Blanchard Amy Ella

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE END OF A DAY

The sun was very low in the west and the evening colors were staining the creek whose quiet waters ran between flat lands to be carried out to the river further on, which, in its turn, found the broader bay. The arms of one or two ancient windmills, which had been moving lazily in the breeze, made a few rotations and then stopped, showing themselves dark objects against a glowing sky. An old church, embowered by tall trees, caught some of the evening glow upon its ancient brick walls, and in the dank long grass gray headstones glimmered out discovering the graveyard. Beyond the church the sparkling creek murmured gently. A few turkey-buzzards cast weird shadows as they circled slowly overhead or dropped with slanting wing to perch upon the chimneys of a long low house which stood not many rods from the weather-stained church. One reached the church by way of a green lane, and along this lane was now coming Linda Talbot, a girl above medium height whose dark hair made her fine fair skin look the fairer by contrast. Her eyes were downcast

so that one could not discern their depth of violet blue, but one could note the long black lashes, the well-shaped brows and the rounded chin. Just now her lips were compressed so the lines of her mouth could not be determined upon. She walked slowly, never once raising her eyes toward the sparkling creek and the sunset sky. But once beyond the gate opening from the lane, she stood and looked around, taking in the view which included the windmills raising protesting arms, the fields where lately, corn had been stacked, the long low brown house. Upon this last her eyes lingered long and lovingly, observing the quaint lines, the low sloping roof, the small-paned windows, the chimneys at each end, the porch running the length of the building, each detail so familiar, so dearly loved, and now passing from her.

She gave her head a little quick shake as if to scatter the thoughts assailing her, then she moved more quickly toward the house, but passing around to the kitchen rather than entering by way of the porch. An old colored woman was picking crabs at a table near the window. "Gwine give yuh some crab cakes fo' suppah, Miss Lindy," she announced, looking up. "Dark ketch me fo' I git 'em done I specs, dat no 'count Jake so long gittin' 'em hyar. He de no countines' niggah evah I did see. Thinks he ain't got nothin' to do but set 'roun' rollin' his eyes at de gals."

"Get me an apron, Mammy," said Linda, "and I'll help you."

"Go 'long, Miss Lindy. 'Tain't no need o' dat."

"But I'd like to," persisted the girl feeling relief at not immediately being obliged to seek other society than that of the

old colored woman to whom she had brought her troubles from babyhood.

Enveloped in a huge gingham apron, she sat down to her task, but was so much more silent than was her wont that the old woman from time to time, raised her eyes to watch her furtively.

Presently she could stand it no longer. "Wha' de matter, honey?" she asked solicitously. "Yuh got sumpin mo' on yo' min' dat honin' fo' Mars Martin."

Linda dropped crab and fork into the dish of crab meat, rested her arms on the table and hid her face in them that Phebe should not see the tears she could no longer keep back.

"Dere, honey, dere baby," crooned Phebe. "Tell yo' ole Mammy all about it. Wha' she been a doin' to Mammy's honey chile?"

Linda lifted her tearful eyes. "Oh, Mammy, I can't stand it. I must go."

Phebe's hands shook. "What yuh mean, chile?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"I mean I must earn my own living. Phebe, I shall have to. Oh, Mammy, you know I cannot blame my brother, but if he had only left a little, just a little for my very own. If he had not made the conditions so hard."

"Tell Mammy agin jes' how yuh stan's, honey," said Phebe soberly.

"It's this way, Mammy. The place is left to Grace and me. As long as she chooses to make it her home I am to live here. If

Grace marries she forfeits her right to it, but while she remains a widow she has a claim to the whole farm, the crops, everything. I am permitted only a place to sleep and enough to eat, and if she elects not to stay here, what am I to do? I cannot keep up an establishment on nothing, can I? Oh, Mammy, I did try, you know I did, while Martin lived, I tried to be patient and good. It hurt more than anyone knew when he brought home a silly pretty girl to take my place, to show a petty jealousy of me. You know how I used to delight in saving that I might buy something for Christmas or birthdays that he particularly wanted. Every little possession meant some sacrifice, and when, one by one, all the little treasured things that I had scrimped and saved to get for him, when they were shoved out of sight and something took their place that she had bought, I never said a word though it did hurt. We were such comrades, Mart and I, and I was only a school girl when I began to keep house for him and he came to me with all his confidences. We used to talk over the crops, the investments, this, that, the other thing, and it seemed as if it must always be so until – "

"Yas, honey, yas, I knows." Phebe spoke soothingly.

"She was jealous of every little thing," Linda went on. "She was very sweet and appealing, always calling me 'dear little sister' to Mart and gradually weaning him from me and my interests, subtly poisoning his mind – No, not that exactly, but making him believe he was such a wonderful brother to give me a home, to support me. She never ceased to praise him for what she told

him was his great unselfishness. She never ceased to put me in the light of a dependent who had no real right to what he gave. It used to be share and share alike, Mammy, and Mart used to be the one to praise me for making a cheerful home. He used to say that he would work day and night rather than have me go out into the world to make my living, but, Mammy – to-day – Grace said I ought to do it, and I must, for she is going to the city for the winter."

"Law, honey! Law, honey! Mah li'l baby!" groaned Mammy. "Yo' ma an' pa'll riz up in dere grabes ef yuh does dat. Ain't it yo' home 'fore it hers? Ain't yo' gran'daddy an' you gre't-gran'-daddy live hyar? Ain't yuh de one dat has de mostes' right?"

"Yes, Mammy, dear, in the ordinary order of things it would be so, but you know the place was mortgaged up to the last dollar and it was Mart who lifted the mortgage and made the farm all his before father died. According to the law I have no part nor parcel in it except what he chose to leave me. Poor dear Mart, he was so blind, he thought never was such a wife as Grace; he couldn't see that she worked steadily, cleverly, cunningly all the time to build a barrier between us, to chain him fast, to make him see through her eyes, to make me appear a poor, weak incapable creature who ought to be left in her guardianship. Well, she succeeded; my darling brother, whose thought was always for me, made his will in such a way as to render me homeless."

"Lord, have mercy," groaned Mammy, rocking back and forth, the crabs unheeded in their pan.

"Oh, he was innocent enough, poor dear," Linda went on quickly. "He couldn't see anything but that it would be a fine thing for us two to live together like loving sisters always. I would be Grace's right hand; she would be my kind elder sister. That is the way it looked to him. He couldn't see through her little deceits. How could he know that her smiles covered a jealous, grasping nature? How could he know that six months after he left us she would practically turn me out-of-doors, that she would tell me I could not expect anything more than food and shelter for part of the year, and that she intended to spend her winters with her family and only her summers here?"

"Ain't it de troof?" ejaculated Mammy.

Having for the first time poured forth her grievances to a sympathetic ear, Linda was not disposed to stop the torrent which gave her relief. "She told me that it was for my sake as well as her own, and that she thought I would be much happier if I were to make myself entirely independent, all with that solicitous manner as if she lay awake nights thinking of my welfare. Oh, no one but you, Mammy, who have seen it, could realize the thousand little pin pricks that I have endured."

"Yas, honey, I knows; Mammy knows," responded the old woman gravely. "But lemme tell yuh right now, ef yuh leaves de ole place, I leaves it."

"Oh, no, Mammy," Linda spoke in alarm, "Master Mart wouldn't like you to do that."

"I ain't thinkin' so much about Marster Mart as I is o' my baby,

an' huccome she goes away. I ain't thinkin' so much o' him as I am o' mah ole mistis, yo' grandma. Yuh reckon she think I 'bleedged to stay? No, ma'am, dat she don't. 'Sides, honey, I reckons by dis time de angels done cl'ar yo' brudder's eyes o' de wool what been pull over dem dese two ye'rs pas', an' I reckons he a-sayin' to his own daddy an' ma', de ole place ain't de same nohow, an' po' li'l sis she need her ole Mammy Phebe, wharever she go!"

At these words, Linda quite broke down again, but this time she hid her face on Phebe's shoulder and was patted gently with many soothing words of, "Dere, honey, dere now, baby, don' cry; de good Lord gwine look arfter yuh."

After a few minutes Linda raised her head to say, "Grace's sister is coming down to help her close the house. They mean to leave before Christmas and Phillips will manage the place. I haven't told you yet what I mean to do. I had a letter to-day from Mr. Willis and he thinks I can have a position in one of the schools, for one of the teachers is going to be married and he will do all he can to get me her place."

"Dat up in town?"

"Yes, it will be in the primary department, and I shall have a class of little boys."

"Humph!" Mammy expressed her disdain. "Whar yuh gwine live?"

"I shall have to board somewhere, of course."

The old woman's face fell. "I hopes I ain't live to see mah ole mistis' gran'child bo'din' in a common bo'din' house, 'thout no

lady to give her countenance an' make it proper fo' her beaux to come an' see her. No, ma'am, I hopes I ain't live to see dat."

"But, Mammy, what can I do? I haven't any very near relatives down here, you know, and none nearly related anywhere, certainly not near enough for me to invite myself to their homes. I can't afford a chaperone, and besides I am sure I am well enough known in town to be treated with respect wherever I may happen to live."

"I ain't say yuh isn't, but what I do say is dat it ain't fittin' an' proper fo' one of de fambly to go off to bo'd thes anywhar lak common folks."

"Then please to tell me what I am to do. Pshaw! Mammy, it's nonsense to talk as if I were a princess. We've got to face facts – plain, every-day facts. I must make my living, and I am lucky to be able to do it in a nice, ladylike way, in my own town and among my own friends."

Mammy began to pick at the crabs again, working away sullenly. She knew these were facts, but she rebelled against the existence of them. She thought seriously over the situation for some minutes. "If yuh goes, I goes," at last she reiterated. "Miss Ri Hill she tell me laughin' like, mo' times dan one, 'When yuh wants a place, Phebe, mah kitchen ready fo' yuh.' She ain't think I uvver leave yuh-alls, but I knows she tek me ef she kin git me."

"Miss Ri Hill! Why, Mammy, that is an inspiration. She is the very one. Perhaps she will take me in, too," cried Linda.

"Praise de Lord! Ain't it de troof now? Co'se she tek yuh.

'Tain' nobody think mo' o' yuh dan Miss Ri. She yo' ma's bridesmaid, an' yuh always gre't fav'ite o' hers. Dat mek it cl'ar as day. She yuh-alls kin' an' she stan' fo' yuh lak home folks. When yuh gwine, Miss Lindy?"

"Oh, pretty soon, I think."

Just here the door opened and a high-pitched, rather sweet, but sentimentally pathetic voice said, "Phebe, have you forgotten that it is nearly supper time? Linda, dear, is that you? I wouldn't hinder Phebe just now. I was wondering where you were. I saw you walking about so energetically and am so glad you can take pleasure in outside things, for of course I couldn't expect you to appreciate my loneliness, a young girl like you is always so buoyant." A plaintive sigh followed, as Grace Talbot turned to go. She was a fair, plump young woman with an appealing expression, a baby mouth and wide-open eyes in which it was her effort to maintain a look of childish innocence. "Do try to have supper promptly, Phebe," she said as she reached the door. "Of course, I don't care for myself, as I eat very little, but Miss Linda must be hungry after her walk."

Phebe gave a suggestive shrug and muttered something under her breath about "snakes in the grass," while Linda, with a sad little smile of deprecation, followed her sister-in-law through the irregular rooms, up a step here, down there, till the parlor was reached. Here an open fire was burning dully, for, though it was early fall, the evenings were chill even in this latitude, and Grace was a person who loved warmth. Creature comforts meant much

to her, a certain chair, a special seat at table, a footstool, a cushion at her back, these she had made necessities, and had demanded them in the way which would most appeal to her husband, while later, for the sake of harmony, Linda had followed his precedent.

Grace now sank into her chair by the fire, put her head back against the cushion and closed her eyes. "Linda, dear," she said, "would you mind seeing if there is more wood? One gets so chilly when one's vitality is low, and I am actually shivering."

Silently Linda went to the wood box, brought a log, stirred the fire and started a cheerful blaze, then sat down in a dim corner, resting elbows on knees, chin in hands.

"Where were you walking?" asked Grace presently, stretching herself like some sleek animal in the warmth of the fire.

"I went to the graveyard," replied Linda slowly.

Grace shivered slightly. "What strong nerves you have. I simply cannot bear to do such things; I am so sensitive. I cannot endure those reminders of my loss. You are so different, but, of course, all natures are not the same. I saw you talking to Phillips. I am glad to know that you can still take an interest in the place, but as for me it is too sad to talk over those things which were always a concern of my dear husband's. I cannot face details yet. My sorrow consumes all my thoughts and outside matters have no place in them. I suppose," she added in a weary voice, "everything is going on all right or you would tell me."

"Everything is right so far as I can judge," returned Linda; "but I would advise you to rouse yourself to take an interest soon,

Grace, for I shall not be here."

"Are you really going soon?" asked Grace, opening her eyes.

It was Linda's impulse to say, "I hope so," but she refrained. "I think so," she answered. "I will tell you just when after I have definite information."

"Please don't be so secretive," said Grace a little sharply. "You must consider that I have my own arrangements to make and that it is due me to know your plans as soon as they are made."

"I will tell you as soon as they are settled," returned Linda stoutly. Here Phebe came in to announce supper and the conversation ended.

CHAPTER II
THE CLINGING VINE

When, two years earlier, Martin Talbot brought his wife to the old family homestead of Talbot's Angles, Linda determined to make the best of the situation. If it was for Martin's happiness to marry the pretty, rather underbred, wholly self-centered Grace Johnson, his sister would not be the one to offer disillusionment. Grace was from the city, dressed well, had dependent little ways which appealed to just such a manly person as Martin. She made much of him, demanded his presence continually, cooed to him persuasively when he would be gone, pouted if he stayed too long, wept if he chided her for being a baby, but under her apparent softness there was obstinacy, and the set purpose of a jealous nature.

Between Linda and her brother there had always been good comradeship, but not much over-demonstration of affection. Each felt that the other was to be depended upon, that in moments of stress, or in emergency there would be no holding back, and consequently Martin expected nothing less than that Linda should accept a new sister-in-law serenely, should make no protests. In fact, he was so deeply in love that, as is the way of mankind, he could not conceive that anyone should not be charmed to become the housemate of such a lovable creature as

he assumed Grace to be, one so warm-hearted, so enchantingly solicitous, so sweetly womanish, and, though he did not exactly underrate Linda, he grew to smile at Grace's little whispers of disparagement. Linda was so cold, so undemonstrative; Linda was so thoughtless of dear Martin. Why, she had never remarked that he was late for dinner. Wasn't it just like Linda to go off by herself to church instead of walking with them? How unappreciative sisters could be of a brother's sacrifices. Not every brother would have supported his sister so uncomplainingly all these years, but dear Martin was such an unselfish darling, he never once thought of its being a sacrifice, and that a less unselfish man would expect his sister to take care of herself. Martin was so chivalrous, and so on.

Therefore, Linda's days of devotion, her constant proofs of affection told in acts rather than in reiterated words, her hours of poring over accounts that she might economize as closely as possible in order that the mortgage might the sooner be paid, her long consultations with Mammy, and her continual mending, patching, turning, contriving, all were forgotten or taken for granted as a just return for her support. That she had driven to town and back again, seven miles each way, during the last years of her school life, that she might still be companion and housekeeper for her brother, seemed no great matter from Grace's point of view, though in those days themselves there had been many a protest against the necessitated late hours that were the result of her many tasks, and "What should I do without my

little sister?" was the daily question.

There was no lack of employment for Linda's hands, even after Grace came, for though very tenacious of her prerogative as mistress of the house, Grace did nothing but assume a great air of being the busy housekeeper, and such work as was not done by Phebe, fell to Linda's share. Martin saw nothing of this, for Grace would bustle in with a show of having been much occupied, would throw herself into a chair with a pretence of fatigue, cast her eyes innocently at Martin, and say, "Oh, I am so tired. Housekeeping in the country is so difficult, but I love doing it for you, dear. Can't you stay home with your little Gracie this afternoon?" And Martin would stay nine times out of ten, with not the slightest perception of the fact that a surface sentimentality which stands in the way of the advancement or profit of another is worth nothing by the side of the year in, year out thought and activity in those little things which, in the end, show a far deeper affection than any clamor for a person's presence or any foolish and unmeaning words of praise.

Linda's pride constrained her to keep all these things to herself, and not even from her old Mammy would she allow criticism of her brother and his wife. Mammy, be it said, was ready enough to grumble at the new order of things to Linda herself, but it was not till the burden was too heavy to bear longer in silence that Linda poured forth the grievances to which no one could listen so sympathetically as Mammy. Indeed, no one could have been a safer listener, for Mammy's pride in the family was

as great as Linda's own, and she would have died rather than have noised its trouble abroad.

Before the next Sunday, Linda had made her arrangements to leave her old home, and Grace's eldest sister, Lauretta, had arrived. Lauretta was a colorless, well-meaning person, a little shaky in her English, inclined to overdress, with no pretension to good looks, and admiring her younger sister the more because of her own lack of beauty. Being less of the spoiled darling, she was less vain and selfish, less wilful and obstinate, but was ready to reflect Grace's opinions, as born of a superior mind, so she quite approved of Linda's departure and prepared to fit into her place as soon as might be, assuming the responsibilities of housekeeping with perfect good will. Of Phebe's departure nothing more had been said, and when Linda questioned the old woman the only answer she received was: "Ain't a-sayin' nuffin."

However, when Linda went into the kitchen one morning and remarked, "I'm going up to town to see Miss Ri Hill, Phebe," she was answered by, "I was thes a-thinkin' I'd go up mahse'f, Miss Lindy."

"How were you going?"

"Well, honey, I kin walk, I reckon."

"You will do no such thing. I intended to go up in the buggy, but I think I can get Jake to drive, and you can go along in the surrey. Have you said anything to Miss Grace about going?"

"No, I ain't, an I ain't a-gwineter. I been hyar befo' she was bo'n, an' she nuvver hire me nohow. I ain't got no call to say

nuffin. When I goes, I goes."

Linda was silent for a moment. "But, Mammy," she said presently, "I don't feel that it is exactly right for you to do that way. If you go to town with me to see about a place, I am responsible in a measure."

"No, yuh ain't. Who say I cain't go see Miss Ri? I ain't a-gwine bag an' baggage. Ef I doesn't go with yuh, I goes on Shanks's mare."

"But who will get dinner to-day?"

"I reckon I kin git Popsy to come in an' git it."

"Well, go along and find out, for I want to get off pretty soon."

Mammy put a discarded felt hat of Martin Talbot's upon her head, and an old table-cover over her shoulders, then sallied forth down the road in search of the woman whose little cabin was one of a number belonging to a negro settlement not far off. Trips to town were so infrequent upon Phebe's part, and she demanded so few afternoons out, that what she wanted was generally conceded her, and though Grace pouted and said she didn't see why both Linda and Phebe should be away at the same time, Lauretta smoothed her down by saying: "Oh, never mind, Gracie dear, I have no doubt the other servant will do very well, and we'll have a nice cosey day together. I can see to everything, and it will give me a good chance to poke around. Old Phebe is such a martinet, she won't allow me inside the kitchen when she is here."

"She certainly is a regular tyrant," admitted Grace, "but no one can cook better, and I am glad to keep her, for down here

it is hard to get competent servants; they are all more or less independent."

"Her being away to-day won't make much difference to you and I," replied Lauretta, with careful attention to her pronoun. She was always very particular never to say you and me. "I'm not a bad cook myself, and we can try some of our own home recipes. For my part, I should think you would get rather tired of oysters and Maryland biscuits."

"I do," returned Grace plaintively. "Linda doesn't always consider me in ordering. Dear Martin didn't seem to notice that until I called his attention to it."

"I don't see why you didn't take up all the housekeeping at the very first," responded Lauretta.

"Oh, I was so unused to it, and these Eastern Shore ways were so unfamiliar. Linda understood them much better than I. Besides, it would have taken up so much of the time I might want to be with Martin." She sighed deeply and wiped a furtive tear before going on: "Then, too," she continued, "I didn't want to neglect my friends, and it does take time to write letters. Everyone always said I was such a good correspondent, and when anyone is in trouble, that my letters are so sympathetic."

Lauretta changed the subject. Even in her sisterly eyes Grace was almost too eager a correspondent. "Why has Linda gone to town?" she asked. "To do some shopping? I suppose she will need some additions to her wardrobe now she is in mourning and is going to town to live."

"Oh, dear no; she is not going to do any shopping for herself. She has all she needs for the present. I gave her some things, and she will soon be earning money for herself. No; she has gone to see about a boarding place, she told me, and she has some errands for me. I think it so much better to give her occupation just now. She is rather a restless person, and she will be much happier than she could be brooding by herself. You know, Lauretta dear, Linda is not so very companionable. She hasn't the nice, confidential way with me that I have with my sisters."

"But she isn't your sister," returned Lauretta bluntly.

"Alas, no. Dear Martin hoped we would be congenial, but you can see it is impossible. I wouldn't acknowledge this to everyone, Lauretta; but I always feel that she holds herself superior. I have seen a look sometimes that made me want to box her ears."

Lauretta kept silence a moment before she said: "The Talbots are of excellent family, Grace."

"And we are not, you mean. That is between ourselves. I am sure I try to impress everyone with the belief that we are," which was too true, "and though our grandparents may have been plain people, Lauretta, in the beginning, they did have plenty of means at the last; we have enough of their solid silver to prove that fact," and indeed Grace's display of solid silver on the sideboard at Talbot's Angles was not allowed to go unnoticed and was her most cherished possession, one of which she made much capital.

"There they go," said Lauretta, looking from the small-paned windows to see the carriage turn from the driveway into the road.

"I may be wrong, but it does seem to me rather like turning Linda out of house and home, Grace, doesn't it?"

"Oh, dear, no; you are quite mistaken. I haven't a doubt but she would much rather live in town. I don't credit her with any real sentiment. She was as calm and self-possessed as possible when Martin died, while I went from one fit of hysterics into another. She can do things which would upset me completely. Oh, you needn't waste your sympathies upon Linda; it is I who am the real sufferer."

"You poor dear," murmured Lauretta. "I am glad you have decided not to spend your winters in this lonely place; it would be too much for one of your sensitive nature."

This was balm to Grace, and she cast a pathetic look at the sister, murmuring: "It is so sweet to be understood."

Meanwhile over the flat, shell road Mammy and Linda were travelling toward the town. Once in a while a thread of blue creek appeared in the distance beyond fields of farmlands, or a white house glimmered out from its setting of tall trees, the masts of a sailing vessel behind it giving one the feeling that he was looking at a floating farm, or that in some mysterious way a vessel had been tossed up far inland, so intersected was the land with little creeks and inlets.

Linda knew every step of the way; to Phebe it was less familiar, and the excitement of going up to town was an unusual one. She hugged herself in her ample shawl and directed, criticised and advised Jake the entire distance. Up through the

shaded streets of the town they continued until they stopped before a gate leading to an old red house which faced the sapphire river. Here lived Miss Maria Hill.

Her cheery self came out on the porch to meet them. "Of all things, Verlinda Talbot!" she cried. "And Phebe, too. Well, this is a surprise. Come right in. You are going to stay to dinner and we will have a good old-fashioned talk." She never failed to call Linda by the quaint name which had been given to various daughters of the Talbot family for many generations. "Go right out into the kitchen, Phebe," continued Miss Ri, "and if you can put any energy into that lazy Randy's heels, I'll be thankful. When are you going to make up your mind to come and live with me, Phebe?" she asked, laughing at the never-failing joke.

But this time Phebe's answer, instead of being: "When de dead ducks eat up all de mud, Miss Ri," was: "Whenever yuh likes to have me, Miss Ri."

Miss Maria stopped short in surprise. She looked from one to another. "You don't mean it!" she cried.

"Yas'm, I means it; dat is, ef acco'din' to de ques', yu teks Miss Lindy, too."

Miss Ri turned her gaze on Linda. "What does all this mean?" she asked. "Come on in, Phebe – no, you mustn't go into the kitchen just yet; we must thrash this out first." She led the way into a cheerful living-room, against whose ancient walls stood solid pieces of shining mahogany. Time-stained pictures, one or two portraits, old engravings, a couple of silhouettes looked down

at the group. "Sit right down here, Verlinda dear. There's a chair for you, Phebe. Now let us hear all about it." Miss Ri drew up a chair and enfolded one of Linda's black-gloved hands in hers. "What does it all mean?"

"It means just this, Miss Ri," said Linda; "Grace is preparing to leave Talbot's Angles and is going to the city for the winter. I cannot stay there alone, even if I had the means to keep up the house, and as it is to be closed, I am thrown on my own resources. Mr. Willis has been good enough to interest himself in getting me a position in one of the schools, and I have come up to town to find a boarding place. I have passed my examinations and am to have Miss Patterson's position, for you know she is going to be married this fall. And now, Miss Ri, Phebe thinks that maybe you would be so good as to take me in."

"Ef yuh teks her, yuh gits me," broke in Phebe with an air of finality.

"It's a bargain," cried Miss Maria. "Have I been speaking for Phebe all these years to be deprived of her now on account of so slight a thing as Verlinda Talbot? No, indeed. I shall be delighted to have you as my guest, my dear. While as for you, Phebe, go right into the kitchen and stir up that lazy Randy with a poker, or anything else you can find. Thank goodness, I shall not have to keep her long. Go along, Phebe." Thus adjured, Phebe departed, ducking her head and chuckling; she dearly liked the errand.

"It must be as a paying guest, you understand," said Linda, when Phebe had left them.

"Paying nonsense! Isn't my house big enough for plump me, skinny you, and fat Phebe? You see how I discriminate between my size and Phebe's?"

"Then if I am not to be a real boarder, I can't come," said Linda firmly.

"And I shall lose Phebe! Verlinda Talbot, you are right-down mean. All right, then, come any way you like, and the sooner, the better. We'll fix it somehow; just make yourself easy on that score. My! I never looked for such luck; a young companion and a good cook at one and the same time. I'll get your room ready right away. I don't suppose you could stay now?"

Linda smiled. "Not to-day. I haven't a very extensive wardrobe, but such as it is, I must get it together; but I shall come within the next ten days. It is so very good of you to take me in, Miss Ri. Joking aside, I am most grateful. It makes the giving up of my own home less of a dread."

"Bless your heart, you dear child; I will try to make you comfortable. I have always wanted someone to mother, but I never expected the Lord would send me Verlinda Talbot. I am not going to ask any questions now, but some day we'll get at the root of the matter. Meantime let it rest. How is Grace bearing up?"

Linda hesitated. "Of course, she misses Martin terribly, but I think she is well; she has a good appetite."

Miss Ri smiled. "I don't doubt it. Has her sister come?"

"Yes."

"A nice sort of somebody, is she?"

"Yes, quite harmless, really good-hearted, I think, but rather dull. However, though she may bore one, she has no affectations. She is devoted to Grace, and I think will be of great use to her."

Miss Ri nodded understandingly. "Take off your things, dear," she said gently. "You are going to stay to dinner, you know, and then we will choose a room for you." She missed the color from the girl's face and noted the heavy shadows under the violet eyes, when Linda removed her hat. "Poor darling," she said to herself, "only time can help her. Grief sits heavily on her heart." She turned to a curious old cupboard in one corner of the room. "You must have some of my home-made wine," she said, "and then we will pick out the room. Would you like one looking out on the river or on the road?"

"Oh, a river room, if I may," replied Linda eagerly.

"Very well; so be it. I'll show you both and you can take your choice; or no, better still, I will fix up the one I am sure you will prefer, for it will look cosier than it does now, and you will have a better impression of it." She poured out some amber-hued wine from an old decanter. "Here, drink this," she said, "and I will join you in a health. Here's to many happy days under my roof, Verlinda, and may you never regret coming to your old friend, Maria Hill."

Just then Phebe's black face appeared at the door. "Miss Ri," she said, "I cain't stan' pokin' 'roun' arfter that fool nigger. I is gwine to set de table, ef yuh'll show me whar de things is, please,

ma'am."

Miss Ri finished her glass with a "Here's to Phebe!" and Linda followed her to the dining-room.

CHAPTER III
LEAVING THE NEST

In this quiet little corner of Maryland's eastern shore, if life lacked the bustle and stir of more widely-known localities, it did not lack interest for its residents, while at the same time it provided a certain easy content which is missed in places more densely populated, or of more stirring affairs… To Linda Talbot the days had come and gone in careless fashion up to the time of her brother's death, for even his marriage did not rob her of friendships, and of concern in the small neighborhood doings, especially in matters relating to the little church, which, because it stood upon Talbot ground, had always been considered the special care of those dwelling at Talbot's Angles. The church was very old and it had required many bazars, many efforts at subscription, many appeals to keep it in repair, and now it showed its antiquity in moss-grown walls, mouldy woodwork, falling plaster and weather-stained casements.

On this last Sunday, when she should perform her weekly duty of placing flowers upon the altar, Linda clipped her choicest white chrysanthemums from the bushes and early in the day took them to the church, making her way through dankly green paths overgrown with woodbine, that she might reach the enclosure where dead and gone Talbots of many generations were buried.

Upon a newly-sodded grave she laid her fairest blossoms, and stood for a moment with heaving breast and quivering lips, then she went on to the church, pushing open the creaking door which led into the still, dimly-lighted, musty-smelling place.

"There must be more air and sun," she said, setting wide the door and forcing open a window that the sunlight might pour in. Then she busied herself with placing the flowers in their vases. This done, she sat down in the old family pew, her thoughts travelling back to the days when it had been scarce large enough for them all, father, mother, grandmother, two brothers, three sisters, and now all resting in the quiet churchyard, herself the youngest of them all, the only one left. She ran her hand lovingly along the corner of the pew where her mother had been wont to sit; she touched with her lips the spot where Martin's forehead had so often rested as he knelt by her side. Next she knelt, herself, for a few minutes; then, without looking back, she left the church, to return later to the one service of the day, letting Grace and Lauretta follow.

Even sorrow possessed certain elements of satisfaction to Grace when she was made a conspicuous object of sympathy. She could not have mourned in silence, if she had tried, and the gratification of hearing someone say as she passed: "Poor, dear Mrs. Talbot, how pathetic she looks," was true balm to her grief. She always went regularly to church, swept in late in all her swathing of crape, to take her place in the Talbot pew, and as certain suggestive looks were cast her, she returned them with a

plaintive droop of the eye, and a mournful turn of the head, as if she would say: "Yes, here I am in all my woe. Pity me who will, and I shall be grateful." Linda, on the contrary, stole into a back seat just before the service began and stole out again as soon as it was over. She could not yet face sympathy and commiseration.

Especially on this last Sunday did she feel uncertain of herself and wished heartily that the day were over, for Grace could not and would not be set aside for any matter of packing, and reproached the girl for her coldness and indifference toward her "own brother's wife," from whom she was about to be parted, so that Linda must fain sit and listen to commonplaces till Grace settled herself for a nap, and then she escaped to her room. There had promised to be a stormy time over Phebe's leave-taking, but as both Linda and Lauretta brought arguments to bear upon the matter, Grace was at last made to admit that, after giving a week's notice, Phebe could not be expected to lose the opportunity of taking a good place when Grace herself should so soon cease to need her. At first there was an effort at temporizing, and then Grace tried to exact a promise that Phebe would return in the summer, but the old woman would give her no satisfaction, and she was obliged to make the best of it.

There was a great bustle and stir the next morning, more because of Phebe's departure than because of Linda's, for Phebe was here, there, everywhere giving orders and scolding away "Jes' lak a ole bluejay," declared Jake. She was so importantly funny that Popsy, who was to fill her place, and Jake, who had long

known her ways, grinned and snickered so continually, that after all, Linda's departure was not the heart-breaking thing she had fancied it would be, and even the drive to town was deprived of melancholy on account of the lively chatter which Jake and Phebe kept up and which was too droll not to bring a smile from one listening.

"Of course, you will come back for the summer holidays," Grace had said at parting, with the air of one who knows her duty and intends to do it. "Of course, you remember that it was dear Martin's wish that you would make the place your home whenever I might be here."

But Linda had made no reply except a faint "I don't know what I shall do next summer." That season was too far off to be making plans for it now when the winter must be gone through, a winter whose unknown ways she would be compelled to learn.

But Miss Ri's welcome was so warm that there was little room left for the sadness of parting after the cheery greeting. "Welcome home, dear child. Come right upstairs. Your room is all ready. That's it, Phebe. Fetch along the bags. I've fixed you up a place over the kitchen. It is a new experience for me to have a cook who doesn't want to go home nights. Right through the kitchen and up the back stairs. You'll find your way. Come, Verlinda, let me have your umbrella or something. I can take that bag."

"Indeed, no. I'm not going to have you waiting on me, Miss Ri."

"Just this once. I'm so proud of having a young lass to look after that you'll have to let me have my way for this first day. There, how do you like it?" She threw open the door of the spotless room, whose windows, though small, were many, and revealed a view of the sparkling blue river, the harbor near by and, on the opposite shores, stretches of green farmlands. The room itself was long and low. It held an old-fashioned four-poster bed with snowy valance, a handsomely-carved mahogany bureau, a spindle-legged table with leaf set up against the wall, a desk which was opened to show many pigeon-holes and small drawers. A low, soft couch, chairs of an antique pattern, and a wood stove completed the furniture. White curtains were at the windows, and on the high mantel were one or two quaint ornaments.

"Now, my dear," said Miss Ri, "this is your sanctum. You can switch the furniture around any way that you prefer, tack up pictures, put your own belongings where you choose, and if there is anything you don't like, it shall be removed."

"It is a darling room," returned Linda gratefully. "I can't imagine how one could want to change a single thing."

"Then we'll have your trunk up; there will be room for one at least in this closet," Miss Ri told her, flinging open a door to disclose further accommodations. "Here's your washstand, you see, and there will be room for some of your frocks on these hooks; the rest can go in the clothes-press on the other side of the room and you can have another bureau, if you like. The trunks could go up in the attic, if that would suit better; but we will let

that work out as it will later. Now, make yourself comfortable, and I'll go look after Phebe. Come down when you are ready."

Left to herself, Linda sank down in a chair by the window, for a moment overcome by the thought that she had cut loose from all the ties which bound her to the dear old home. But in a moment her courage returned. "What nonsense," she murmured. "Was ever a girl so lucky? Here I am with my living assured and with dear Miss Ri to coddle me; with this darling room; and, last of all, with my own old Mammy at hand. I am a perfect ingrate to want more." She turned her eyes from a survey of the room to a survey of the outside. Along the river's brink stood some little houses, where the oystermen lived; nearer, was a long building, where the oyster-packing went on. Every now and then, through the open window, came a sound of cheerful singing from the shuckers at work. Tall-masted sail-boats dipped and curtseyed upon the sapphire waters. Across the river a line of shore was misty-green in the autumn light; closer at hand a grassy slope, over which tall trees cast their shadows, stretched down to the river. One or two little row-boats tethered to a stake, near a small boat-house, rocked gently as the tiny wavelets leaped up on the sandy brink. Vines clambered to the very windows of her room, amongst their leaves birds were twittering. The trees about the place were many, and from one of them a scarlet tanager was shrilling out his inviting call. "It is next best to being at home," Linda told herself, "and to get next best is a rare thing. I will unpack at my leisure, for perhaps I'd better see how Mammy is

faring."

She found Miss Ri in the sitting-room and Phebe already busy in the kitchen. Miss Ri was looking over some photograph prints. She handed one to Linda. "Tell me what you think of it," she said.

"Fine!" exclaimed Linda. "I didn't know you were an expert photographer, Miss Ri."

"I'm not. Don't give me credit for them. Sit down and I'll tell you how I happen to have them. One day, not long ago, I was potting some of my plants for the winter, when a young man came in the gate. I had never seen him before and thought he must be a book-agent or some sort of trader in dustless dusters or patent flat-irons, though he was much too nice-looking for that kind of business. Well, he walked up to me and said, 'Don't you want me to take some photographs of your house and grounds? This is certainly the most picturesque place I have seen about here.'"

"Of course, that pleased you, and so – "

"Yes, that is it exactly, and so he took a lot of views, interiors and exteriors, and I think they are pretty good. He didn't overcharge, and if he had done it, I should be disposed to forgive him. He stayed all the morning – "

"And I'll venture to say you asked him to dinner."

Miss Ri laughed. "Well, yes, I did; for who wouldn't have almost anyone rather than eat alone? He did stay and told me his story, which was a most interesting one."

"I hope he didn't go off with his pockets full of your old silver."

"My dear, he is a gentleman."

"Oh, is he? And goes around taking photographs? This is interesting, Miss Ri. Tell me some more."

"Well, it seems that he has come down here to look up some property that belonged to his great-grandfather and which he should have inherited by all rights; but, unfortunately, his trunk, with all the papers he needs, has gone astray, and, what is more, he was robbed of his pocketbook; so now, while he is waiting to find the trunk and until his next quarter's money comes in, he finds himself, as they express it, 'momentarily embarrassed'; but, having his camera with him and being a good amateur photographer, he is turning his gifts to account, that he may at least pay his board."

"It seems to me it would have been more to the purpose, if he had been robbed of the camera instead of the pocket-book. He strikes me as a very careless young man to lose both his trunk and his purse."

"He didn't lose the pocket-book; it was stolen; he is sure of that; and as for the trunk, it was sent by a local expressman to the steamboat, and so far has not been traced."

"A very clever story," Linda went on. "I am only surprised that you didn't offer to take him in here until the missing articles are found."

"I did think of it," returned Miss Ri with a twinkle in her eye, "and if you hadn't been coming, I might have done it; but I was afraid he might prove too susceptible or that – "

"I might," returned Linda, laughing. "You certainly are considerate, Miss Ri. Where is our paragon, now?"

"Oh, I sent him to Parthy Turner's, and they are both having a mighty nice time of it. She has turned him over to Berk Matthews, and he is doing what he can for him."

"And do you believe there really was a great-grandfather?"

"Oh, dear, yes; I am convinced of it. The young man has shown us his credentials, and I have no doubt but that in time he can find enough proof to substantiate what he has told us about his claim. If only the trunk could be found, he says he thinks it would be a very simple thing to establish his rights."

"And am I not to see this mysterious stranger? I suppose he comes here sometimes to report."

"If you are very good, I may let you see him through the crack of the door; but he is not for you. I have picked out someone else."

"Oh, you have? So you are a confessed matchmaker, Miss Ri? May I know the name of my knight?"

"No, you may not; that would be enough to make you turn your back on him at once. It is entirely my secret."

"And the picked out person doesn't know he is picked out?"

"Not a bit of it; he hasn't the faintest suspicion. How good that dinner does smell. Phebe is the only thing I wanted that I didn't have, and now I have her."

"Do you really mean, Miss Ri, that you get everything you want in this world?"

"Why, yes; at least of late years it has been so. I found out the secret from Thoreau some ten or more years ago."

"A precious secret, I should say."

"A very simple one. It is easy enough to get what one wants, when one makes it a rule to want only what he can get. If you think you haven't enough for your wants, all you have to do is to reduce your wants."

"I'm afraid my philosophy isn't sufficient for such a state of things," said Linda with a sigh.

"Why isn't it? Now, let's face the question. What do you want that you can't get?"

Linda was silent before she said tremulously, "My brother."

"Ah, my dear, that is all wrong. Don't you believe that you have your brother still? If he were in Europe, in China, in India, wouldn't you still have him? Even if he were in some unreachable place like the South Pole, he would still be your brother, and now because he has gone a little further away, is he not yours just the same?"

"Oh, Miss Ri, sometimes I am afraid I doubt it."

"But I know it, for there was One who said, 'If it were *not* so, I would have told you.' Even the greatest scoffer among us must admit that our Lord was one who did speak the truth; that is what comforts."

Linda laid her cheek against the other woman's hand. "That does comfort," she said. "I never saw it that way before. Is it that, Miss Ri, that keeps you almost always so bright and happy? You

who have lost all your nearest and dearest, too? You so seldom get worried or blue."

"Yes, I suppose it is that and another reason," returned Miss Ri, unwilling to continue so serious a talk.

"And what is the other?"

"I try to make it a rule never to get mad with fools," replied Miss Ri with a laugh. "Of course, I don't always succeed, but the trying helps a lot."

Just here Phebe's head appeared at the door. "Miss Ri, I cain't find no tater-masher. What I gwine do?"

"Oh, dear me; let me see. Oh, yes, I remember; Randy threw it at black Wally the other day when he was pestering her. She didn't hit him and I reckon she never troubled herself to pick up the potato-masher; you'll find it somewhere about the back yard. Randy certainly has a temper, for all she is so slow in other ways. Come along, Verlinda; I promised to show you that old wine-cooler we were talking about the other day. I found it down cellar, when the men were clearing out the trash; I've had it done over, and it isn't bad." She led the way to the living-room, which, rich in old mahogany, displayed an added treasure in the quaint wine-cooler, in which the bottles could lie slanting, around the central receptacle for ice.

"It is a beautiful piece of wood," commented Linda, "and it is certainly curious enough. I do love this room, with all this beautiful old furniture. How do you manage to keep it so beautifully polished?"

"Give it a rub up once in a while; and, you see, between whiles there is no one to abuse the things, so they keep bright. Let us see about the potato-masher; Phebe's found it, I declare. I venture to say it won't lie out of doors for a week, while she's here."

CHAPTER IV
"DEPARTED DAYS"

Miss Parthy Turner's back garden was separated from Miss Maria Hill's by a fence in which a gate was cut that the two might sociably jog back and forth without going around the block. One of Linda's windows overlooked these gardens, where apple-trees disputed right of way with lilac bushes and grape-vines, and where, just now, late roses were cast in the shade by the more brilliant chrysanthemums. Miss Parthy, it may be said, was of a more practical turn than her neighbor in that she gave over to vegetables a larger part of her garden space, so that there were still discernible rows of cabbages, slowly-ripening pumpkins, high-poled beans, and a few late tomatoes.

The morning after her arrival, Linda noticed in the garden, beyond the dividing line, a young man walking about with an evident eye to the quality of the apples shining redly above his head. She regarded this person with some curiosity, conjecturing that he was the mysterious stranger who had taken the photographs for Miss Ri. "He doesn't look like a fake," she told herself. "I suppose his story may be true. By the way, Miss Ri didn't tell me his name nor where he hails from." However, her thoughts did not long dwell upon the stranger, for this was to be her initial morning at school, and she was looking forward

to it with dismay and dread. She scarce tasted her breakfast and looked so pale and anxious, that Miss Ri's heart ached for her. Mammy, too, was most solicitous, but knew no better way to express her sympathy than by urging hot cakes upon the girl with such persistence that at last, to please her, Linda managed to eat one.

In spite of fears, the morning went more smoothly than she had anticipated, for Miss Patterson remained to coach her and she became familiarized with the routine, at least. Her pupils were little boys, none too docile, and naturally a new teacher was a target for tricks, if so she did not show her mettle. Under Miss Patterson's watchful eye there was no chance for mutiny, and Linda went home with some of her qualms allayed. She had passed her examinations creditably enough and felt that she could cope with the mere matters of teaching, but the disciplining of a room full of mischievous urchins was quite another question, and the next morning her heart misgave her when she met the rows of upturned faces, some expressing mock meekness, some defiant bravado, some open mirth. Courageously as she met the situation, it was a trying morning. If her back was turned for but an instant, there were subdued snickers; if she made a statement, it was questioned; if she censured, there were black looks and whispers of disapproval. At last one offender, sneaking on his hands and knees to the desk of another boy, was captured and marched off to the principal, a last resort, as poor Linda's nerves could stand no more. She was near to crying, her voice trembled and her

heart beat fast. She scarcely knew how she went through the rest of the morning, for, though her summary act had quelled open rebellion, she was not at ease and keenly felt the undercurrent of criticism. She did not realize that the boys were trying her spirit, and she went home discouraged and exhausted, a sense of defeat overcoming her.

As she was entering the gate, she met someone coming out, a young man, rather heavily built, with a keen, clever face, rather than a handsome one. "Ah, Miss Linda," he exclaimed, holding out his hand, "I've just been hearing about you."

"From Miss Ri, of course. Well, what has she been telling you?"

"It wouldn't do to say. How is the school going?"

"The school in general seems to be going very well; as to my part of it, the least said, the better."

"Really? What's the trouble?"

"I don't know exactly. I suppose that I am the trouble, perhaps; Miss Patterson seemed to get along well enough."

"Boys or girls do you have?"

"Boys; little wretches from eight to ten, such sinners, not a saint among them."

"Would you have even one saint? I wouldn't, for he couldn't be a truly normal, healthy boy. But I am keeping you standing and I know you are ready for your dinner. I'll walk back to the house with you, and you can tell me the particular kinds of sin that have annoyed you. I was a boy myself once, you know."

He walked by her side to the house. Miss Ri, seeing them coming, was at the door to meet them. "I thought I sent you home once, Berk Matthews," she said.

"So you did, but I took this way of going. Don't imagine for a moment that my return involves an invitation to dinner, Miss Ri."

"That is an excellent thing, for I don't intend to extend one."

"Could you believe that she would so fail in hospitality?" said the young man, turning to Linda. "I am mortified, Miss Ri, not because of the dinner, but that you should go back on the reputation of an Eastern Shore hostess. Isn't it a world-wide theory that we of the Eastern Shore never turn a guest from the door when there is the faintest possibility of his accepting a bid to a meal? Alas, that you should be the first to establish a precedent that will change the world's opinion of us."

Miss Ri laughed. "You would think I was a client for the other side and that he was using his wiles to get me fined, at least. Come along in, if you must; I can guarantee you better fare than you will get at the Jackson House, I am bound to say."

"That sounds alluring, but my feelings are hurt because I had to hint for an invitation."

"Could anything so obvious be dignified by the name of a hint? Very well, go along and cut off your nose to spite your face, if you like; you will be the loser."

"Not very complimentary, is she?" said Mr. Matthews, laughing. "I believe I will come now, just to show you that I am not to be badgered."

"Then don't stand there keeping us from our dinner. It is all ready, and I don't want it spoiled." Thus adjured, the young man followed the others into the dining-room, where Phebe was just setting forth the meal.

"Well, and how did it go to-day, Verlinda?" asked Miss Ri, when they had seated themselves.

"Don't ask her anything till after dinner," put in Mr. Matthews. "Things will assume an entirely different aspect when she has had something to eat. Just now the shooting of the young idea is not a pleasant process to contemplate, in the eyes of Miss Linda. We'll talk about something else. Where did you get these oysters, Miss Ri? I never tasted such a pie."

"Of course you didn't, for you never ate one made by such a cook. The oysters came from the usual place, but I'm in high feather, Berk, for I have the best cook in town. I have Linda's Phebe."

"You don't want another boarder?"

"Not I. Linda is adopted; she is not to be classed with common boarders, and I certainly don't want to spoil my ideal household by taking in a – "

"Mere man," interrupted Berkley. "Very well, I will find an excuse to come in every day about meal time. What are you going to have for supper?"

"Cold cornbread, dried apples and chipped beef," replied Miss Ri with gravity.

"That's mean. Well, I'll come around with the papers to-

morrow."

"We're going to have the remains of the chipped beef and dried apples for dinner."

"Then I'll come about supper time; they can't last over three meals."

"You don't know the surviving qualities of those articles of diet; they may last a week with proper care."

"I'll come and find out. I can go in the back way and ask Phebe, or I might bribe her to throw the stuff over the fence to Miss Parthy's chickens."

"Don't you be up to any of your lawyer's tricks, Berk Matthews. I warn you, not a meal in my house shall you eat, if I hear of any shenannyging on your part."

"I'll be good then, but I'd like a piece of that pie, a nice big piece."

While all this nonsense was going on, Linda kept silence. She was really hungry and the light foolish talk was a relief, as the others intended it should be. In consequence, she went back to school in better spirits and the afternoon passed more satisfactorily.

True to his threat, Berkley Matthews did appear with some papers just before supper time, but refused to stay, telling Miss Ri with great glee that Miss Parthy had invited him to her house and that she was going to cook the supper herself, while he and her other guest, Wyatt Jeffreys, were going to help.

"Wyatt Jeffreys, Wyatt Jeffreys," repeated Linda. "That name

sounds very familiar. I wonder where I have heard it. Where is he from, Miss Ri?"

"From Connecticut, I believe. Any more light on the case, Berk?"

"No. Nothing can be done till he shows up his papers, and they seem to be lost irrevocably. It's pretty hard on the poor chap, if there is really anything in the claim. Good-by, Miss Linda. I must be going, Miss Ri; you can't wheedle me into staying this time."

"Wheedle you!" cried Miss Ri in pretended indignation. "I can scarcely get rid of such a persistent beggar. Go along and don't come back."

"I'll have to," cried he. "You must sign those papers at once, this very evening."

"I'll bring them to your office to-morrow morning," Miss Ri called after him, but he only waved his hand with a parting "Shan't be there," and Miss Ri turned to Linda, laughing. "We always have it back and forth this way. He attends to my business, you know, and runs in often. Now that his mother and sister have left town, he boards at the hotel, and likes the home feeling of coming here to a meal. Nice boy, Berk is."

Linda had known Berkley Matthews all her life. As a little stocky boy he had come to play with her in Miss Ri's garden on some of the occasions when she was brought from Talbot's Angles to spend the day. Later he had gone to boarding-school, then to college, and she had seen little of him during late years.

"He'll be back," said Miss Ri nodding, "just to get the better of

me. But to tell you the truth, Verlinda, he certainly is a comfort, for he looks out for my interest every time. I wouldn't have a house nor a field left by this time, if it had depended upon my kin folks. Don't be an old maid, Verlinda. When their very nearest and dearest are gone, old maids seem to be regarded, by the world in general, as things so detached as to have no rights whatever; their possessions appear to be regarded as so many threads hanging from them; whoever comes along in need of a needleful, makes a grab, possesses himself of such a length and makes off with it, never stopping to see that it leaves a gaping rent behind."

Linda laughed. Miss Ri's grievances were not many, but were generally those caused by her stepbrother's family, who lived not far away and made raids upon her whenever they came to town.

"Oh, well, you may laugh," Miss Ri went on, "but it is quite true. Why, only the last time Becky was here she carried off a little mirror that had belonged to my great-grandmother."

"Why did you let her have it? Your great-grandmother was no relation of hers."

"I know that; but she talked so much, I had to let her take it to get rid of the incessant buzzing. You know what a talker Becky is."

"But you like Mrs. Becky; I've often heard you say so."

"Oh, yes, I like her well enough. She is entertaining when she is talking about other people's affairs and not mine," remarked Miss Ri with a droll smile. "That is the way it generally is,

I suppose. Well, anyhow, Berk Matthews keeps my business together, and I'm sure I am satisfied to have him run in when he chooses, if only to keep me in a good humor."

"I thought you were always so, and that you never got mad with fools."

"I don't; but Becky is no fool, my dear."

They turned into the big drawing-room, a room charming enough in itself, without the addition of the fine old Chippendale chairs and tables, the carved davenport, the big inlaid piano, and the portraits representing beauties of a departed time. Linda knew them all. The beautiful girl in white, holding a rose, was Miss Ri's grandmother, for whom she was named and who was a famous belle in her day. The gentleman in red hunting-coat was a great-grandfather and his wife the lady with powdered hair and robed in blue satin. The man with the sword was another great-grandfather, and so on. One must go up a step to reach the embrasured windows which looked riverward, but at the others, which faced the lawn, hung heavy damask curtains. Linda had always liked the smaller windows, and when she was a little child had preferred to play on the platform before them to going anywhere else. There was such a sense of security in being thus raised above the floor. She liked, too, the little writing-room and the tiny boudoir which led from the larger room, though these were closed, except in summer, as so large a house was hard to heat comfortably.

A freshly-burning fire in the fireplace sent glancing lights over

the tall candlesticks and sought out the brightest spots on the old picture-frames. It picked out the brass beading on the yellow-keyed piano, and flickered across Chinese curios on the spindle-legged tables. Miss Ri's grandfather had been an admiral in the navy and many were the treasures which were tucked away here, out of sight there, or more happily, brought forth to take the place of some more modern gift which had come to grief in the hands of careless servants.

"It is a dear old room," said Linda, sitting down at the piano and touching softly the yellowed keys, which gave forth a tinkling response.

"I ought to have a new piano," said Miss Ri, "and now you have come, it will be an excuse to get one. I'll see what I can do next time I go to town. I remember that you have a nice voice."

"Nothing to boast of."

"Not very powerful, perhaps, but sweet and true. I wish you'd sing for me, Verlinda, if you are not too tired."

"I will, if you will first play for me some of those things I used to love when I was a child. You would play till I grew drowsy, and then you would carry me off to bed."

"Oh, my dear, I don't play nowadays, and on that old tinkling piano."

"But it is just because it is the old piano that I want the old tunes."

"Then pick out what you like, and I will try."

Linda turned over a pile of music to find such obsolete titles

as "Twilight Dews," "Departed Days," "Showers of Pearl," and the like. She selected one and set it on the rack. "Here is one I used to like the best," she said. "It suggested all sorts of things to my childish mind; deep woods, fairy calls, growling giants; I don't know what all."

"'Departed Days.' Very fitly named, isn't it? for it is at least fifteen years ago, and it was an old thing then. Well, I will try; but you mustn't criticise when I stumble." She sat down to the piano, a stout, fresh-colored, grey-haired woman with a large mouth, whose sweet expression betokened the kindly nature better than did the humorous twinkling eyes. She played with little style, but sympathetically, though the thin tinkling notes might have jarred upon the ears of one who had no tender associations with the commonplace melody. To Linda it was a voice from out of her long-ago, and she listened with a wistful smile till suddenly the door opened and the music ended with a false chord. Miss Ri shut the piano with a bang, and turned to greet the young man who entered.

CHAPTER V
THE ALARM

"Have I interrupted a musicale?" asked Berkley jauntily.

"You are just in time to hear Verlinda sing," responded Miss Ri with ready tact and in order to cover her own confusion.

"Ah, that's good," cried he, though "Oh, Miss Ri," came in protest from Linda.

"Didn't you promise to sing for me, if I played for you?" queried Miss Ri.

"Yes, – but – only for you."

"Now, Miss Linda," Berkley expostulated, "haven't I known you as long as Miss Ri has?"

"Not quite," Linda answered.

"But does the matter of a few months or even years, when you were yet in a state of infantile bewilderment, make any difference?"

"It makes all the difference," Linda was positive.

"Oh, come, come," spoke up Miss Ri, "that is all nonsense. You don't make any bones of singing in the church choir, Verlinda."

"Oh, but then I have the support of other voices."

"Well, you can have the support of Berk's voice; I am sure it is big enough."

"Oh, but I don't sing anything but college songs," the young man declared.

"Such a very modest pair," laughed Miss Ri.

"Well, who was blushing like a sixteen-older when I came in? Tell me that," said Berkley triumphantly. And Miss Ri was perforce to acknowledge that she was as bad as the rest, but the controversy was finally ended by Linda's consenting to sing one song if Berkley would do the same. She chose a quaint old English ballad as being in keeping with the clinking piano, and then Berkley sang a rollicking college song to a monotonous accompaniment which, however, was nearly drowned by his big baritone.

By the time this was ended the ice was broken and they warmed up to the occasion. They dragged forth some of Miss Ri's old music-books to find such sentimental songs of a former day as pleased their fancy. Over some of these they made merry; over others they paused. "My mother used to sing that," Berkley would say. "So did my mother," Linda would answer, and then would follow: "She Wore a Wreath of Roses," "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton," "Cast That Shadow from Thy Brow," or some other forgotten ballad.

"Oh, here is 'The Knight of the Raven Black Plume,'" cried Linda, as she turned the discolored pages of one of the old books. "How I used to love that; it is so romantic. Listen," and she began, "A lady looked forth from her lattice."

So they went from one thing to another till Berkley, looking

at his watch exclaimed, "I'm keeping you all up, and Miss Ri, we haven't seen to those papers. That music is a treasure-trove, Miss Linda. We must get at the other books sometime, but we'll take some Friday night when you can sleep late the next morning."

Linda's face shadowed. "Why remind me of such things? I had nearly forgotten that there were matters like school-rooms and abandoned little wretches of boys."

"Don't be so hard on the little chaps. I was one once, as I reminded you, and I have some sympathy with them caged up in a school-room. Just get the point of contact and you will be all right."

"Ah, but there's the rub," returned Linda ruefully. "I am not used to boys, and any sort of contact, pointed or otherwise, doesn't appeal to me."

"You must just bully them into good behavior," put in Miss Ri. "Here, Berk, you be the little boy and I'll be the school-marm. Verlinda needs an object lesson." Then followed a scene so funny that Linda laughed till she cried.

"Where are those papers?" inquired Miss Ri suddenly putting an end to the nonsense. "Bring them into the sitting-room, Berk, and we will get them done with. I'm going up to town to-morrow, and we may as well finish up this business before I go."

"One of your mysterious errands, Miss Ri?" said Berkley smiling.

"Never mind what it is; that is none of your concern. You don't suppose because you collect my rents, and look after my leases

that you must know every time I buy a paper of hairpins."

"You don't have to go up to the city for those, you see. It is my private opinion, Miss Linda, that she makes a semi-annual visit to a fortune-teller or some one of that ilk. I notice she is more than ordinarily keen when she gets back after one of these trips."

"Come along, come along," interrupted Miss Ri. "You'll stand here talking all night. I declare you are as bad as Becky Hill."

"Oh, yes, I'm coming, Miss Ri. Do you know Mrs. Hill, Miss Linda? and did you ever hear what her sister, Mrs. Phil Reed says of her?"

"I know Mrs. Hill, yes, indeed, but I never heard the speech. What was it?"

"You know what a talker Mrs. Becky is. Mrs. Reed refers to it in this way. 'Becky, dear child, is so sympathetic, so interested in others that she exhausts herself by giving out so much to her friends.'"

"I should say it was the friends who were exhausted," returned Linda. But here Miss Ri suddenly turned out the lights leaving them to grope their way to the sitting-room where the papers were signed and then Berkley was, as Miss Ri termed it, driven out.

The steamboat which left at six o'clock every evening bore Miss Ri away on its next trip. It was an all night journey down the river and up the bay, and therefore, Miss Ri would not return till the morning of the second day when the boat arrived on its voyage from the city.

"If you are afraid to sleep in the house with no one but Phebe, get some one to come and stay with you," charged Miss Ri. "Bertie Bryan will come, I am sure."

"I shall not be in the least afraid," declared Linda. "Phebe and I have often stayed in the house alone at Talbot's Angles."

"Nevertheless, I would rather you did have someone. I'll send Phebe over to the Bryans with a note." This she did in spite of Linda's protest that it was not necessary, and after Linda had returned from seeing Miss Ri on her way, Bertie arrived. She was a nice wholesome girl who had been a schoolmate of Linda's and had spent many a day with her at Talbot's Angles. She was not exactly a beauty, but a lovely complexion and sweet innocent eyes helped out the charm of frank good nature and unaffected geniality.

"It certainly is good to see you in town, Linda," she said as she greeted her friend. "Why didn't you send me word you were here? I would have been over long ago."

"I wanted to gather my wits together first. I am experimenting, you see, and I didn't know how my experiment might turn out. I was afraid I might have to slink off again ignominiously after the first week."

"But, as this is the second week and you are not slinking, I surmise it is all right."

"Not exactly all right, but I manage to keep from having hysterics, and am getting my youngsters in hand better."

"I heard Miss Adams say this morning that you were getting

on very well for one who had never had any experience."

"That is the most encouraging thing I have heard yet. I have been wondering what my principal really did think, and to have that much praise is worth a great deal," said Linda gratefully. "Now don't let us talk shop. Tell me what is going on in town."

"Don't you hear every bit of town news from Miss Ri? What she can't tell you Miss Parthy can."

"I haven't seen much of Miss Parthy. The hobnobbing between those two generally goes on while I am at school. Have you met the mysterious stranger, Bertie?"

"Yes, indeed, and he is quite an acquisition, or would be if he could find his trunk. Have you met him?"

Linda smiled. "No, Miss Ri is afraid I shall fall in love with him, I think, and has stipulated that he is only to call at such hours as I am at school."

"What nonsense. Is she making a recluse of you?"

"Oh, no. Berk Matthews is allowed, or rather he comes without being allowed, being a favorite and liable to take his own way. Tell me more of the man without a trunk."

"Sounds rather ghastly, doesn't it? Well, he is like almost any other nice young man, has good manners, speaks correctly, makes himself agreeable when the opportunity is afforded. It is rumored that his affairs are in better shape, and that money orders and checks and things have come in, so he is no longer a mere travelling photographer."

"I wonder he stays here now that he has the means to get

away."

"Oh, but he came prepared to stay. At least his object was to look up this property. He has been up to the city once or twice and is still hoping to recover the trunk which he thinks must be in Baltimore still. In the meantime he is very reticent about his case, won't talk of it to anyone, so nobody seems to know exactly what he does claim."

"The name is very familiar," remarked Linda thoughtfully. "I can't think where I have heard it."

"There is some sort of romantic tale about him, Miss Parthy says. She seems to know more than anyone."

"He can't be a duke or a prince in disguise," said Linda.

"He might be, for he was educated abroad, I have heard."

"Wyatt Jeffreys – Jeffreys – I can't get the name located. I suppose it will come to me sometime."

The girls had a quiet chatty evening alone, and started upstairs betimes. To Bertie was given a room opening out of Linda's, and with many a good-night they at last settled down to sleep.

From her first nap Linda, after a while, was awakened by the low murmur of voices beneath her window. She listened with beating heart. No, there was no mistake. Should she arouse Bertie? She listened for a few moments and then heard a sound as of someone trying a shutter. Next a door-knob rattled slightly. Though frightened enough Linda was no coward, and as she sat up in bed listening, her brain worked rapidly. It would be better to arouse Bertie than to go prowling around alone, and have her

friend doubly alarmed. Together they would go down stairs and perhaps could scare off the would-be burglars. Slipping on some clothing she cautiously went to Bertie's door, candle in hand. Flashing the light before her friend's closed eyes she succeeded in awaking without alarming her.

"What's the matter, Linda?" asked Bertie sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "Are you ill? It isn't morning, is it?"

"No, I'm not ill. Don't be scared, Bertie, but get up and put on some clothes quickly. I am sure I heard someone trying to get into the house."

"But what can we do?" asked Bertie in a shaking voice. "We mustn't go down, Linda; we mustn't. Let's lock the doors and let them take what they want."

"I don't believe they have really broken in yet, and I am going to try to scare them away. I wish I had a pistol; I left mine in the country, not supposing I should need it here."

"I'm sure we left everything safely locked and barred; you know we tried every door and window."

"Yes, I know. It wouldn't be any sneak thief, of course. I have a plan. Come into my room and let's peep out the window." They extinguished the candle and crept to Linda's window, already raised. There was no one in sight.

"Now we'll go to Miss Ri's room," whispered Linda. Tiptoeing across the hall they went into this room at the front of the house and gently raised a window here.

"I believe I hear someone on the porch," whispered Linda,

drawing in her head. "Someone is at the front door. Come on down. They are not inside yet; that is a comfort."

"Oh, but do you think we ought to go?" asked Bertie in trepidation. "Suppose they should get in and shoot us."

"No, they are still outside, I am sure."

The rooms below were dark and silent, windows and shutters tightly closed. The girls listened at the front door. Yes, surely there was a very low murmur of voices. Linda crept into the dining-room, Bertie holding tightly to her sleeve.

"What are you going to do?" asked Bertie fearfully.

"I'll show you. Don't be scared, and don't hold on to me."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to blow up some paper bags. You take this one and blow into it while I open the window. As soon as it is up burst your bag, and I'll get mine ready. Say when you are ready."

"Ready!" whispered Bertie and up went the window, back shot the bolt and upon the silence of the night sounded a loud report quickly followed by a second.

"Hallo!" cried a surprised voice. "Here, Miss Linda, don't shoot."

The girls who had drawn back from the window clutched one another, but felt an immense relief.

There were footsteps on the porch and presently two figures appeared before the open window. "Hallo, in there," called someone. "It's only I, Berk Matthews, Miss Linda."

The two girls approached the window. "What in the world are

you doing prowling around here at this time of night, trying our bolts and bars?" asked Linda, indignantly. "You scared us nearly to death."

"And don't you reckon you gave us a good scare. It is lucky you don't see one of us weltering in gore, Linda Talbot. Just like a girl to be reckless with fire-arms."

Bertie stifled a giggle and pinched Linda's arm.

"It would serve you right to welter," Linda replied severely. "What right had you to try to frighten us, I demand?"

"We didn't intend to, but I promised Miss Ri faithfully that I would make a point of coming around here after you had gone to bed to see if by any chance some door or window had been left insecure."

"Well, you might have told us what you were going to do," returned Linda somewhat mollified.

"I couldn't," returned Berkley meekly, "for I haven't seen you since, and – Do you happen to know Mr. Jeffreys? Here, Jeffreys, I want to present you to Miss Talbot and – who is with you, Linda?"

"Bertie Bryan."

"And Miss Bryan. It is rather dark to tell which from t'other, but I would like especially to warn you against Miss Talbot. She carries a pistol and in her hot rage against us may still yearn for prey."

"It was Bertie who fired the first shot," declared Linda with a gravity which brought a giggle from Bertie. "Don't tell what it

was," whispered Linda to her.

"Oh," said Mr. Jeffreys, "I have met Miss Bryan, so it will not be difficult to identify her when she is brought up with intent to kill."

"Well, whatever happens to-morrow, we mustn't keep these ladies from their slumbers now," said Berkley. "I'm awfully sorry, girls, really I am, that we frightened you. We tried not to make any noise. Let's be friends. We will forgive you for the shooting if you will forgive us for the scare."

"But," said Linda, "the laugh is entirely on our side, for – it wasn't a pistol. Please shut in the shutters, Berk, and I'll fasten them inside."

"It wasn't a pistol? Then what in the world was it?" Berkley paused in the act of closing the shutters.

"Paper bags!" returned Linda pulling the shutters together with a bang and closing the window, while upon the quiet of the night rang out a hearty peal of laughter from the two outside.

"It's lucky I didn't use a bottle of ammonia to throw in their faces," remarked Linda as the girls climbed the stairs. "That was my first thought, but the bags were handy in my washstand drawer."

"It was an awfully good joke," replied Bertie, "and I wouldn't have missed it, scared as I was at first. I was dreadfully afraid of burglars getting in and chloroforming us."

"Did you ever hear of the girl who slept with her head at the foot of her bed and who was roused by feeling something cold

on her toes? A burglar was chloroforming them, and she let him do it, then when he was out of the room she jumped up, locked her door and gave the alarm."

Bertie laughed. "There is no fear of burglars now, I think, when we have two self-appointed watchmen."

"It does give us a safer feeling," acknowledged Linda.

"So we can rest in peace," returned Bertie going to her room.

There was no disturbing of slumbers the next night, for the young men made noise enough to arouse the girls, who, in fact, had not gone to bed when stentorian voices called to them, "Here we are. Get out your ammunition. We're ready to stand fire."

The girls looked down from above. "Anyone who is scared at a bag of wind would be sure to run from a flash in the pan," called Bertie. "We won't test your courage to-night, Berk."

"Did you find everything all right?" asked Linda.

"All's well," answered Berkley.

"Thank you, watchmen," returned Linda, and then the window was closed and the young men tramped off softly singing: "Good-night, ladies."

CHAPTER VI
AN INQUISITIVE NEIGHBOR

Miss Ri returned in due time. The girls were at breakfast when she came in bearing a small package which she laid on the table, a merry twinkle in her eye. "Well, girls," she exclaimed, "so nobody has carried you off, I see."

The girls laughed. "No one has, although – " began Linda.

"Don't tell me anything has happened," exclaimed Miss Ri. "Now isn't that just the way? I might stay at home a thousand years and nothing would happen. Tell me about it. I'm glad it's Saturday, Verlinda, so you don't have to hurry. Just touch the bell for Phebe to bring in some hot coffee. I don't take meals on the boat when I know what I can get at home. Those rolls look delicious."

"Did you have a good trip, Miss Ri?" asked Bertie.

"Never had such a stupid one. I didn't get a good state-room going up, and what with the men talking in the cabin outside my door all night, and the calves bleating in their stalls below, I did not get a wink of sleep, and there never was such a stupid sale."

"Sale? Oh, you went to a sale? Of what?" Bertie was interested.

"Oh, just things – all kinds of things," returned Miss Ri vaguely. Then, turning her attention to her breakfast she said,

"Go on now, and tell me all that has been going on."

The girls delivered themselves of the news of their adventure with supposed burglars to the great entertainment of Miss Ri, and then a message coming to Bertie from her mother, she departed while Miss Ri finished her breakfast.

"I've almost as good a tale to tell myself," remarked that lady as she folded her napkin. "I think I shall have to tell you, Linda, but you must promise not to repeat it. I couldn't have told it to Bertie for she would never rest till she had passed it on. However, I can trust you, and you mustn't hint of it to Bertie of all people."

Linda gave the required promise, Miss Ri picked up her wraps and the small bundle, and proposed they should go into the sitting-room where the sun was shining brightly. They settled themselves comfortably and Miss Ri proceeded to unfold her secret. "Berk was entirely too keen when he said I had a special purpose in going to town periodically," she began. "I have a harmless little fad, Verlinda; it is nothing more nor less than the buying of "old horse" if you know what that is."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.