as she spoke and sailed towards Patty, Mrs. Aarons following; and Paul Brion held his breath while he waited to see how his reckless enterprise would turn out. In a few minutes Patty came towards the piano, with her head up and her face flushed, looking a little defiant, but as self-possessed as the great lady who convoyed her across the room. The events of the evening had roused her spirit, and strung up her nerves like Herr Wüllner's fiddle-strings, and she, too, was in a daring and audacious mood.

"This is it," said the old musician, looking at her critically as he gave a sheet of manuscript into her hand. It was a wonderful chance, of course, but Patty had seen the facsimile of that manuscript many times before, and had played from it. It is true she had never played with the violin accompaniment – had never so much as seen a violin until she came to Melbourne; but her mother had contrived to make her understand how the more delicate and sensitive instrument ought to be deferred to in the execution of the piano part, and what the whole should sound like, by singing the missing air in her flexible trilling voice; and just now she was in that peculiar mood of exaltation that she felt inspired to dare anything and assured that she should succeed. "You will not be able to read it?" Herr Wüllner suggested persuasively, drawing hope from her momentary silence.

"Oh, yes," she said, looking up bravely: "I think so. You will stop me, please, if I do not play it right." And she seated herself at the piano with a quiet air of knowing what she was doing that confounded the two ladies who were watching her and deeply interested Mrs. Duff-Scott. Paul Brion's heart was beating high with anticipated triumph. Herr Wüllner's heart, on the contrary, sank with a mild despair.

"Well, we will have a few bars," he sighed. "And pray, my dear young lady, don't bang the piano – I mean don't play over me. And try to keep time. But you will never do it – with the best intentions, my dear, you will never be able to read it from such a manuscript as that."

Patty looked up at him with a sort of radiant calmness, and said gently, "Go on. You see you have an opening movement to yourself."

Bewildered, the old man dropped his bow upon the strings, and set forth on his hopeless task. And at exactly the right moment the piano glided in, so lightly, so tenderly, and yet with such admirable precision and delicate clearness, that it justified, for once, its trespass upon ground that belonged to more aerial instruments. It was just what Paul Brion had counted on – though Paul Brion had not the least idea what a wild chance had brought about the fulfilment of his expectations. Patty was able to display her chief accomplishment to the very best advantage, and the sisters were thereby promoted to honour. The cold shade of neglect and obscurity was to chill them no more from this happy moment. It was a much greater triumph than Patty herself had any idea of, or than anybody had had the least reason to expect. *She* knew that piles of music, all in this self-same handwriting (she had never seen any other and supposed that all manuscript music was alike), were stowed away in the old bureau at home, and in the ottoman which she had constructed out of a packing-case, and that long familiarity had made it as easy to her to read as print; but Herr Wüllner was not in a position to make the faintest guess at such a circumstance. When Elizabeth moved her seat nearer to the piano, as if to support her sister, though he was close enough to see it, he did not recognise in the miniature round her neck the face of that young lady of genius who eloped with a scapegrace, and was supposed to have been drowned at sea with her husband. And yet it was that lady's face. Such wonderful coincidences are continually happening in our small world. It was not more wonderful than that Herr Wüllner, Mrs. Duff-Scott, Paul Brion, and Patty King should have been gathered together round one piano, and that piano Mrs. Aarons's.

The guests were laughing and talking and flirting, as they were wont to do under cover of the music that generally prevailed at these Friday receptions, when an angry "Hush!" from the violinist, repeated by Mrs. Duff-Scott, made a little circle of silence round the performers. And in this silence Patty carried through her responsible undertaking with perfect accuracy and the finest taste – save for a shadowy mistake or two, which, glancing over them as if they were mere phantoms of mistakes, and recovering herself instantly, only served to show more clearly the finished quality of her execution, and the thoroughness of her musical experience. She was conscious herself of being in her very best form.

"Ah!" said Herr Wüllner, drawing a long breath as he uttered the exclamation, and softly laying down his violin, "I was mistaken. My dear young lady, allow me to beg your pardon, and to thank you." And he bowed before Patty until his nose nearly touched his knees.

Mrs. Duff-Scott, who was a woman of impulses, as most nice women are, was enthusiastic. Not only had she listened to Patty's performance with all her intelligent ears, but she had at the same time investigated and appraised the various details of her personal appearance, and been particularly interested in that bit of lace about her neck.

"My dear," she said, putting out her hand as the girl rose from the music-stool, "come here and sit by me and tell me where you learned to play like that."

Patty went over to her readily, won by the kind voice and motherly gesture. And, in a very few minutes, Paul had the pleasure of seeing the great lady sitting on a sofa with all three sisters around her, talking to them, and they to her, as if they had known one another for years.

Leaving them thus safe and cared for, he bade good-night to his hostess, and went home to his work, in a mood of high contentment.

CHAPTER XIII. PATTY IN UNDRESS

When Paul Brion bade Mrs. Aarons good-night, he perceived that she was a little cold to him, and rather wondered at himself that he did not feel inclined either to resent or to grieve over that unprecedented circumstance.

"I am going to steal away," he said in an airy whisper, coming across her in the middle of the room as he made his way to the door. "I have a good couple of hours' work to get through to-night."

He was accustomed to speak to her in this familiar and confidential fashion, though she was but a recent acquaintance, and she had always responded in a highly gratifying way. But now she looked at him listlessly, with no change of face, and merely said, "Indeed."

"Yes," he repeated; "I have a lot to do before I can go to bed. It is delightful to be here; but I must not indulge myself any longer. Good-night."

"Good-night," she said, still unsmiling, as she gave him her hand. "I am sorry you must go so soon." But she did not look as if she were sorry; she looked as if she didn't care a straw whether he went or stayed. However, he pressed her hand with the wonted friendly pressure, and slipped out of the room, unabashed by her assumed indifference and real change of manner, which he was at no great trouble to interpret; and he took a cab to his office – now a humming hive of busy bees improving the shining hours of the gaslit night – and walked back from the city through the shadowy gardens to his lodgings, singing a tuneless air to himself, which, if devoid of music, was a pleasant expression of his frame of mind.

When he reached Myrtle Street the town clocks were striking twelve. He looked up at his neighbours' windows as he passed the gate of No. 6, and saw no light, and supposed they had returned from their revels and gone peaceably to bed. He opened his own door softly, as if afraid of waking them, and went upstairs to his sitting-room, where Mrs. M'Intyre, who loved to make him comfortable, had left him a bit of supper, and a speck of gas about the size of a pea in the burner at the head of his arm-chair; and he pulled off his dress coat, and kicked away his boots, and got his slippers and his dressing-gown, and his tobacco and his pipe, and took measures generally for making himself at home. But before he had quite settled himself the idea occurred to him that his neighbours might *not* have returned from Mrs. Aarons's, but might, indeed (for he knew their frugal and unconventional habits), be even then out in the streets, alone and unprotected, walking home by night as they walked home by day, unconscious of the perils and dangers that beset them. He had not presumed to offer his escort – he had not even spoken to them during the evening, lest he should seem to take those liberties that Miss Patty resented so much; but now he angrily reproached himself for not having stayed at Mrs. Aarons's until their departure, so that he could, at least, have followed and watched over them. He put down his pipe hastily, and, opening the window, stepped out on the balcony. It was a dark night, and a cold wind was blowing, and the quarter-hour after midnight was chiming from the tower of the Post Office. He was about to go in for his boots and his overcoat, when he was relieved to hear a cab approaching at a smart pace, and to see it draw up at the gate of No. 6. Standing still in the shadow of the partition that divided his enclosure from theirs, he watched the girls descend upon the footpath, one by one, fitfully illuminated from the interior of the vehicle. First Eleanor, then Elizabeth, then Patty – who entered the gate and tapped softly at her street door. He expected to see the driver dismissed, with probably double the fare to which he was entitled; but to his surprise, the cab lingered, and Elizabeth stood at the step and began to talk to someone inside. "Thank you so much for your kindness," she said, in her gentle but clear tones, which were perfectly audible on the balcony. A voice from the cab answered, "Don't mention it, my dear. I am very glad to see as much of you as possible, for I want to know you. May I come and have a little gossip to-morrow afternoon?"

It was the voice of Mrs. Duff-Scott, who, after keeping them late at Mrs. Aarons's, talking to them, had frustrated their intention of making their own way home. That powerful woman had "taken them up," literally and figuratively, and she was not one to drop them again – as fine ladies commonly drop interesting impecunious *protégées* when the novelty of their acquaintance has worn off – save for causes in their own conduct and circumstances that were never likely to arise. Paul Brion, thoroughly realising that his little schemes had been crowned with the most gratifying success, stole back to his rooms, shut the window softly, and sat down to his pipe and his manuscripts. And he wrote such a maliciously bitter article that, when he took it to the office, his editor refused to print it without modifications, on the ground that it would land the paper in an action for libel.

Meanwhile our girls parted from their new friend with affectionate good-nights, and were let into their house by the landlady, who had herself been entertaining company to a late hour. They went upstairs with light feet, too excited to feel tired, and all assembled in Elizabeth's meagrely-appointed bedchamber to take off their finery and to have a little happy gossip before they went to rest. Elizabeth herself, who was not a gushing person, had the most to say at first, pouring out her ingenuous heart in grateful reminiscences of the unparalleled kindness of Mrs. Duff-Scott. "What a dear, dear woman!" she murmured, with soft rapture, as she unwound the watch-chain and locket from her neck and disembarrassed herself of her voluminous fichu. "You can *see* that what she does and says is real and truthful – I am certain you can trust her. I do not trust Mrs. Aarons – I do not understand her ways. She wanted us to go and see her, and when we went she was unkind to us; at least, she was not polite. I was very sorry we had gone to her house – until Mrs. Duff-Scott came to our sofa to speak to us. But now I feel so glad! For it has given us *her*. And she is just the kind of friend I have so often pictured to myself – so often longed to know."

"I think it was Patty's playing that gave us Mrs. Duff-Scott," said Eleanor, who was sitting by the dressing table with her frock unbuttoned. "She is fond of music, and really there was no one who could play at all except Herr Wüllner – which was a very strange thing, don't you think? And the singing was worse – such sickly, silly sort of songs, with such eccentric accompaniments. I could not understand it, unless the fashion has changed since mother was a girl. I suppose it has. But when Patty and Herr Wüllner got together it was like another atmosphere in the room. How did you come to play so well, Patty? – to be so collected and quiet when there was so much to frighten you? I was so nervous that my hands shook, and I had to squeeze them to keep myself still."

"I was nervous, too, at first," said Patty, who, divested of her dress and laces, was lying all along on Elizabeth's bed, with her pretty bare arms flung up over the pillows, and her hands clasped one over the other at the back of her head. "When we got there, that impudent maid in the room where we took our things off upset me; she looked at our old hats and water-proofs as if she had never seen such things before – and they *did* seem very shabby amongst all the pretty cloaks and hoods that the other ladies were taking off. And then it was so ignominious to have to find our way to the drawing-room by following other people, and to have our names bawled out as if to call everybody's attention to us, and then not to *have* attentions. When we trailed about the room, so lost and lonely, with all those fine people watching us and staring at us, my knees were shaking under me, and I felt hot and cold – I don't know how I felt. The only comfort I had was seeing how calm Elizabeth was. She seemed to stand up for us all, and to carry us through it. *I* felt – I hate to think I could be such an idiot – so nervous and so unhinged, and so miserable altogether, that I should have liked to go away somewhere and have a good cry. But," added Patty, suddenly sitting up in the bed, and removing her hands from the back of her head to her knees, "but after a little while it got *too* horrid. And then I got angry, and that made me feel much better. And by-and-bye, when they began to play and sing, and I saw how ridiculous they made themselves, I brightened up, and was not nervous any more – for I saw that they were rather ignorant people, in spite of their airs and their fine clothes. When the girl in that beautiful creamy satin dress sang her whining little song about parting and dying half a note flat, while she dashed her hands up and down the keyboard, and they all hung round her when

she had done and said how charming it was, I felt that *really*— " Patty paused, and stared into the obscurity of the room with brilliant, humorous, disdainful eyes, which expressed her sentiments with a distinctness that made further words unnecessary.

"But, you see, if people don't *know* that you are superior to them — " suggested Eleanor, folding up Elizabeth's best gloves, and wrapping them in tissue paper, with a reflective air.

"Who would care about their knowing?" interposed Elizabeth. "We should not be very much superior to anyone if we could indulge in a poor ambition to seem so. That is not one of Patty's feelings, I think."

"But it is, then," Patty confessed, with honest promptness. "I found it out to-night, Elizabeth. When I saw those conceited people sweeping about in their splendid trains and looking as if all Melbourne belonged to them — when I heard that girl singing that preposterous twaddle, and herself and all her friends thinking she was a perfect genius — I felt that I would give anything, *anything*, just to rise up and be very grand and magnificent for a little while and crush them all into vulgarity and insignificance."

"Patty!" murmured Elizabeth.

"Yes, my dear, it shocks you, I know. But you wouldn't have me disguise the truth from you, would you? I wanted to pay them out. I saw they were turning up their noses at us, and I longed — I *raged*— to be in a position to turn up my nose at them, if only for five minutes. I thought to myself, oh, if the door should suddenly open and that big footman shout out, 'His Grace the Duke of So and So;' and they should all be ready to drop on their knees before such a grand person — as you know they would be, Elizabeth; they would *grovel*, simply — and he should look with a sort of gracious, ducal haughtiness over their heads and say to Mrs. Aarons, 'I am told that I shall find here the daughters of my brother, who disappeared from home when he was young, along with his wife, the Princess So and So.' You know, Elizabeth, our father, who never would talk about his family to anybody, *might* have been a duke or an earl in disguise, for anything we know, and our mother was the very image of what a princess *ought* to be — "

"We should have been found out before this, if we had been such illustrious persons," said Elizabeth, calmly.

"Yes, of course — of course. But one needn't be so practical. You are free to think what you like, however improbable it may be. And that is what I thought of. Then I thought, suppose a telegram should be brought in, saying that some enormously wealthy squatter, with several millions of money and no children, had left us all his fortune — "

"I should think that kind of news would come by post," suggested Eleanor.

"It might and it mightn't, Nelly. The old squatter might have been that queer old man who comes to the Library sometimes, and seems to take such interest in seeing us reading so hard. He might have thought that girls who were so studious would have serious views of life and the value of money. Or he might have overheard us castle-building about Europe, and determined to help us to realise our dreams. Or he might have fallen in love with Elizabeth — at a distance, you know, and in a humble, old-fashioned, hopeless way."

"But that doesn't account for the telegram, Patty."

"And have felt himself dying, perhaps," continued Patty, quite solemnly, with her bright eyes fixed on her invisible drama, "and have thought he would like to see us — to speak to Elizabeth — to give some directions and last wishes to us — before he went. No," she added, checking herself with a laugh and shaking herself up, "I don't think it was that. I think the lawyer came himself to tell us. The lawyer had opened the will, and he was a friend of Mrs. Aarons's, and he came to tell her of the wonderful thing that had happened. 'Everyone has been wondering whom he would leave his money to,' he says to her, 'but no one ever expected this. He has left it to three poor girls whom no one has ever heard of, and whom he never spoke to in his life. I am now going to find them out, for they are living somewhere in Melbourne. Their name is King, and they are sisters, without father or mother, or

friends or fortune – mere nobodies, in fact. But now they will be the richest women in Australia.' And Mrs. Aarons suddenly remembers us, away there in the corner of the room, and it flashes across her that *we* are the great heiresses. And she tells the other ladies, and they all flock round us, and – and – "

"And you find yourself in the position to turn up your nose at them," laughed Eleanor. "No one would have guessed your thoughts, Patty, seeing you sitting on that sofa, looking so severe and dignified."

"But I had other thoughts," said Patty, quickly. "These were just passing ideas, of course. What really *did* take hold of me was an intense desire to be asked to play, so that I might show them how much better we could play than they could. Especially after I heard Herr Wüllner. I knew he, at least, would appreciate the difference – and I thought Mrs. Duff-Scott looked like a person who would, also. And perhaps – perhaps – Paul Brion."

"Oh, Patty!" exclaimed Elizabeth, smiling, but reproachful. "Did you really want to go to the piano for the sake of showing off your skill – to mortify those poor women who had not been taught as well as you had?"

"Yes," said Patty, hardily. "I really did. When Mrs. Duff-Scott came and asked me to join Herr Wüllner in that duet, I felt that, failing the duke and the lawyer, it was just the opportunity that I had been looking and longing for. And it was because I felt that I was going to do so much better than they could that I was in such good spirits, and got on – as I flatter myself I did – so splendidly."

"Well, I don't believe you," said Elizabeth. "You could never have rendered that beautiful music as you did simply from pure vindictiveness. It is not in you."

"No," said Patty, throwing herself back on the bed and flinging up her arms again, "no – when I come to think of it – I was not vindictive all the time. At first I was *savage*– O yes, there is no doubt about it. Then Herr Wüllner's fears and frights were so charming that I got amused a little; I felt jocose and mischievous. Then I felt Mrs. Duff-Scott looking at me —*studying* me – and that made me serious again, and also quieted me down and steadied me. Then I was a little afraid that I *might* blunder over the music – it was a long time since I had played that thing, and the manuscript was pale and smudged – and so I had to brace myself up and forget about the outside people. And as soon as Herr Wüllner reached me, and I began safely and found that we were making it, oh, so sweet! between us – then I lost sight of lots of things. I mean I began to see and think of lots of other things. I remembered playing it with mother – it was like the echo of her voice, that violin! – and the sun shining through a bit of the red curtain into our sitting-room at home, and flickering on the wall over the piano, where it used to stand; and the sound of the sea under the cliffs —*whish-sh-sh-sh*– in the still afternoon – " Patty broke off abruptly, with a little laugh that was half a sob, and flung herself from the bed with vehemence. "But it won't do to go on chattering like this – we shall have daylight here directly," she said, gathering up her frock and shoes.

CHAPTER XIV. IN THE WOMB OF FATE

Mrs. Duff-Scott came for her gossip on Saturday afternoon, and it was a long one, and deeply interesting to all concerned. The girls took her to their trustful hearts, and told her their past history and present circumstances in such a way that she understood them even better than they did themselves. They introduced her to their entire suite of rooms, including the infinitesimal kitchen and its gas stove; they unlocked the drawers and cupboards of the old bureau to show her their own and their mother's sketches, and the family miniatures, and even the jewels they had worn the night before, about which she was frankly curious, and which she examined with the same discriminating intelligence that she brought to bear upon old china. They chattered to her, they played to her, they set the kettle on the gas-stove and made tea for her, with a familiar and yet modest friendliness that was a pleasant contrast to the attitude in which feminine attentions were too often offered to her. In return, she put off that armour of self-defence in which she usually performed her social duties, fearing no danger to pride or principle from an unreserved intercourse with such unsophisticated and yet singularly well-bred young women; and she revelled in unguarded and unlimited gossip as freely as if they had been her own sisters or her grown-up children. She gave them a great deal of very plain, but very wholesome, advice as to the necessity that lay upon them to walk circumspectly in the new life they had entered upon; and they accepted it in a spirit of meek gratitude that would have astonished Paul Brion beyond measure. All sorts of delicate difficulties were touched upon in connection with the non-existent chaperon and the omnipotent and omnipresent Mrs. Grundy, and not only touched upon, but frankly discussed, between the kindly woman of the world who wished to serve them and the proud but modest girls who were but too anxious to learn of one who they felt was authorised to teach them. In short, they sat together for more than two hours, and learned in that one interview to know and trust each other better than some of us will do after living for two years under the same roof. When at last the lady called her coachman, who had been mooning up and down Myrtle Street, half asleep upon his box, to the gate of No. 6, she had made a compact with herself to "look after" the three sweet and pretty sisters who had so oddly fallen in her way with systematic vigilance; and they were unconsciously of one mind, that to be looked after by Mrs. Duff-Scott was the most delightful experience, by far, that Melbourne had yet given them.

On the following Monday they went to her house, and spent a ravishing evening in a beautiful, cosy, stately, deeply-coloured, softly-lighted room, that was full of wonderful and historical bric-à-brac such as they had never seen before, listening to Herr Wüllner and three brother artists playing violins and a violoncello in a way that brought tears to their eyes and unspeakable emotions into their responsive hearts. Never had they had such a time as this. There was no Mr. Duff-Scott – he was away from home just now, looking after property in Queensland; and no Mrs. Aarons – she was not privileged to join any but large and comprehensive parties in this select "set." There were no conceited women to stare at and to snub them, and no girls to sing sickly ballads, half a note flat. Only two or three unpretentious music-loving ladies, who smiled on them and were kind to them, and two or three quiet men who paid them charmingly delicate attentions; nothing that was unpleasant or unharmonious – nothing to jar with the exquisite music of a well-trained quartette, which was like a new revelation to them of the possibilities of art and life. They went home that night in a cab, escorted by one of the quiet men, whose provincial rank was such that the landlady curtsied like an English rustic, when she opened the door to him, and paid her young lodgers marked attentions for days afterwards in honour of their acquaintance with such a distinguished individual. And Paul Brion, who was carefully informed by Mrs. M'Intyre of their rise and progress in the world that was not his world, said how glad he was that they had been recognised and appreciated for what they were, and

went on writing smart literary and political and social criticisms for his paper, that were continually proving too smart for prudent journalism.

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