BAUM LYMAN FRANK

AUNT JANE'S NIECES

Lyman Baum
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Aunt Jane's Nieces:

Содержание

L. Frank Baum
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CHAPTER I.
BETH RECEIVES AN INVITATION

Professor De Graf was sorting the mail at the breakfast table.

"Here's a letter for you, Beth," said he, and tossed it across the cloth to where his daughter sat.

The girl raised her eyebrows, expressing surprise. It was something unusual for her to receive a letter. She picked up the square envelope between a finger and thumb and carefully read the inscription, "Miss Elizabeth De Graf, Cloverton, Ohio." Turning the envelope she found on the reverse flap a curious armorial emblem, with the word "Elmhurst."

Then she glanced at her father, her eyes big and somewhat startled in expression. The Professor was deeply engrossed in a letter from Benjamin Lowenstein which declared that a certain note must be paid at maturity. His weak, watery blue eyes stared rather blankly from behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. His flat nostrils extended and compressed like those of a frightened horse; and the indecisive mouth was tremulous. At the best the Professor was not an imposing personage. He wore a dressing-

gown of soiled quilted silk and linen not too immaculate; but his little sandy moustache and the goatee that decorated his receding chin were both carefully waxed into sharp points – an indication that he possessed at least one vanity. Three days in the week he taught vocal and instrumental music to the ambitious young ladies of Cloverton. The other three days he rode to Pelham's Grove, ten miles away, and taught music to all who wished to acquire that desirable accomplishment. But the towns were small and the fees not large, so that Professor De Graf had much difficulty in securing an income sufficient for the needs of his family.

The stout, sour-visaged lady who was half-hidden by her newspaper at the other end of the table was also a bread-winner, for she taught embroidery to the women of her acquaintance and made various articles of fancy-work that were sold at Biggar's Emporium, the largest store in Cloverton. So, between them, the Professor and Mrs. DeGraf managed to defray ordinary expenses and keep Elizabeth at school; but there were one or two dreadful "notes" that were constantly hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles, threatening to ruin them at any moment their creditors proved obdurate.

Finding her father and mother both occupied, the girl ventured to open her letter. It was written in a sharp, angular, feminine hand and read as follows:

"My Dear Niece: It will please me to have you spend the months of July and August as my guest at Elmhurst. I am in

miserable health, and wish to become better acquainted with you before I die. A check for necessary expenses is enclosed and I shall expect you to arrive promptly on the first of July.

"Your Aunt,
"JANE MERRICK."

A low exclamation from Elizabeth caused her father to look in her direction. He saw the bank check lying beside her plate and the sight lent an eager thrill to his voice.

"What is it, Beth?"

"A letter from Aunt Jane."

Mrs. De Graf gave a jump and crushed the newspaper into her lap.

"What!" she screamed.

"Aunt Jane has invited me to spend two months at Elmhurst" said Elizabeth, and passed the letter to her mother, who grabbed it excitedly.

"How big is the check, Beth?" enquired the Professor, in a low tone.

"A hundred dollars. She says it's for my expenses.

"Huh! Of course you won't go near that dreadful old cat, so we can use the money to better advantage."

"Adolph!"

The harsh, cutting voice was that of his wife, and the Professor shrank back in his chair.

"Your sister Jane is a mean, selfish, despicable old female," he muttered. "You've said so a thousand times yourself, Julia."

"My sister Jane is a very wealthy woman, and she's a Merrick," returned the lady, severely. "How dare you – a common De Graf – asperse her character?"

"The De Grafs are a very good family," he retorted.

"Show me one who is wealthy! Show me one who is famous!"

"I can't," said the Professor. "But they're decent, and they're generous, which is more than can be said for your tribe."

"Elizabeth must go to Elmhurst," said Mrs. De Graf, ignoring her husband's taunt.

"She shan't. Your sister refused to loan me fifty dollars last year, when I was in great trouble. She hasn't given you a single cent since I married you. No daughter of mine shall go In Elmhurst to be bullied and insulted by Jane Merrick."

"Adolph, try to conceal the fact that you're a fool," said his wife. "Jane is in a desperate state of health, and can't live very long at the best. I believe she's decided to leave her money to Elizabeth, or she never would have invited the child to visit her. Do you want to fly in the face of Providence, you doddering old imbecile?"

"No," said the Professor, accepting the doubtful appellation without a blush. "How much do you suppose Jane is worth?"

"A half million, at the very least. When she was a girl she inherited from Thomas Bradley, the man she was engaged to marry, and who was suddenly killed in a railway accident, more than a quarter of a million dollars, besides that beautiful estate of Elmhurst. I don't believe Jane has even spent a quarter of

her income, and the fortune must have increased enormously. Elizabeth will be one of the wealthiest heiresses in the country!"

"If she gets the money, which I doubt," returned the Professor, gloomily.

"Why should you doubt it, after this letter?"

"You had another sister and a brother, and they both had children," said he.

"They each left a girl. I admit. But Jane has never favored them any more than she has me. And this invitation, coming; when Jane is practically on her death bed, is a warrant that Beth will get the money."

"I hope she will," sighed the music teacher. "We all need it bad enough, I'm sure."

During this conversation Elizabeth, who might be supposed the one most interested in her Aunt's invitation, sat silently at her place, eating her breakfast with her accustomed calmness of demeanor and scarcely glancing at her parents.

She had pleasant and quite regular features, for a girl of fifteen, with dark hair and eyes – the "Merrick eyes," her mother proudly declared – and a complexion denoting perfect health and colored with the rosy tints of youth. Her figure was a bit slim and unformed, and her shoulders stooped a little more than was desirable; but in Cloverton Elizabeth had the reputation of being "a pretty girl," and a sullen and unresponsive one as well.

Presently she rose from her seat, glanced at the clock, and then went into the hall to get her hat and school-books. The prospect

of being an heiress some day had no present bearing on the fact that it was time to start for school.

Her father came to the door with the check in his hand.

"Just sign your name on the back of this, Beth," said he, "and I'll get it cashed for you."

The girl shook her head.

"No, father," she answered. "If I decide to go to Aunt Jane's I must buy some clothes; and if you get the money I'll never see a cent of it."

"When will you decide?" he asked.

"There's no hurry. I'll take time to think it over," she replied. "I hate Aunt Jane, of course; so if I go to her I must be a hypocrite, and pretend to like her, or she never will leave me her property.

"Well, Beth?"

"Perhaps it will be worth while; but if I go into that woman's house

I'll be acting a living lie."

"But think of the money!" said her mother.

"I do think of it. That's why I didn't tell you at once to send the check back to Aunt Jane. I'm going to think of everything before I decide. But if I go – if I allow this money to make me a hypocrite – I won't stop at trifles, I assure you. It's in my nature to be dreadfully wicked and cruel and selfish, and perhaps the money isn't worth the risk I run of becoming depraved."

"Elizabeth!"

"Good-bye; I'm late now," she continued, in the same quiet

tone, and walked slowly down the walk.

The Professor twisted his moustache and looked into his wife's eyes with a half frightened glance.

"Beth's a mighty queer girl," he muttered.

"She's very like her Aunt Jane," returned Mrs. De Graf, thoughtfully gazing after her daughter. "But she's defiant and wilful enough for all the Merricks put together. I do hope she'll decide to go to Elmhurst."

CHAPTER II.
MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

In the cosy chamber of an apartment located in a fashionable quarter of New York Louise Merrick reclined upon a couch, dressed in a dainty morning gown and propped and supported by a dozen embroidered cushions.

Upon a taboret beside her stood a box of bonbons, the contents of which she occasionally nibbled as she turned the pages of her novel.

The girl had a pleasant and attractive face, although its listless expression was singular in one so young. It led you to suspect that the short seventeen years of her life had robbed her of all the anticipation and eagerness that is accustomed to pulse in strong young blood, and filled her with experiences that compelled her to accept existence in a half bored and wholly matter-of-fact way.

The room was tastefully though somewhat elaborately furnished; yet everything in it seemed as fresh and new as if it had just come from the shop – which was not far from the truth. The apartment itself was new, with highly polished floors and woodwork, and decorations undimmed by time. Even the girl's robe, which she wore so gracefully, was new, and the books upon the center-table were of the latest editions.

The portiere was thrust aside and an elderly lady entered

the room, seating herself quietly at the window, and, after a single glance at the form upon the couch, beginning to embroider patiently upon some work she took from a silken bag. She moved so noiselessly that the girl did not hear her and for several minutes absolute silence pervaded the room.

Then, however, Louise in turning a leaf glanced up and saw the head bent over the embroidery. She laid down her book and drew an open letter from between the cushions beside her, which she languidly tossed into the other's lap.

"Who is this woman, mamma?" she asked.

Mrs. Merrick glanced at the letter and then read it carefully through, before replying.

"Jane Merrick is your father's sister," she said, at last, as she thoughtfully folded the letter and placed it upon the table.

"Why have I never heard of her before?" enquired the girl, with a slight accession of interest in her tones.

"That I cannot well explain. I had supposed you knew of your poor father's sister Jane, although you were so young when he died that it is possible he never mentioned her name in your presence."

"They were not on friendly terms, you know. Jane was rich, having inherited a fortune and a handsome country place from a young man whom she was engaged to marry, but who died on the eve of his wedding day."

"How romantic!" exclaimed Louise.

"It does seem romantic, related in this way," replied her

mother. "But with the inheritance all romance disappeared from your aunt's life. She became a crabbed, disagreeable woman, old before her time and friendless because she suspected everyone of trying to rob her of her money. Your poor father applied to her in vain for assistance, and I believe her refusal positively shortened his life. When he died, after struggling bravely to succeed in his business, he left nothing but his life-insurance."

"Thank heaven he left that!" sighed Louise.

"Yes; we would have been beggared, indeed, without it," agreed Mrs. Merrick. "Yet I often wonder, Louise, how we managed to live upon the interest of that money for so many years."

"We didn't live – we existed," corrected the girl, yawning. "We scrimped and pinched, and denied ourselves everything but bare necessities. And had it not been for your brilliant idea, mater dear, we would still be struggling in the depths of poverty."

Mrs. Merrick frowned, and leaned back in her chair.

"I sometimes doubt if the idea was so brilliant, after all," she returned, with a certain grimness of expression. "We're plunging, Louise; and it may be into a bottomless pit."

"Don't worry, dear," said the girl, biting into a bonbon. "We are only on the verge of our great adventure, and there's no reason to be discouraged yet, I assure you. Brilliant! Of course the idea was brilliant, mamma. The income of that insurance money was insignificant, but the capital is a very respectable sum. I am just seventeen years of age – although I feel that I ought to be thirty,

at the least – and in three years I shall be twenty, and a married woman. You decided to divide our capital into three equal parts, and spend a third of it each year, this plan enabling us to live in good style and to acquire a certain social standing that will allow me to select a wealthy husband. It's a very brilliant idea, my dear! Three years is a long time. I'll find my Croesus long before that, never fear."

"You ought to," returned the mother, thoughtfully. "But if you fail, we shall be entirely ruined."

"A strong incentive to succeed." said Louise, smiling. "An ordinary girl might not win out; but I've had my taste of poverty, and I don't like it. No one will suspect us of being adventurers, for as long as we live in this luxurious fashion we shall pay our bills promptly and be proper and respectable in every way. The only chance we run lies in the danger that eligible young men may prove shy, and refuse to take our bait; but are we not diplomats, mother dear? We won't despise a millionaire, but will be content with a man who can support us in good style, or even in comfort, and in return for his money I'll be a very good wife to him. That seems sensible and wise, I'm sure, and not at all difficult of accomplishment."

Mrs. Merrick stared silently out of the window, and for a few moments seemed lost in thought.

"I think, Louise," she said at last, "you will do well to cultivate your rich aunt, and so have two strings to your bow."

"You mean that I should accept her queer invitation to visit

her?"

"Yes."

"She has sent me a check for a hundred dollars. Isn't it funny?"

"Jane was always a whimsical woman. Perhaps she thinks we are quite destitute, and fears you would not be able to present a respectable appearance at Elmhurst without this assistance. But it is an evidence of her good intentions. Finding death near at hand she is obliged to select an heir, and so invites you to visit her that she may study your character and determine whether you are worthy to inherit her fortune."

The girl laughed, lightly.

"It will be easy to cajole the old lady," she said. "In two days I can so win her heart that she will regret she has neglected me so long."

"Exactly."

"If I get her money we will change our plans, and abandon the adventure we were forced to undertake. But if, for any reason, that plan goes awry, we can fall back upon this prettily conceived scheme which we have undertaken. As you say, it is well to have two strings to one's bow; and during July and August everyone will be out of town, and so we shall lose no valuable time."

Mrs. Merrick did not reply. She stitched away in a methodical manner, as if abstracted, and Louise crossed her delicate hands behind her head and gazed at her mother reflectively. Presently she said:

"Tell me more of my father's family. Is this rich aunt of mine

the only relative he had?"

"No, indeed. There were two other sisters and a brother – a very uninteresting lot, with the exception, of your poor father. The eldest was John Merrick, a common tinsmith, if I remember rightly, who went into the far west many years ago and probably died there, for he was never heard from. Then came Jane, who in her young days had some slight claim to beauty. Anyway, she won the heart of Thomas Bradley, the wealthy young man I referred to, and she must have been clever to have induced him to leave her his money. Your father was a year or so younger than Jane, and after him came Julia, a coarse and disagreeable creature who married a music-teacher and settled in some out-of-the-way country town. Once, while your father was alive, she visited us for a few days, with her baby daughter, and nearly drove us all crazy. Perhaps she did not find us very hospitable, for we were too poor to entertain lavishly. Anyway, she went away suddenly after you had a fight with her child and nearly pulled its hair out by the roots, and I have never heard of her since."

"A daughter, eh," said Louise, musingly. "Then this rich Aunt Jane has another niece besides myself."

"Perhaps two," returned Mrs. Merrick; "for her youngest sister, who was named Violet, married a vagabond Irishman and had a daughter about a year younger than you. The mother died, but whether the child survived her or not I have never learned."

"What was her name?" asked Louise.

"I cannot remember. But it is unimportant. You are the only

Merrick of them all, and that is doubtless the reason Jane has sent for you."

The girl shook her blonde head.

"I don't like it," she observed.

"Don't like what?"

"All this string of relations. It complicates matters."

Mrs. Merrick seemed annoyed.

"If you fear your own persuasive powers," she said, with almost a sneer in her tones, "you'd better not go to Elmhurst. One or the other of your country cousins might supplant you in your dear aunt's affections."

The girl yawned and took up her neglected novel.

"Nevertheless, mater dear," she said briefly, "I shall go."

CHAPTER III.
PATSY

"Now, Major, stand up straight and behave yourself! How do you expect me to sponge your vest when you're wriggling around in that way?"

"Patsy, dear, you're so sweet this evening, I just had to kiss your lips."

"Don't do it again, sir," replied Patricia, severely, as she scrubbed the big man's waistcoat with a damp cloth. "And tell me, Major, how you ever happened to get into such a disgraceful condition."

"The soup just shpilled," said the Major, meekly.

Patricia laughed merrily. She was a tiny thing, appearing to be no more than twelve years old, although in reality she was sixteen. Her hair was a decided red – not a beautiful "auburn," but really red – and her round face was badly freckled. Her nose was too small and her mouth too wide to be beautiful, but the girl's wonderful blue eyes fully redeemed these faults and led the observer to forget all else but their fascinations. They could really dance, these eyes, and send out magnetic, scintillating sparks of joy and laughter that were potent to draw a smile from the sourest visage they smiled upon. Patricia was a favorite with all who knew her, but the big, white-moustached Major Doyle, her

father, positively worshipped her, and let the girl rule him as her fancy dictated.

"Now, sir, you're fairly decent again," she said, after a few vigorous scrubs. "So put on your hat and we'll go out to dinner."

They occupied two small rooms at the top of a respectable but middle-class tenement building, and had to descend innumerable flights of bare wooden stairs before they emerged upon a narrow street thronged with people of all sorts and descriptions except those who were too far removed from the atmosphere of Duggan street to know that it existed.

The big major walked stiffly and pompously along, swinging his silver-trimmed cane in one hand while Patricia clung to his other arm. The child wore a plain grey cloak, for the evening was chill. She had a knack of making her own clothes, all of simple material and fashion, but fitting neatly and giving her an air of quiet refinement that made more than one passer-by turn to look back at her curiously.

After threading their way for several blocks they turned in at the open door of an unobtrusive restaurant where many of the round white tables were occupied by busy and silent patrons.

The proprietor nodded to the major and gave Patricia a smile. There was no need to seat them, for they found the little table in the corner where they were accustomed to eat, and sat down.

"Did you get paid tonight?" asked the girl.

"To be sure, my Patsy."

"Then hand over the coin," she commanded.

The major obeyed. She counted it carefully and placed it in her pocketbook, afterwards passing a half-dollar back to her father.

"Remember, Major, no riotous living! Make that go as far as you can, and take care not to invite anyone to drink with you."

"Yes, Patsy."

"And now I'll order the dinner."

The waiter was bowing and smiling beside her. Everyone smiled at

Patsy, it seemed.

They gave the usual order, and then, after a moment's hesitation, she added:

"And a bottle of claret for the Major."

Her father fairly gasped with amazement.

"Patsy!"

People at the near-by tables looked up as her gay laugh rang out, and beamed upon her in sympathy.

"I'm not crazy a bit. Major," said she, patting the hand he had stretched toward her, partly in delight and partly in protest. "I've just had a raise, that's all, and we'll celebrate the occasion."

Her father tucked the napkin under his chin then looked at her questioningly.

"Tell me, Patsy."

"Madam Borne sent me to a swell house on Madison Avenue this morning, because all her women were engaged. I dressed the lady's hair in my best style, Major, and she said it was much more becoming than Juliette ever made it. Indeed, she wrote a note

to Madam, asking her to send me, hereafter, instead of Juliette, and Madam patted my head and said I would be a credit to her, and my wages would be ten dollars a week, from now on. Ten dollars. Major! As much as you earn yourself at that miserable bookkeeping!"

"Sufferin' Moses!" ejaculated the astonished major, staring back into her twinkling eyes, "if this kapes on, we'll be millionaires, Patsy."

"We're millionaires, now." responded Patsy, promptly, "because we've health, and love, and contentment – and enough money to keep us from worrying. Do you know what I've decided, Major, dear? You shall go to make that visit to your colonel that you've so long wanted to have. The vacation will do you good, and you can get away all during July, because you haven't rested for five years. I went to see Mr. Conover this noon, and he said he'd give you the month willingly, and keep the position for you when you returned."

"What! You spoke to old Conover about me?"

"This noon. It's all arranged, daddy, and you'll just have a glorious time with the old colonel. Bless his dear heart, he'll be overjoyed to have you with him, at last."

The major pulled out his handkerchief, blew his nose vigorously, and then surreptitiously wiped his eyes.

"Ah, Patsy, Patsy; it's an angel you are, and nothing less at all, at all."

"Rubbish, Major. Try your claret, and see if it's right. And eat

your fish before it gets cold. I'll not treat you again, sir, unless you try to look happy. Why, you seem as glum as old Conover himself!"

The major was positively beaming.

"Would it look bad for me to kiss you, Patsy?"

"Now?"

"Now and right here in this very room!"

"Of course it would. Try and behave, like the gentleman you are, and pay attention to your dinner!"

It was a glorious meal. The cost was twenty-five cents a plate, but the gods never feasted more grandly in Olympus than these two simple, loving souls in that grimy Duggan street restaurant.

Over his coffee the major gave a sudden start and looked guiltily into

Patricia's eyes.

"Now, then," she said, quickly catching the expression, "out with it."

"It's a letter," said the major. "It came yesterday, or mayhap the day before. I don't just remember."

"A letter! And who from?" she cried, surprised.

"An ould vixen."

"And who may that be?"

"Your mother's sister Jane. I can tell by the emblem on the flap of the envelope," said he, drawing a crumpled paper from his breast pocket.

"Oh, *that* person," said Patsy, with scorn. "Whatever induced

her to write to *me?*" "You might read it and find out," suggested the major.

Patricia tore open the envelope and scanned the letter. Her eyes blazed.

"What is it, Mavoureen?"

"An insult!" she answered, crushing the paper in her hand and then stuffing it into the pocket of her dress. "Light your pipe, daddy, dear. Here – I'll strike the match."

CHAPTER IV.
LOUISE MAKES A DISCOVERY

"How did you enjoy the reception, Louise?"

"Very well, mamma. But I made the discovery that my escort. Harry Wyndham, is only a poor cousin of the rich Wyndham family, and will never have a penny he doesn't earn himself."

"I knew that," said Mrs. Merrick. "But Harry has the entree into some very exclusive social circles. I hope you treated him nicely, Louise. He can be of use to us."

"Oh, yes, I think I interested him; but he's a very stupid boy. By the way, mamma, I had an adventure last evening, which I have had no time to tell you of before."

"Yes?"

"It has given me quite a shock. You noticed the maid you ordered to come from Madam Borne to dress my hair for the reception?"

"I merely saw her. Was she unsatisfactory?"

"She was very clever. I never looked prettier, I am sure. The maid is a little, demure thing, very young for such a position, and positively homely and common in appearance. But I hardly noticed her until she dropped a letter from her clothing. It fell just beside me, and I saw that it was addressed to no less a personage than my rich aunt, Miss Jane Merrick, at Elmhurst. Curious to

know why a hair-dresser should be in correspondence with Aunt Jane, I managed to conceal the letter under my skirts until the maid was gone. Then I put it away until after the reception. It was sealed and stamped, all ready for the post, but I moistened the flap and easily opened it. Guess what I read?"

"I've no idea," replied Mrs. Merrick.

"Here it is," continued Louise, producing a letter and carefully unfolding it. "Listen to this, if you please: 'Aunt Jane.' She doesn't even say 'dear' or 'respected,' you observe."

'Your letter to me, asking me to visit you, is almost an insult after your years of silence and neglect and your refusals to assist my poor mother when she was in need. Thank God we can do without your friendship and assistance now, for my honored father, Major Gregory Doyle, is very prosperous and earns all we need. I return your check with my compliments. If you are really ill, I am sorry for you, and would go to nurse you were you not able to hire twenty nurses, each of whom would have fully as much love and far more respect for you than could ever

'Your indignant niece,

'Patricia Doyle.'

"What do you think of that, mamma?'"

"It's very strange, Louise. This hair-dresser is your own cousin."

"So it seems. And she must be poor, or she wouldn't go out as a sort of lady's maid. I remember scolding her severely for pulling my hair at one time, and she was as meek as Moses, and

never answered a word."

"She has a temper though, as this letter proves," said Mrs. Merrick; "and I admire her for the stand she has taken."

"So do I," rejoined Louise with a laugh, "for it removes a rival from my path. You will notice that Aunt Jane has sent her a check for the same amount she sent me. Here it is, folded in the letter. Probably my other cousin, the De Graf girl, is likewise invited to Elmhurst? Aunt Jane wanted us all, to see what we were like, and perhaps to choose between us."

"Quite likely," said Mrs. Merrick, uneasily watching her daughter's face.

"That being the case," continued Louise, "I intend to enter the competition. With this child Patricia out of the way, it will be a simple duel with my unknown De Graf cousin for my aunt's favor, and the excitement will be agreeable even if I am worsted."

"There's no danger of that," said her mother, calmly. "And the stakes are high, Louise. I've learned that your Aunt Jane is rated as worth a half million dollars."

"They shall be mine," said the daughter, with assurance. "Unless, indeed, the De Graf girl is most wonderfully clever. What is her name?"

"Elizabeth, if I remember rightly. But I am not sure she is yet alive, my dear. I haven't heard of the De Grafs for a dozen years.'"

"Anyway I shall accept my Aunt Jane's invitation, and make the acceptance as sweet as Patricia Doyle's refusal is sour. Aunt Jane will be simply furious when she gets the little hair-dresser's

note."

"Will you send it on?"

"Why not? It's only a question of resealing the envelope and mailing it. And it will be sure to settle Miss Doyle's chances of sharing the inheritance, for good and all."

"And the check?"

"Oh, I shall leave the check inside the envelope. It wouldn't be at all safe to cash it, you know."

"But if you took it out Jane would think the girl had kept tit money, after all, and would be even more incensed against her."

"No," said Louise, after a moment's thought, "I'll not do a single act of dishonesty that could ever by any chance be traced to my door. To be cunning, to be diplomatic, to play the game of life with the best cards we can draw, is every woman's privilege. But if I can't win honestly, mater dear, I'll quit the game, for even money can't compensate a girl for the loss of her self-respect."

Mrs. Merrick cast a fleeting glance at her daughter and smiled.

Perhaps the heroics of Louise did not greatly impress her.

CHAPTER V.
AUNT JANE

"Lift me up, Phibbs – no, not that way! Confound your awkwardness – do you want to break my back? There! That's better. Now the pillow at my head. Oh – h. What are you blinking at, you old owl?"

"Are you better this morning, Miss Jane?" asked the attendant, with grave deference.

"No; I'm worse."

"You look brighter, Miss Jane."

"Don't be stupid, Martha Phibbs. I know how I am, better than any doctor, and I tell you I'm on my last legs."

"Anything unusual, Miss?"

"Of course. I can't be on my last legs regularly, can I?"

"I hope not, Miss."

"What do you mean by that? Are you trying to insult me, now that I'm weak and helpless? Answer me, you gibbering idiot!"

"I'm sure you'll feel better soon, Miss. Can't I wheel you into the garden? It's a beautiful day, and quite sunny and warm already."

"Be quick about it, then; and don't tire me out with your eternal doddering. When a thing has to be done, do it. That's my motto."

"Yes, Miss Jane."

Slowly and with care the old attendant wheeled her mistress's invalid chair through the doorway of the room, along a stately passage, and out upon a broad piazza at the back of the mansion. Here were extensive and carefully tended gardens, and the balmy morning air was redolent with the odor of flowers.

Jane Merrick sniffed the fragrance with evident enjoyment, and her sharp grey eyes sparkled as she allowed them to roam over the gorgeous expanse of colors spread out before her.

"I'll go down, I guess, Phibbs. This may be my last day on earth, and I'll spend an hour with my flowers before I bid them good-bye forever."

Phibbs pulled a bell-cord, and a soft faraway jingle was heard. Then an old man came slowly around the corner of the house. His bare head was quite bald. He wore a short canvas apron and carried pruning-shears in one hand. Without a word of greeting to his mistress or scarce a glance at her half recumbent form, he mounted the steps of the piazza and assisted Phibbs to lift the chair to the ground.

"How are the roses coming on, James?"

"Poorly, Miss," he answered, and turning his back returned to his work around the corner. If he was surly, Miss Jane seemed not to mind it. Her glance even softened a moment as she followed his retreating form.

But now she was revelling amongst the flowers, which she seemed to love passionately. Phibbs wheeled her slowly along

the narrow paths between the beds, and she stopped frequently to fondle a blossom or pull away a dead leaf or twig from a bush. The roses were magnificent, in spite of the old gardener's croaking, and the sun was warm and grateful and the hum of the bees musical and sweet.

"It's hard to die and leave all this, Phibbs," said the old woman, a catch in her voice. "But it's got to be done."

"Not for a while yet, I hope, Miss Jane."

"It won't be long, Phibbs. But I must try to live until my nieces come, and I can decide which of them is most worthy to care for the old place when I am gone."

"Yes, Miss."

"I've heard from two of them, already. They jumped at the bait I held out quickly enough; but that's only natural. And the letters are very sensible ones, too. Elizabeth DeGraf says she will be glad to come, and thanks me for inviting her. Louise Merrick is glad to come, also, but hopes I am deceived about my health and that she will make me more than one visit after we become friends. A very proper feeling; but I'm not deceived, Phibbs. My end's in plain sight."

"Yes, Miss Jane."

"And somebody's got to have my money and dear Elmhurst when I'm through with them. Who will it be, Phibbs?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Miss."

"Nor do I. The money's mine, and I can do what I please with it; and

I'm under no obligation to anyone."

"Except Kenneth," said a soft voice behind her.

Jane Merrick gave a start at the interruption and turned red and angry as, without looking around, she answered:

"Stuff and nonsense! I know my duties and my business, Silas Watson."

"To be sure," said a little, withered man, passing around the chair and facing the old woman with an humble, deprecating air. He was clothed in black, and his smooth-shaven, deeply lined face was pleasant of expression and not without power and shrewd intelligence. The eyes, however, were concealed by heavy-rimmed spectacles, and his manner was somewhat shy and reserved. However, he did not hesitate to speak frankly to his old friend, nor minded in the least if he aroused her ire.

"No one knows better than you, dear Miss Jane, her duties and obligations; and no one performs them more religiously. But your recent acts, I confess, puzzle me. Why should you choose from a lot of inexperienced, incompetent girls a successor to Thomas Bradley's fortune, when he especially requested you in his will to look after any of his relatives, should they need assistance? Kenneth Forbes, his own nephew, was born after Tom's death, to be sure; but he is alone in the world now, an orphan, and has had no advantages to help him along in life since his mother's death eight years ago. I think Tom Bradley must have had a premonition of what was to come even though his sister was not married at the time of his death, and I am sure he would want

you to help Kenneth now."

"He placed me under no obligations to leave the boy any money," snapped the old woman, white with suppressed wrath, "you know that well enough, Silas Watson, for you drew up the will."

The old gentleman slowly drew a pattern upon the gravelled walk with the end of his walking-stick.

"Yes, I drew up the will," he said, deliberately, "and I remember that he gave to you, his betrothed bride, all that he possessed – gave it gladly and lovingly, and without reserve. He was very fond of you, Miss Jane. But perhaps his conscience pricked him a bit, after all, for he added the words: 'I shall expect you to look after the welfare of my only relative, my sister. Katherine Bradley – or any of her heirs.' It appears to me, Miss Jane, that that is a distinct obligation. The boy is now sixteen and as fine a fellow as one often meets."

"Bah! An imbecile – an awkward, ill-mannered brat who is only fit for a stable-boy! I know him, Silas, and I know he'll never amount to a hill of beans. Leave *him* my money? Not if I hadn't a relative on earth!"

"You misjudge him, Jane. Kenneth is all right if you'll treat him decently. But he won't stand your abuse and I don't think the less of him for that."

"Why abuse? Haven't I given him a home and an education, all because Thomas asked me to look after his relatives? And he's been rebellious and pig-headed and sullen in return for my

kindness, so naturally there's little love lost between us."

"You resented your one obligation, Jane; and although you fulfilled it to the letter you did not in the spirit of Tom Bradley's request. I don't blame the boy for not liking you."

"Sir!"

"All right, Jane; fly at me if you will," said the little man, with a smile; "but I intend to tell you frankly what I think of your actions, just as long as we remain friends."

Her stern brows unbent a trifle.

"That's why we are friends, Silas; and it's useless to quarrel with you now that I'm on my last legs. A few days more will end me, I'm positive; so bear with me a little longer, my friend."

He took her withered hand in his and kissed it gently.

"You're not so very bad, Jane," said he, "and I'm almost sure you will be with us for a long time to come. But you're more nervous and irritable than usual, I'll admit, and I fear this invasion of your nieces won't be good for you. Are they really coming?"

"Two of them are, I'm sure, for they've accepted my invitation," she replied.

"Here's a letter that just arrived," he said, taking it from his pocket. "Perhaps it contains news from the third niece."

"My glasses, Phibbs!" cried Miss Jane, eagerly, and the attendant started briskly for the house to get them.

"What do you know about these girls?" asked the old lawyer curiously.

"Nothing whatever. I scarcely knew of their existence until

you hunted them out for me and found they were alive. But I'm going to know them, and study them, and the one that's most capable and deserving shall have my property."

Mr. Watson sighed.

"And Kenneth?" he asked.

"I'll provide an annuity for the boy, although it's more than he deserves. When I realized that death was creeping upon me I felt a strange desire to bequeath my fortune to one of my own flesh and blood. Perhaps I didn't treat my brothers and sisters generously in the old days, Silas."

"Perhaps not," he answered.

"So I'll make amends to one of their children. That is, if any one of the three nieces should prove worthy."

"I see. But if neither of the three is worthy?"

"Then I'll leave every cent to charity – except Kenneth's annuity."

The lawyer smiled.

"Let us hope," said he, "that they will prove all you desire. It would break my heart, Jane, to see Elmhurst turned into a hospital."

Phibbs arrived with the spectacles, and Jane Merrick read her letter, her face growing harder with every line she mastered. Then she crumpled the paper fiercely in both hands, and a moment later smoothed it out carefully and replaced it in the envelope.

Silas Watson had watched her silently.

"Well," said he, at last, "another acceptance?"

"No, a refusal," said she. "A refusal from the Irishman's daughter,

Patricia Doyle."

"That's bad," he remarked, but in a tone of relief.

"I don't see it in that light at all," replied Miss Jane. "The girl is right. It's the sort of letter I'd have written myself, under the circumstances. I'll write again, Silas, and humble myself, and try to get her to come."

"You surprise me!" said the lawyer.

"I surprise myself," retorted the old woman, "but I mean to know more of this Patricia Doyle. Perhaps I've found a gold mine, Silas Watson!"

CHAPTER VI.
THE BOY

Leaving the mistress of Elmhurst among her flowers, Silas Watson walked slowly and thoughtfully along the paths until he reached the extreme left wing of the rambling old mansion. Here, half hidden by tangled vines of climbing roses, he came to a flight of steps leading to an iron-railed balcony, and beyond this was a narrow stairway to the rooms in the upper part of the wing.

Miss Merrick, however ungenerous she might have been to others, had always maintained Elmhurst in a fairly lavish manner. There were plenty of servants to look after the house and gardens, and there were good horses in the stables. Whenever her health permitted she dined in state each evening in the great dining-room, solitary and dignified, unless on rare occasions her one familiar, Silas Watson, occupied the seat opposite her. "The boy," as he was contemptuously called, was never permitted to enter this room. Indeed, it would be difficult to define exactly Kenneth Forbes' position at Elmhurst. He had lived there ever since his mother's death, when, a silent and unattractive lad of eight, Mr. Watson had brought him to Jane Merrick and insisted upon her providing a home for Tom Bradley's orphaned nephew.

She accepted the obligation reluctantly enough, giving the child a small room in the left wing, as far removed from her own

apartments as possible, and transferring all details of his care to Misery Agnew, the old housekeeper. Misery endeavored to "do her duty" by the boy, but appreciating the scant courtesy with which he was treated by her mistress, it is not surprising the old woman regarded him merely as a dependent and left him mostly to his own devices.

Kenneth, even in his first days at Elmhurst, knew that his presence was disagreeable to Miss Jane, and as the years dragged on he grew shy and retiring, longing to break away from his unpleasant surroundings, but knowing of no other place where he would be more welcome. His only real friend was the lawyer, who neglected no opportunity to visit the boy and chat with him, in his cheery manner. Mr. Watson also arranged with the son of the village curate to tutor Kenneth and prepare him for college; but either the tutor was incompetent or the pupil did not apply himself, for at twenty Kenneth Forbes was very ignorant, indeed, and seemed not to apply himself properly to his books.

He was short of stature and thin, with a sad drawn face and manners that even his staunch friend, Silas Watson, admitted were awkward and unprepossessing. What he might have been under different conditions or with different treatment, could only be imagined. Slowly climbing the stairs to the little room Kenneth inhabited, Mr. Watson was forced to conclude, with a sigh of regret, that he could not blame Miss Jane for wishing to find a more desirable heir to her estate than this graceless, sullen youth who had been thrust upon her by a thoughtless request

contained in the will of her dead lover – a request that she seemed determined to fulfil literally, as it only required her to "look after" Tom's relatives and did not oblige her to leave Kenneth her property.

Yet, strange as it may seem, the old lawyer was exceedingly fond of the boy, and longed to see him the master of Elmhurst. Sometimes, when they were alone, Kenneth forgot his sense of injury and dependence, and spoke so well and with such animation that Mr. Watson was astonished, and believed that hidden underneath the mask of reserve was another entirely different personality, that in the years to come might change the entire nature of the neglected youth and win for him the respect and admiration of the world. But these fits of brightness and geniality were rare. Only the lawyer had as yet discovered them.

Today he found the boy lying listlessly upon the window-seat, an open book in his hand, but his eyes fixed dreamily upon the grove of huge elm trees that covered the distant hills.

"Morning, Ken," said he, briefly, sitting beside his young friend and taking the book in his own hand. The margins of the printed pages were fairly covered with drawings of every description. The far away trees were there and the near-by rose gardens. There was a cat spitting at an angry dog, caricatures of old Misery and James, the gardener, and of Aunt Jane and even Silas Watson himself – all so clearly depicted that the lawyer suddenly wondered if they were not clever, and an evidence of genius. But the boy turned to look at him, and the next moment

seized the book from his grasp and sent it flying through the open window, uttering at the same time a rude exclamation of impatience.

The lawyer quietly lighted his pipe.

"Why did you do that, Kenneth?" he asked. "The pictures are clever enough to be preserved. I did not know you have a talent for drawing."

The boy glanced at him, but answered nothing, and the lawyer thought best not to pursue the subject After smoking a moment in silence he remarked:

"Your aunt is failing fast." Although no relative, Kenneth had been accustomed to speak of Jane Merrick as his aunt.

Getting neither word nor look in reply the lawyer presently continued:

"I do not think she will live much longer."

The boy stared from the window and drummed on the sill with his fingers.

"When she dies," said Mr. Watson, in a musing tone, "there will be a new mistress at Elmhurst and you will have to move out."

The boy now turned to look at him, enquiringly.

"You are twenty, and you are not ready for college. You would be of no use in the commercial world. You have not even the capacity to become a clerk. What will you do, Kenneth? Where will you go?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"When will Aunt Jane die?" he asked.

"I hope she will live many days yet. She may die tomorrow."

"When she does, I'll answer your question." said the boy, roughly. "When I'm turned out of this place – which is part prison and part paradise – I'll do something. I don't know what, and I won't bother about it till the time comes. But I'll do something."

"Could you earn a living?" asked the old lawyer.

"Perhaps not; but I'll get one. Will I be a beggar?"

"I don't know. It depends on whether Aunt Jane leaves you anything in her will."

"I hope she won't leave me a cent!" cried the boy, with sudden fierceness. "I hate her, and will be glad when she is dead and out of my way!"

"Kenneth – Kenneth, lad!"

"I hate her!" he persisted, with blazing eyes. "She has insulted me, scorned me, humiliated me every moment since I have known her. I'll be glad to have her die, and I don't want a cent of her miserable money."

"Money," remarked the old man, knocking the ashes from his pipe, "is very necessary to one who is incompetent to earn his salt. And the money she leaves you – if she really does leave you any – won't be her's, remember, but your Uncle Tom's."

"Uncle Tom was good to my father," said the boy, softening.

"Well, Uncle Tom gave his money to Aunt Jane, whom he had expected to marry; but he asked her to care for his relatives, and she'll doubtless give you enough to live on. But the place will go

to some one else, and that means you must move on."

"Who will have Elmhurst?" asked the boy.

"One of your aunt's nieces, probably. She has three, it seems, all of them young girls, and she has invited them to come here to visit her."

"Girls! Girls at Elmhurst?" cried the boy, shrinking back with a look of terror in his eyes.

"To be sure. One of the nieces, it seems, refuses to come; but there will be two of them to scramble for your aunt's affection."

"She has none," declared the boy.

"Or her money, which is the same thing. The one she likes the best will get the estate."

Kenneth smiled, and with the change of expression his face lighted wonderfully.

"Poor Aunt!" he said. "Almost I am tempted to be sorry for her. Two girls – fighting one against the other for Elmhurst – and both fawning before a cruel and malicious old woman who could never love anyone but herself."

"And her flowers," suggested the lawyer.

"Oh, yes; and perhaps James. Tell me, why should she love James, who is a mere gardener, and hate me?"

"James tends the flowers, and the flowers are Jane Merrick's very life. Isn't that the explanation?"

"I don't know."

"The girls need not worry you, Kenneth. It will be easy for you to keep out of their way."

"When will they come?"

"Next week, I believe."

The boy looked around helplessly, with the air of a caged tiger.

"Perhaps they won't know I'm here," he said.

"Perhaps not. I'll tell Misery to bring all your meals to this room, and no one ever comes to this end of the garden. But if they find you, Kenneth, and scare you out of your den, run over to me, and I'll keep you safe until the girls are gone."

"Thank you, Mr. Watson," more graciously than was his wont. "It isn't that I'm afraid of girls, you know; but they may want to insult me, just as their aunt does, and I couldn't bear any more cruelty."

"I know nothing about them," said the lawyer, "so I can't vouch in any way for Aunt Jane's nieces. But they are young, and it is probable they'll be as shy and uncomfortable here at Elmhurst as you are yourself. And after all, Kenneth boy, the most important thing just now is your own future. What in the world is to become of you?"

"Oh, *that*," answered the boy, relapsing into his sullen mood; "I can't see that it matters much one way or another. Anyhow, I'll not bother my head about it until the time comes and as far as you're concerned, it's none of your business."

CHAPTER VII.
THE FIRST WARNING

For a day or two Jane Merrick seemed to improve in health. Indeed, Martha Phibbs declared her mistress was better than she had been for weeks. Then, one night, the old attendant was awakened by a scream, and rushed to her mistress' side.

"What is it, ma'am?" she asked, tremblingly.

"My leg! I can't move my leg," gasped the mistress of Elmhurst. "Rub it, you old fool! Rub it till you drop, and see if you can bring back the life to it."

Martha rubbed, of course, but the task was useless. Oscar the groom was sent on horseback for the nearest doctor, who came just as day was breaking. He gave the old woman a brief examination and shook his head.

"It's the first warning," said he; "but nothing to be frightened about. That is, for the present."

"Is it paralysis?" asked Jane Merrick.

"Yes; a slight stroke."

"But I'll have another?"

"Perhaps, in time."

"How long?"

"It may be a week – or a month – or a year. Sometimes there is never another stroke. Don't worry, ma'am. Just lie still and be

comfortable."

"Huh!" grunted the old woman. But she became more composed and obeyed the doctor's instructions with unwonted meekness. Silas Watson arrived during the forenoon, and pressed her thin hand with real sympathy, for these two were friends despite the great difference in their temperaments.

"Shall I draw your will, Jane?" he asked. "No!" she snapped. "I'm not going to die just yet, I assure you. I shall live to carry out my plans, Silas."

She did live, and grew better as the days wore on, although she never recovered the use of the paralyzed limb.

Each day Phibbs drew the invalid chair to the porch and old James lifted it to the garden walk, where his mistress might enjoy the flowers he so carefully and skillfully tended. They seldom spoke together, these two; yet there seemed a strange bond of sympathy between them.

At last the first of July arrived, and Oscar was dispatched to the railway station, four miles distant, to meet Miss Elizabeth De Graf, the first of the nieces to appear in answer to Jane Merrick's invitation.

Beth looked very charming and fresh in her new gown, and she greeted her aunt with a calm graciousness that would have amazed the professor to behold. She had observed carefully the grandeur and beauty of Elmhurst, as she drove through the grounds, and instantly decided the place was worth an effort to win.

"So, this is Elizabeth, is it?" asked Aunt June, as the girl stood before her for inspection. "You may kiss me, child."

Elizabeth advanced, striving to quell the antipathy she felt to kiss the stern featured, old woman, and touched her lips to the wrinkled forehead.

Jane Merrick laughed, a bit sneeringly, while Beth drew back, still composed, and looked at her relative enquiringly.

"Well, what do you think of me?" demanded Aunt Jane, as if embarrassed at the scrutiny she received.

"Surely, it is too early to ask me that," replied Beth, gently. "I am going to try to like you, and my first sight of my new aunt leads me to hope I shall succeed."

"Why shouldn't you like me?" cried the old woman. "Why must you try to like your mother's sister?"

Beth flushed. She had promised herself not to become angry or discomposed, whatever her aunt might say or do; but before she could control herself an indignant expression flashed across her face and Jane Merrick saw it.

"There are reasons," said Beth, slowly, "why your name is seldom mentioned in my father's family. Until your letter came I scarcely knew I possessed an aunt. It was your desire we should become better acquainted, and I am here for that purpose. I hope we shall become friends, Aunt Jane, but until then, it is better we should not discuss the past."

The woman frowned. It was not difficult for her to read the character of the child before her, and she knew intuitively that

Beth was strongly prejudiced against her, but was honestly trying not to allow that prejudice to influence her. She decided to postpone further interrogations until another time.

"Your journey has tired you," she said abruptly. "I'll have Misery show you to your room."

She touched a bell beside her.

"I'm not tired, but I'll go to my room, if you please," answered Beth, who realized that she had in some way failed to make as favorable an impression as she had hoped. "When may I see you again?"

"When I send for you," snapped Aunt Jane, as the housekeeper entered.

"I suppose you know I am a paralytic, and liable to die at any time?"

"I am very sorry," said Beth, hesitatingly. "You do not seem very ill."

"I'm on my last legs. I may not live an hour. But that's none of your business, I suppose. By the way, I expect your cousin on the afternoon train."

Beth gave a start of surprise.

"My cousin?" she asked.

"Yes, Louise Merrick."

"Oh!" said Beth, and stopped short.

"What do you mean by that?" enquired Aunt Jane, with a smile that was rather malicious.

"I did not know I had a cousin," said the girl. "That is,"

correcting herself, "I did not know whether Louise Merrick was alive or not. Mother has mentioned her name once or twice in my presence; but not lately."

"Well, she's alive. Very much alive, I believe. And she's coming to visit me, while you are here. I expect you to be friends."

"To be sure," said Beth, nevertheless discomfited at the news.

"We dine at seven," said Aunt Jane. "I always lunch in my own room, and you may do the same," and with a wave of her thin hand she dismissed the girl, who thoughtfully followed the old housekeeper through the halls.

It was not going to be an easy task to win this old woman's affection. Already she rebelled at the necessity of undertaking so distasteful a venture and wondered if she had not made a mistake in trying to curb her natural frankness, and to conciliate a creature whose very nature seemed antagonistic to her own. And this new cousin, Louise Merrick, why was she coming to Elmhurst? To compete for the prize Beth had already determined to win? In that case she must consider carefully her line of action, that no rival might deprive her of this great estate. Beth felt that she could fight savagely for an object she so much desired. Her very muscles hardened and grew tense at the thought of conflict as she walked down the corridor in the wake of old Misery the housekeeper. She had always resented the sordid life at Cloverton. She had been discontented with her lot since her earliest girlhood, and longed to escape the constant bickerings of

her parents and their vain struggles to obtain enough money to "keep up appearances" and drive the wolf from the door. And here was an opportunity to win a fortune and a home beautiful enough for a royal princess. All that was necessary was to gain the esteem of a crabbed, garrulous old woman, who had doubtless but a few more weeks to live. It must be done, in one way or another; but how? How could she out-wit this unknown cousin, and inspire the love of Aunt Jane?

"If there's any stuff of the right sort in my nature," decided the girl, as she entered her pretty bedchamber and threw herself into a chair, "I'll find a way to win out. One thing is certain – I'll never again have another chance at so fine a fortune, and if I fail to get it I shall deserve to live in poverty forever afterward."

Suddenly she noticed the old housekeeper standing before her and regarding her with a kindly interest. In an instant she sprang up, threw her arms around Misery and kissed her furrowed cheek.

"Thank you for being so kind," said she. "I've never been away from home before and you must be a mother to me while I'm at Elmhurst."

Old Misery smiled and stroked the girl's glossy head.

"Bless the child!" she said, delightedly; "of course I'll be a mother to you. You'll need a bit of comforting now and then, my dear, if you're going to live with Jane Merrick."

"Is she cross?" asked Beth, softly.

"At times she's a fiend," confided the old housekeeper, in

almost a whisper. "But don't you mind her tantrums, or lay 'em to heart, and you'll get along with her all right."

"Thank you," said the girl. "I'll try not to mind."

"Do you need anything else, deary?" asked Misery, with a glance around the room.

"Nothing at all, thank you."

The housekeeper nodded and softly withdrew.

"That was one brilliant move, at any rate," said Beth to herself, as she laid aside her hat and prepared to unstrap her small trunk. "I've made a friend at Elmhurst who will be of use to me; and I shall make more before long. Come as soon as you like, Cousin Louise! You'll have to be more clever than I am, if you hope to win Elmhurst."

CHAPTER VIII.
THE DIPLOMAT

Aunt Jane was in her garden, enjoying the flowers. This was her especial garden, surrounded by a high-box hedge, and quite distinct from the vast expanse of shrubbery and flower-beds which lent so much to the beauty of the grounds at Elmhurst. Aunt Jane knew and loved every inch of her property. She had watched the shrubs personally for many years, and planned all the alterations and the construction of the flower-beds which James had so successfully attended to. Each morning, when her health permitted, she had inspected the greenhouses and issued her brief orders – brief because her slightest word to the old gardener incurred the fulfillment of her wishes. But this bit of garden adjoining her own rooms was her especial pride, and contained the choicest plants she had been able to secure. So, since she had been confined to her chair, the place had almost attained to the dignity of a private drawing-room, and on bright days she spent many hours here, delighting to feast her eyes with the rich coloring of the flowers and to inhale their fragrance. For however gruff Jane Merrick might be to the people with whom she came in contact, she was always tender to her beloved flowers, and her nature invariably softened when in their presence.

By and by Oscar, the groom, stepped through an opening in

the hedge and touched his hat.

"Has my niece arrived?" asked his mistress, sharply.

"She's on the way, mum," the man answered, grinning. "She stopped outside the grounds to pick wild flowers, an' said I was to tell you she'd walk the rest o' the way."

"To pick wild flowers?"

"That's what she said, mum. She's that fond of 'em she couldn't resist it. I was to come an' tell you this, mum; an' she'll follow me directly."

Aunt Jane stared at the man sternly, and he turned toward her an unmoved countenance. Oscar had been sent to the station to meet Louise Merrick, and drive her to Elmhurst; but this strange freak on the part of her guest set the old woman thinking what her object could be. Wild flowers were well enough in their way; but those adjoining the grounds of Elmhurst were very ordinary and unattractive, and Miss Merrick's aunt was expecting her. Perhaps —

A sudden light illumined the mystery.

"See here, Oscar; has this girl been questioning you?"

"She asked a few questions, mum."

"About me?"

"Some of 'em, if I remember right, mum, was about you."

"And you told her I was fond of flowers?"

"I may have just mentioned that you liked 'em, mum."

Aunt Jane gave a scornful snort, and the man responded in a curious way. He winked slowly and laboriously, still retaining the

solemn expression on his face.

"You may go, Oscar. Have the girl's luggage placed in her room."

"Yes, mum."

He touched his hat and then withdrew, leaving Jane Merrick with a frown upon her brow that was not caused by his seeming impertinence.

Presently a slight and graceful form darted through the opening in the hedge and approached the chair wherein Jane Merrick reclined.

"Oh, my dear, dear aunt!" cried Louise. "How glad I am to see you at last, and how good of you to let me come here!" and she bent over and kissed the stern, unresponsive face with an enthusiasm delightful to behold.

"This is Louise, I suppose," said Aunt Jane, stiffly. "You are welcome to Elmhurst."

"Tell me how you are," continued the girl, kneeling beside the chair and taking the withered hands gently in her own. "Do you suffer any? And are you getting better, dear aunt, in this beautiful garden with the birds and the sunshine?"

"Get up," said the elder woman, roughly. "You're spoiling your gown."

Louise laughed gaily.

"Never mind the gown," she answered. "Tell me about yourself. I've been so anxious since your last letter."

Aunt Jane's countenance relaxed a trifle. To speak of her

broken health always gave her a sort of grim satisfaction.

"I'm dying, as you can plainly see," she announced. "My days are numbered, Louise. If you stay long enough you can gather wild flowers for my coffin."

Louise flushed a trifle. A bunch of butter-cups and forget-me-nots was fastened to her girdle, and she had placed a few marguerites in her hair.

"Don't laugh at these poor things!" she said, deprecatingly. "I'm so fond of flowers, and we find none growing wild in the cities, you know."

Jane Merrick looked at her reflectively.

"How old are you, Louise," she asked.

"Just seventeen, Aunt."

"I had forgotten you are so old as that. Let me see; Elizabeth cannot be more than fifteen."

"Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth De Graf, your cousin. She arrived at Elmhurst this morning, and will be your companion while you are here."

"That is nice," said Louise.

"I hope you will be friends."

"Why not, Aunt? I haven't known much of my relations in the past, you know, so it pleases me to find an aunt and a cousin at the same time. I am sure I shall love you both. Let me fix your pillow – you do not seem comfortable. There! Isn't that better?" patting the pillow deftly. "I'm afraid you have needed more loving care than a paid attendant can give you," glancing at old Martha

Phibbs, who stood some paces away, and lowering her voice that she might not be overheard. "But for a time, at least, I mean to be your nurse, and look after your wants. You should have sent for me before, Aunt Jane."

"Don't trouble yourself; Phibbs knows my ways, and does all that is required," said the invalid, rather testily. "Run away, now, Louise. The housekeeper will show you to your room. It's opposite Elizabeth's, and you will do well to make her acquaintance at once. I shall expect you both to dine with me at seven."

"Can't I stay here a little longer?" pleaded Louise. "We haven't spoken two words together, as yet, and I'm not a bit tired or anxious to go to my room. What a superb oleander this is! Is it one of your favorites, Aunt Jane?"

"Run away," repeated the woman. "I want to be alone."

The girl sighed and kissed her again, stroking the gray hair softly with her white hand.

"Very well; I'll go," she said. "But I don't intend to be treated as a strange guest, dear Aunt, for that would drive me to return home at once. You are my father's eldest sister, and I mean to make you love me, if you will give me the least chance to do so."

She looked around her, enquiringly, and Aunt Jane pointed a bony finger at the porch.

"That is the way. Phibbs will take you to Misery, the housekeeper, and then return to me. Remember, I dine promptly at seven."

"I shall count the minutes," said Louise, and with a laugh and a graceful gesture of adieu, turned to follow Martha into the house.

Jane Merrick looked after her with a puzzled expression upon her face.

"Were she in the least sincere," she muttered, "Louise might prove a very pleasant companion. But she's not sincere; she's coddling me to win my money, and if I don't watch out she'll succeed. The girl's a born diplomat, and weighed in the balance against sincerity, diplomacy will often tip the scales. I might do worse than to leave Elmhurst to a clever woman. But I don't know Beth yet. I'll wait and see which girl is the most desirable, and give them each an equal chance."

CHAPTER IX.
COUSINS

"Come in," called Beth, answering a knock at her door.

Louise entered, and with a little cry ran forward and caught Beth in her arms, kissing her in greeting.

"You must be my new cousin – Cousin Elizabeth – and I'm awfully glad to see you at last!" she said, holding the younger girl a little away, that she might examine her carefully.

Beth did not respond to the caress. She eyed her opponent sharply, for she knew well enough, even in that first moment, that they were engaged in a struggle for supremacy in Aunt Jane's affections, and that in the battles to come no quarter could be asked or expected.

So they stood at arm's length, facing one another and secretly forming an estimate each of the other's advantages and accomplishments.

"She's pretty enough, but has no style whatever," was Louise's conclusion. "Neither has she tact nor self-possession, or even a prepossessing manner. She wears her new gown in a dowdy manner and one can read her face easily. There's little danger in this quarter, I'm sure, so I may as well be friends with the poor child."

As for Beth, she saw at once that her "new cousin" was older

and more experienced in the ways of the world, and therefore liable to prove a dangerous antagonist. Slender and graceful of form, attractive of feature and dainty in manner, Louise must be credited with many advantages; but against these might be weighed her evident insincerity – the volubility and gush that are so often affected to hide one's real nature, and which so shrewd and suspicious a woman as Aunt Jane could not fail to readily detect. Altogether, Beth was not greatly disturbed by her cousin's appearance, and suddenly realizing that they had been staring at one another rather rudely, she said, pleasantly enough:

"Won't you sit down?"

"Of course; we must get acquainted," replied Louise, gaily, and perched herself cross-legged upon the window-seat, surrounded by a mass of cushions.

"I didn't know you were here, until an hour ago," she continued. "But as soon as Aunt Jane told me I ran to my room, unpacked and settled the few traps I brought with me, and here I am – prepared for a good long chat and to love you just as dearly as you will let me."

"I knew you were coming, but not until this morning," answered Beth, slowly. "Perhaps had I known, I would not have accepted our Aunt's invitation."

"Ah! Why not?" enquired the other, as if in wonder.

Beth hesitated.

"Have you known Aunt Jane before today?" she asked.

"No."

"Nor I. The letter asking me to visit her was the first I have ever received from her. Even my mother, her own sister, does not correspond with her. I was brought up to hate her very name, as a selfish, miserly old woman. But, since she asked me to visit her, we judged she had softened and might wish to become friendly, and so I accepted the invitation. I had no idea you were also invited."

"But why should you resent my being here?" Louise asked, smiling.

"Surely, two girls will have a better time in this lonely old place than one could have alone. For my part, I am delighted to find you at

Elmhurst."

"Thank you," said Beth. "That's a nice thing to say, but I doubt if it's true. Don't let's beat around the bush. I hate hypocrisy, and if we're going to be friends let's be honest with one another from the start."

"Well?" queried Louise, evidently amused.

"It's plain to me that Aunt Jane has invited us here to choose which one of us shall inherit her money – and Elmhurst. She's old and feeble, and she hasn't any other relations."

"Oh, yes, she has" corrected Louise.

"You mean Patricia Doyle?"

"Yes."

"What do you know of her?"

"Nothing at all."

"Where does she live?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

Louise spoke as calmly as if she had not mailed Patricia's defiant letter to Aunt Jane, or discovered her cousin's identity in the little hair-dresser from Madame Borne's establishment.

"Has Aunt Jane mentioned her?" continued Beth.

"Not in my presence."

"Then we may conclude she's left out of the arrangement," said Beth, calmly. "And, as I said, Aunt Jane is likely to choose one of us to succeed her at Elmhurst. I hoped I had it all my own way, but it's evident I was mistaken. You'll fight for your chance and fight mighty hard!"

Louise laughed merrily.

"How funny!" she exclaimed, after a moment during which Beth frowned at her darkly. "Why, my dear cousin, I don't want Aunt Jane's money."

"You don't?"

"Not a penny of it; nor Elmhurst; nor anything you can possibly lay claim to, my dear. My mother and I are amply provided for, and I am only here to find rest from my social duties and to get acquainted with my dead father's sister. That is all."

"Oh!" said Beth, lying back in her chair with a sigh of relief.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.