YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

THE TWO SIDES OF THE SHIELD

Charlotte Yonge

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Yonge C.

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Содержание

CHAPTER I. – WHAT WILL BECOME OF ME? 5
CHAPTER II. – THE MERRIFIELDS 10
CHAPTER III. – GOOD-BYE 14
CHAPTER IV. – TURNED IN AMONG THEM 19
CHAPTER V. – THE FIRST WALK 27
CHAPTER VI. – PERSECUTION 35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 42

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CHAPTER I. – WHAT WILL BECOME OF ME?

A London dining-room was lighted with gas, which showed a table of small dimensions, with a vase of somewhat dirty and dilapidated grasses in the centre, and at one end a soup tureen, from which a gentleman had helped himself and a young girl of about thirteen, without much apparent consciousness of what he was about, being absorbed in a pile of papers, pamphlets, and letters, while she on her side kept a book pinned open by a gravy spoon. The elderly maid-servant, who set the dishes before them, handed the vegetables and changed the plates, really came as near to feeding the pair as was possible with people above three years old.

The one was a dark, thin man, with a good deal of white in his thick beard and scanty hair, the absence of which made the breadth of his forehead the more remarkable. The girl would have shown an equally remarkable brow, but that her dark hair was cut square over it, so as to take off from its height, and give a heavy over-hanging look to the upper part of the face, which below was tin and sallow, well-featured, but with a want of glow and colour. The thick masses of dark hair were plaited into a very long thick tail behind, hanging down over a black evening frock, whose white trimmings were, like everything else about the place, rather dingy. She was far less absorbed than her father, and raised a quick, wistful brown eye whenever he made the least sound, or shuffled his papers. Indeed, it seemed that she was reading in order to distract her anxiety rather than for the sake of occupation.

It was not till after the last pieces of cheese had been offered and refused, and the maid had retired, leaving some dull crackers and veteran biscuits, with two decanters and a claret-jug, that he spoke.

‘Dolores!’

‘Yes, father.’

But he only cleared his throat, and looked at his letter again, while she fixed her eager eyes upon him so earnestly that he let his fall again, and looked once more over his letters before he spoke again.

‘Dolores,’ and the tone was dry, as if all feeling were driven from it.

‘Yes, father.’

‘You know that I have accepted this appointment?’

‘Yes, father.’

‘And that I shall be absent three years at the least?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then comes the question, how you are to be disposed of in the meantime?’

‘Could not I go with you?’ she said, under her breath.

‘No, my dear.’ And somehow the tone had more tenderness in it, though it was so explicit. ‘I shall have no fixed residence, no one with whom to leave you; and the climate is not fit for you. Your Aunt Lilias has kindly offered to take charge of you.’

‘Oh, father!’

‘Well?’

‘If you would only let me stay here with Caroline and Fraulein. I like it so much better.’

‘That cannot be, Dolly. I have this morning promised to let the house as it is to Mr. Smithson.’

‘And Caroline?’

‘If Caroline takes my advice, she will remain here as his housekeeper, and I think she will. Well, what is it? You do not mean that you would prefer going to your Aunts Jane and Ada?’

‘Oh no, no; only if I might go to school.’

'This is nonsense, Dolores. It will be much better for you on all accounts to be with your aunt at Silverfold. I have no fear that she and her girls will not do their best to make you happy and good, and to give you what you have sadly wanted, my poor child. I have always wished you could have seen more of her.'

There could be no doubt from the tone, in the mind of any one who knew Mr. Maurine Mohun, that the decision was final; but perhaps Dolores would have asked more if the door-bell had not rung at the moment and Mr. Smithson had not been announced. Fate was closing in on her. She retired into her book, and remained as long as she possibly could, for the sake of seeing her father and hearing his voice; but after a time she was desired to call Caroline, and to go to bed herself, for it was a good deal past nine o'clock.

She had been aware, she could hardly tell how, that her father had been offered a government appointment connected with the Fiji Islands, and then that, glad to escape from the dreariness which had settled down on the house since his wife's death, about eighteen months previously, he had accepted it, and she had speculated much on her probable fate; but had never before been officially informed of his designs for himself or for her.

He was a barrister, who spent all his leisure time on scientific studies, and his wife had been equally devoted to the same pursuits. Dolores had been her constant companion; but after the mother's death, from an accident on a glacier, a strange barrier of throwing himself into the ways of a girl past the charms of infancy. It was as if they had lost their interpreter.

The German governess, chosen by Mrs. Mohun, was very German indeed, and greatly occupied in her own studies. When she found that the armes-liebes Madchen shrank from being wept over and caressed on the mournful return, she decided that the English had no feeling, and acquiesced in the routine of lessons and expeditions to classes. She was never unkind, but she did not try to be a companion; and old Caroline was excellent in the attention she paid to the comforts of her master and his daughter, but had no love of children, and would not have encouraged familiarities, even if Dolores had not been too entirely a drawing-room child to offer them.

The morning came, and everything went on as usual; Dolores poured out the coffee, Mr. Mohun read his Times, Fraulein ate as usual, but afterwards he asked for a few minutes' conversation with Fraulein. All that Dolores heard of the result of it was 'So,' and then lessons went on until twelve o'clock, when it was the custom that the girl should have an hour's recreation, which was, in any tolerable weather, spent in the gardens of the far west Crescent, where she lived. There she was nearly certain of meeting her one great friend, Maude Sefton, who was always sent out for her airing at the same time.

They spied each other issuing from their doors, met, linked their arms, and entered together. Maude was a tall, rosy girl, with a great yellow bush down her back, half a year older than Dolores, and a great deal bigger.

'My dearest Doll!'

'Oh yes, it is come.'

'Then he is really going? I heard the pater and mater talking about it yesterday, and they said it would be an excellent thing for him.'

'Oh, Maude! Then they did not say anything about what we hoped?'

'What, the mater's offering for you to come and live with us, darling? Oh no; and I's afraid it is of no use to ask her, for she said of herself, that she knew Mr. Mohun had sisters, and—'

'And what? Tell me, Maude. You must!'

'Well, then, you know you made me, and I think it is a shame. She said she was glad she wasn't one of them, for you were such a peculiar child.'

'Dear me, Maude, you needn't mind telling me that! I'm sure I don't want to be like everybody else.'

'And are you going to one of your aunts?'

'Yes, to Aunt Lilias. Oh, Maude, he would not hear a word against it, and I know it will be so horrid! Aunts are always nasty!'

'Kate is very fond of her aunt,' said Maude, who did not happen to have any personal experiences to oppose to this sweeping assertion.

'Oh, I don't mean proper aunts, but aunts that have orphans left to them.'

'But you are not an orphan, darling.'

'I dare say I shall be. 'Tis a horrible climate, and there are no end of cannibals there, so that he would not take me out for anything,—and sharks, and volcanoes, and hurricanes.'

'I don't think they eat people there now.'

'It's bad enough if they don't! And you know those aunts begin pretty well, while they are in fear of the father, but then they get worse.'

'There was Ada Morton,' said Maude, in a tone of conviction, 'and Anna Ross.'

'Oh yes, and another book, 'Rose Turquand.' It was a grown-up book, that I read once—long ago,' said Dolores, who had in her mother's time been allowed a pretty free range of 'book-box.'

"And there's 'Under the Shield,' but that was a boy."

'There are lots and lots,' said Dolores. 'They are ever so much worse than the stepmothers! Not that there is any fear of that!' she added quickly.

'But isn't this Aunt Lilias nice? It's a pretty name. Which is she? You have one aunt a Lady Something, haven't you?'

'Yes, it is this one, Lady Merrifield. Her husband is a general, Sir Jasper Merrifield, and he is gone out to command in some place in India; but she cannot stand the climate, and is living at home at a place called Silverfold, with a whole lot of children. I think two are gone out with their father, but there are a great many more.'

'Don't you know them at all?'

'No, and don't want to! I think my aunts were unkind to mother!'

'Oh!' exclaimed Maude.

'I am sure of it. They were horrid, stuck-up, fine ladies, and looked down on her, though she was ever so much nicer, and cleverer, and more intellectual than they; and she looked down on them.'

'Are you sure?' asked Maude, to whom it was as good as a story.

'Yes, indeed. She was civil, of course, because they were father's sisters, but I know she couldn't bear them. If any of them came to London, there was a calling, but all very stupid, and a dining at Lord Rotherwood's; but she never would, except once, when I can hardly remember, go to stay at their slow places in the country. I've heard father try to persuade her when they didn't think I understood. You know we always went abroad, or to the sea or something, except last year, when we were at Beechcroft. That wasn't so bad, for there were lots of books, and Uncle Reginald was there, and he is jolly.'

'Can't you get Mr. Mohun to send you there?'

'No, I don't think they would have me, for every body there is grown up, and father seems to have a wish for me to be with this Aunt Lilias, because she has a schoolroom.'

'I wonder he should wish it, if she was unkind to Mrs. Mohun.'

'Well, she was out of the way most of the time. They have lived at Malta and Gibraltar, and Belfast, and all sorts of places, so they will all have regular garrison frivolous manner, and think of nothing but officers and balls. I know she was a beauty, and wants to be one still.'

'Maude, whose father was a professor, looked quite appalled and said—

'You will be the one to infuse better things.' She felt quite proud of the word.

'Perhaps,' returned Dolores; 'they always do that in time, but not till they've been awfully bullied. All the cousins are jealous, and the aunt spites them because they are nicer and prettier than her own.'

'Yes,' said Maude, 'but then there's always some tremendously nice boy-cousin, or uncle, or something, that makes up for it all. Will Sir Jasper Merrifield's eldest son be a Sir?'

'Oh no; he's not a baronet, but a G.C.B., Knight Grand Cross of the Bath, that is. Besides, I don't care for love, and titles, and all that nonsense, though father is first cousin to Lord Rotherwood.'

'And you never saw any of them?'

'Yes, Aunt Lilias was at the Charing Cross Hotel with Uncle Jasper and the two eldest daughters, Alethea and Phyllis, and some more of them, just before they sailed; and father took me there on Sunday to luncheon; but there were so many people, and such a talk, and such a bustle, that I hardly knew which was which. Aunt Jane and Aunt Ada were a talking that it made my head turn round; but I saw how affected Aunt Lilias is, and I knew that whenever they looked at me they said 'poor child,' and I always hate any one who does that! All I was afraid of then was that father would let Aunt Jane and Aunt Ada come and live with us; but this is ever so much worse.'

'You have such a lot of aunts and uncles!' said Maude, 'and I have not got anything but one old uncle.'

'Uncles are all very well,' said Dolores, said Maude. 'There are the two Miss Mohuns—'

'Oh, that's beginning at the wrong end. Aunt Ada is the youngest of them all, and she thinks she is a young lady still, and wears little curls on her forehead, and a tennis pinafore, and makes her waist just like a wasp. She and Aunt Jane live together at Rockquay, because she has bad health—at least she has whenever she likes; and Aunt Jane does all sorts of charities and worries, and sets everybody to rights,' said Dolly, in a very grown-up voice, speaking partly from her own observation, and partly repeating what she had caught from her elders.

'Oh yes, I know her,' said Maude. 'She asked me questions about all I did, and she did bother mamma so about a maid she recommended that we are never going to take another from her.'

'Aunt Phyllis comes between them, I believe; but she has married a sailor captain and gone to settle in New Zealand, and I have not seen her since I was a very little girl. Then there's Aunt Emily, who is a very great swell indeed. Her husband was a canon, Lord Henry Grey; but he is dead, and she lives at Brighton, a regular fat, comfortable down-pillow of a woman, who isn't bad to lunch with, only she sends one out to the Parade with her maid, as if one was a baby. Mother used to laugh at her. And I think there was an older one who went to India and died long ago.'

'I have seen your two uncles. There's Major Mohun. Oh! he is fun!'

'Yes, dear old Uncle Regie! I wish he was not in Ireland. He will be so sorry to miss seeing father off, but he can't get leave. And there was a clergyman who is dead, and father grieved for very much. I think he did something to make them all nicer to mother, for it was just after that we went to stay at Beechcroft with Uncle William. You know him, and how mother used to call him the very model of a country squire; and I like his wife, Aunt Alethea. Only it is very pokey and slow down there, and they are always after flannel petticoats and soup kitchens, and all the old fads that are exploded. I should get awfully tired of it before a year was out, only I should not be teased with strange children, and there would be no one to be jealous of me.'

'Can't you get your father to change and send you there?'

'Not a chance. You see Aunt Lilias had offered, and they haven't, and I must go on with my education. I hope, though I shall have no advantages, I shall still be able to go up for the Cambridge examination, if Aunt Lilias has not prejudices, as I dare say she has, since of course none of her own will be able to try.'

'You'll come up to us for the examination, Dolly dear, and we shall do it together, and that will be nice!'

'If they will let me; but I don't expect to be allowed to do anything that I wish. Only perhaps father may be come home by that time.'

'Is it three years?'

'Yes. It is a terrible time, isn't it? However, when I'm seventeen perhaps he will talk to me, and I can really keep house.'

'And then you'll come back here?'

'Do you know, Maudie—listen—I've another uncle, belonging to mother.'

'Oh, Dolly! I thought she had no one!'

'He told me he was my Uncle Alfred once when he met me in the park with Fraulein, and gave me a note for mother. He is called Mr. Flinders.'

'But I thought your mother was daughter to Professor Hay?'

'But this is a half-brother; my grandmother was married before. Uncle Alfrey has an immense light beard, and I think he is very poor. He came once or twice to see mother, and they always sent me out of the room; but I am sure she gave him money—not father's housekeeping money, but what she got for herself by writing. Once I heard father go out of the house, saying, 'Well, it's your own to do as you please with.' And then mother went to her room, and I know she cried. It was the only time that ever mother cried!' And as Maude listened, much impressed—'Once when she had got eleven pounds, and we were going to have bought father such a binocular for a secret as a birthday present, Mr. Flinders came, and she gave him ten of it, and we could only buy just a few slides for father. And she told me she was grieved, but she could not help it, and it would be time for me to understand when I was older.'

'I don't think this Uncle Alfrey can be nice,' said Maude.

"Tis quite disgusting if he kisses me,' said Dolly; 'but you see he is poor, and all the Mohuns are stuck up, except father, and they wanted mother to despise him, and not help him. And you see, she stuck to him. I don't like him much; but you see nobody ever was like her! Oh, Maude, if she wasn't dead!'

And poor Dolores cried as she had not done even at the time of the accident, or in the terrible week that followed, or at the desolate home coming.

CHAPTER II. – THE MERRIFIELDS

The cool twilight of a long sunny summer's day was freshening the pleasant garden of a country house, and three people were walking slowly along a garden path enjoying the contrast with the heat, glare, and noise of the day. The central one was a tall, slender lady, with a light shawl hung round her shoulders. On one side was a youth who had begun to overtop her, on the other a girl of shorter and sturdier mould, who only reached up to her shoulder.

'So she is coming!' the girl said.

'Yes, Uncle Maurice has answered my letter very kindly.'

'I should think he would be very much obliged,' observed the boy.

'Please, mamma, do tell us all about it,' said the girl. 'You know I stopped directly when you made me a sign not to go on asking questions before the little ones. And you said you should have to make us your friends while papa and the grown-ups are away.'

'Well, Gillian, I know you can be discreet when you are warned, and perhaps it is best that you should know how things stand. Do you remember anything about it, Hal?'

'Only a general perception that there were tempests in the higher regions, but I think that was more from hearing Alley and Phyl talk than from my native sagacity.'

'So I should suppose, since you were only six years old, at the utmost.'

'But Uncle Maurice always was under a cloud, wasn't he, especially at Beechcroft, where I never saw him or his wife in the holidays except once, when I believe she was not at all liked, and was thought to be very proud, and stuck-up, and pretentious.'

'But was she just nobody? not a lady?' cried Gillian. 'Aunt Emily always called her, "'Poor thing.'"

'Perhaps she did the same by Aunt Emily,' returned Hal.

'And I am sure I have heard Aunt Ada say that she wasn't a lady; and Aunt Jane that she had all sorts of discreditable connections.'

'Come now, Gill, if you chatter so, how is mamma to get a word in between?'

'I'm afraid we have all been hard on her, poor thing!'

'There now, mamma has done it, just like Aunt Emily!'

'Anybody would be poor who got killed in a glacier!'

'No, but one doesn't say poor when people are—nice.'

'When I said poor,' now put in Lady Merrifield, 'it was not so much that I was thinking of her death as of her having come into a family where nobody welcomed her, and I really do not suppose it was her fault.'

'Moreover, she seemed to do very well without a welcome,' added Hal.

'Who is interrupting now?' cried Gillian, 'but was she a lady?'

'I never saw her, you know,' said the mother; 'but from all I ever heard of her, I should think she was, and cleverer and more highly educated than any of us.'

'Yes,' said Hal, 'that was the kind of pretension that exasperated them all at Beechcroft, especially Uncle William.'

'I wonder if Dolores will have it!' said Gillian. 'I suppose she will know much more than we do.'

'Probably, being the only child of such parents, and with every advantage London can give. Maurice was always much the cleverest of us all, and with a very strong mechanical and scientific turn, so that I now think it might have been better to have let him follow his bent. But when we were young there was a good deal of mistrust of anything outside the beaten tracks of gentlemanlike professions, and my dear old father did not like what he heard of the course of study for those lines. Things were not as they are now. So Maurice went to Cambridge, and was fifth wrangler of his year, and then had to go to the bar. It somehow always gave him a thwarted, injured feeling of working against the

grain, and he cultivated all these scientific pursuits to the utmost, getting more and more into opinions and society that distressed grandpapa and Uncle William. So he fell in with Mr. Hay, a professor at a German university. I can hear William's tone of utter contempt and disgust. I believe this poor man was exceedingly learned, and had made some remarkable discoveries, but he was very poor, and lived in lodgings at Bonn with his daughter in the small way people are content to do in Germany. As to his opinions, we all took it for granted that he was a freethinker; but I can't tell how that might be. Maurice lodged in the same house one year when he went to learn German and attend lectures, and he went back again every long vacation. At last came your dear grandfather's death. Maurice hurried away from Beechcroft immediately after the funeral, and the next thing that was heard of him was that he had married Miss Hay. It was no wonder that your Uncle William was bitterly hurt and offended at the apparent disrespect to our father, and would make no move towards Maurice.'

'It was when we were at the Cape, wasn't it?' asked Hal.

'Yes, the year Gillian was born. Well, your dear Uncle Claude went to see Maurice in London, and found there was much excuse. Maurice had learnt that the old professor was dying, and his daughter had nothing, and would have had to be a governess, so that Maurice had married her in haste in order to be able to help them.'

'Then it really was very kind and noble in him!' exclaimed Gillian.

'And I believe every one would have felt it so; but for his unfortunately reserved way of concealing the extent of the acquaintance, and showing that he would not be interfered with. Claude did his best to close the breach, but there had been something to forgive on both sides, and perhaps SHE was prouder than the Mohuns themselves. Oh! my dears, I hope you will never have a family quarrel among you! It is so sad to look back upon a change after the happy years when we were all together, and were laughing and making fun of one another!'

'But you were quite out of it, mamma.'

'So I was in a way, but I knew nothing of the justification till too late for any advances from us to take much effect. I am four years older than Maurice, we had never been a pair, and had never corresponded. And when I wrote to him and to his wife, I only received stiff, formal answers. They were abroad when we were in London on coming home, and they would not come to see us at Belfast, so that I could never make acquaintance with her; but I believe she was an excellent wife, suiting him admirably in every way, and I expect to find this little daughter of theirs very well brought up, and much forwarder than honest old Mysie.'

'Mysie is in perfect raptures at the notion of having a cousin here exactly of her own age,' said Gillian. 'What she would wish is that the two should be so much alike as to be taken for twins. I have been trying to remember Dolores on that dreadful Sunday at the hotel, when Uncle Maurice came to see us, just when papa was setting off for Bombay, but it all seems confusion. I can think of nothing but a little black, shy figure. I remember Phyllis telling me that she thought I ought to do something to entertain her, but I could not think of a word to say to her.'

'For which perhaps she was thankful,' said her brother.

'I am not sure. You are all too apt, when you are shy, to console yourself with fancying that you are doing as you would be done by. It might have worried her then perhaps, but it would have made it easier for her to begin among us now! I am very glad her father consents to my having her! I do hope we may make her happy.'

'Happy!' said Gillian. 'Anybody must be happy with such a number to play with, and with you to mother her, mamma.'

'I am afraid she will not feel me much like her own mother, poor child! But it will not be for want of the will. When I look back now I feel sorry for myself for the early loss of my mother, for though we were all merry enough as children and young people, there always seems to have been a lack of something fostering and repressing. There was a kind of desolateness in our life, though we did not understand it at the time. I am thankful you have not known it, my dears.' There was a strange

rush of tears nearly choking her voice, and she shook them away with a sort of laugh. 'That I should cry for that at this time of day!'

Gillian raised her face for a kiss, and even Harry did the same. Their hearts were very full, as the perception swept over them in one flash what their lives would have been without mamma. It seemed like the solid earth giving way under their feet!

'I am very sorry for poor Dolores,' said Gillian presently. 'It seems as if we could never be kind enough to her.'

'Yes. Indeed I hope we may do something towards supplying her with a real home, wandering sprites as we have been,' said Lady Merrifield.

'What a name it is! Dolores! It is as bad as Peter Grievous! How did she get it?' grumbled Harry.

'That I cannot tell, but I think we must call her Dora or Dolly, as I fancy your Aunt Jane told me she was called at home. I hope Wilfred will not get hold of it and tease her about it. You must defend her from that.'

'If we can,' said Gillian; 'but Wilfred is rather an imp.'

'Yes,' said Harry. 'I found Primrose reduced to the verge of distraction yesterday because 'Willie would call her Leg of Mutton.''

'I hope you boxed his ears!' cried Gillian.

'I did give it to him well,' said Hal, laughing.

'Thank you,' said his mother. 'A big brother is more effective in such cases than any one else can be. Wilfred is the only one of you all who ever seemed to take pleasure in causing pain—and I hardly know how to meet the propensity.'

'He is the only one who is not quite certain to be nice with Dolores,' said Gillian.

'And I really don't quite see how to manage,' said the mother. 'If we show him our anxiety to shield her, it is very likely to direct his attention that way.'

'She must take her chance,' said Hal, 'and if she is any way rational, she can soon put a stop to it.'

'But, oh dear! I wish he could go to school,' said Gillian.

'So do I, my dear,' returned her mother; 'but you know the doctors say we must not risk it for another year, and I can only hope that as he grows stronger, he may become more manly. Meantime we must be patient with him, and Hal can help more than any one else. There—what's that striking?'

'Three quarters.'

'Then we must make haste in, or we shall not have finished supper before ten.'

Lilias Mohun had married a soldier, and after many wanderings through military stations, the health and education of a large proportion of her family had necessitated her remaining at home with them, while her husband held a command in India, taking out with him the two grown-up daughters and the second son, who was on his staff. She was established in a large house not far from a country town, for the convenience of daily governess, tutor, and masters. She herself had grown up on the old system which made education depend more on the family than on the governess, and she preferred honestly the company and training of her children to going into society in her husband's absence. Therefore she arranged her habits with a view to being constantly with them, and though exchanging calls, and occasionally accepting invitations in the neighbourhood, it was an understood thing that she went out very little. The chief exceptions were when her eldest son, Harry, was at home from Oxford. He was devotedly fond of her, and all the more pleased and proud to take her about with him because it had not always been possible that his holidays in his school life should be spent at home, and thus the privilege was doubly prized.

The two sisters above and one brother below him were in India with their father, and Gillian was not yet out of the schoolroom, though this did not cut her off from being her mother's prime companion. Then followed a schoolboy at Wellington, named Jasper, two more girls, a brace of boys, and the five-year-old baby of the establishment—sufficient reasons to detain Lady Merrifield in England after more than twenty years of travels as a soldier's wife, so that scarcely three of her

children had the same birthplace. She had been able to see very little of her English relations, being much tied by the number of her children while all were very young, and the expense of journeys; but she was now within easy reach of her two unmarried sisters, and after the Cape, Gibraltar, Malta, and Dublin, the homes of her eldest sister, and of her eldest brother did not seem very far off.

Indeed Beechcroft, the home of her childhood, had always been the headquarters of herself and her children on their rare visits to England. Her elder boys had been sure of a welcome there in the holidays, and loved it scarcely less than she did herself; and when looking for her present abode, the whole family had stayed there for three months. Her brother Maurice, however, she had scarcely seen, and she had been much pained at being included in his persistent avoidance of the whole family, who felt that he resented their displeasure at his marriage even more since his wife's death than he had done during her lifetime, as if he felt doubly bound, for her sake, not to forgive and forget. At least so said some of the family, while others hoped that his distaste to all intercourse with them only arose from the apathy succeeding a great blow.

CHAPTER III. – GOOD-BYE

A passage was offered to Mr. Mohun in a Queen's ship, and this hurried the preparations so much that to Dolores it appeared that there was nothing but bustle and confusion, from the day of her conversation with Maude, until she found herself in the railway carriage returning from Plymouth with her eldest uncle. Her father had intended to take her himself to Silverfold; but detentions at the office in London, and then a telegram from Plymouth, had disconcerted his plans, and when he found that his eldest brother would come and meet him at the last, he was glad to yield to his little daughter's earnest desire to be with him as long as possible.

Shy and reserved as both were, and almost incapable of finding expression for their feelings, they still clung closely together, though the only tears the girl was seen to shed came in church on the last Sunday evening, blinding and choking, and she could barely restrain her sobs. Her father would have taken her out, but she resisted, and leant against him, while he put his arm round her. After this, whenever it was possible, she crept up to him, and he held her close.

There had been no further discussion on her home. Lady Merrifield had written kindly to her, as well as to her father, but that was small consolation to one so well instructed by story books in the hypocrisy of aunts until fathers were at a distance. And her father was so manifestly gratified by the letter, that it would be of no use to say a word to him now. Her fate was determined, and, as she heroically told Maude in their last interview, she was determined to make the best of it. She would endure the unjust aunt, and jealous, silly cousins, and be so clever, and wise, and superior, that she would force them to admire and respect her, and by-and-by follow her example, and be good and sensible, so that when father came home, he would find them acknowledging that they owed everything to her; she had saved two or three of their lives, nursed half of them when the other half were helpless, fainting, and hysterical, and, in short, been the Providence of the household. Then father would look at her, and say, 'My Mary again!' and he would take her home, and talk to her with the free confidence he had shown her mother, and would be comforted.

This was the hope that had carried her through the last parting, when she went on board with her uncle and saw her father's cabin, and looked with a dull kind of entertainment at all the curious arrangements of the big ship. It seemed more like sight-seeing than good-bye, when at last they were sent on shore, and hurried up to the station just in time for the train.

Uncle William was a very unapproachable person. He did not profess to understand little girls. He looked at Dolores rather anxiously, afraid, perhaps, that she was crying, and put her into the carriage, then rushed out and brought back a handful of newspapers, giving her the Graphic, and hiding himself in the Times.

She felt too dull and stunned to read, or to look at the pictures, though she held the paper in her hands, and she gazed out dreamily at the Ton's and rocks and woody ravines of Dartmoor as they flew past her, the leaves and ferns all golden brown with autumn colouring. She had had little sleep that night; her little legs had all the morning been keeping up with the two men's hasty steps, and though an excellent meal had been set before her in the ship, she had not been able to swallow much, and she was a good deal worn out. So when at last they reached Exeter, and finding there would be two hours to wait, her uncle asked whether she would come down into the town with him and see the Cathedral, she much preferred to stay where she was. He put her under the care of the woman in the waiting-room, who gave her some tea, took off her hat, and made her lie down on a couch, where she slept quite sound for more than an hour, until she was roused by some ladies coming in with a crying baby.

It was, she thought, nearly time to go on, for the gas was being lighted. She put on her hat, and went out to look for her uncle on the platform, so as to get into a better light to see the face of her mother's little Swiss watch, which her father had just made over to her. She had just made out that there was not more than a quarter of an hour to spare, when she heard an exclamation.

'By Jove! if that ain't Mary's little girl!' and, looking up she saw Mr. Flinders' huge, bushy, light-coloured beard. 'Is your father here?' he asked.

'No; he sailed this afternoon.'

'Always my luck! Ticket wasted! Sailed—really?'

'Oh yes. We did not come back till the ship was out of harbour.'

He muttered some exclamation, and asked—

'Whom are you with?'

'Uncle William. Mr. Mohun—my eldest uncle. He will be back directly.'

Mr. Flinders whistled a note of discontent.

'Going to rusticate with him, poor little mite?' he asked.

'No. I'm to live with my Aunt Lilias—Lady Merrifield.'

'Where?'

'At Silverfold Grange, near Silverfold.'

'Well, you'll get among the swells. They'll make you cut all your poor mother's connections. So there's an end of it. She was a good creature—she was!'

'I'll never forget any one that belongs to her,' said Dolores. 'Oh, there's Uncle William!' as on the top of the stairs she spied the welcome sight of his grey locks and burly figure. Before he had descended, her other uncle had vanished, and she fancied she had heard something about, 'Mum about our meeting. Ta ta!'

Uncle William's eyes being less sharp than hers, he was on his way to the waiting-room before she joined him, and as he had not seen her encounter, she would not tell him. They were settled in the carriage again, and she was tolerably refreshed. Mr. Mohun fell asleep, and she, after reading by the lamp-light as long as she could find anything to read, gazed at the odd reflections in the windows till she, too, nodded and dozed, half waking at every station.

At last, she was aware of a stop in earnest, voices, and being called. There was her uncle saying, 'Well, Hal, here we are!' and she was lifted out and set on the platform, with gas all round. Her uncle was saying, 'We didn't get away in time for the express,' and a young man was answering, 'We'd better put Dolly into the waggonette at once. Then I'll see to the luggage.'

Very like a parcel, so stiff were her legs, she was bundled into the dark cavern of a closed waggonette, and, after a little lumbering, her uncle and the young man got in after her, saying something about eleven o'clock.

She was more awake now, and knew that they were driving through lighted streets, and then, after an interval, turned into darkness, upon gravel, and stopped at last before a door full of light, with figures standing up dark in it. She heard a 'Well, William!' 'Well Lily, here we are at last!' Then there were arms embracing her, and a kiss on each cheek, as a soft voice said, 'My poor little girl! They wanted to sit up for you, but it was too late, and I dare say you had rather be quiet.'

She was led into a lamp-lit room, which dazzled her. It was spread with food, but she was too much tired to eat, and her aunt saw how it was, and telling Harry to take care of his uncle, she took the hand—though it did not close on hers—and, climbing up what seemed to Dolores an endless number of stairs, she said—

'You are up high, my dear; but I thought you would like a room to yourself.'

'Poked away in an attic,' was Dolores's dreamy thought; while her aunt added, to a tall, thin woman, who came out with a lamp in her hand—

'She is so tired that she had better go to bed directly, Mrs. Halfpenny. You will make her comfortable, and don't let her be disturbed in the morning till she has had her sleep out.'

Dolly found herself undressed, without many words, till it came to—'Your prayers, Miss Dora. I am sure you've need not to miss them.'

She did not like to be told, besides, poor child, prayers were not much more than a form to her. She did not contest the point, but knelt down and muttered something, then laid her weary head

on the pillow, was tucked up by Mrs. Halfpenny, and left in the dark. It was a dreary half sleep into which she fell. The noise of the train seemed to be still in her ears, and at the same time she was always being driven up—up—up endless stairs, by tall, cruel aunts; or they were shutting her up to do all their children's work, and keeping away father's letters from her. Then she awoke and told herself it was a dream, but she missed the noises of the street, and the patch of light on the wall from the gas lamps, and recollected that father was gone, and she was really in the power of one of these cruel aunts; and she felt like screaming, only then she might have been heard; and a great horrid clock went on making a noise like a church bell, and striking so many odd quarters that there was no guessing when morning was coming. And after all, why should she wish it to come? Oh, if she could but sleep the three years while father was away!

At last, however, she fell into a really calm sleep, and when she awoke, the room was full of light, but her watch had stopped; she had been too much tired to remember to wind it; and she lay a little while hearing sounds that made it clear that the world was astir, and she could see that preparations had been made for her getting up.

'They shan't begin by scolding me for being late,' she thought, and she began her toilette.

Just as she came to her hair, the old nurse knocked and asked whether she wanted help.

'Thank you, I've been used to dress myself,' said Dolores, rather proudly.

'I'll help you now, missy, for prayers are over, and they are all gone to breakfast, only my lady said you were not to be disturbed, and Miss Mysie will be up presently again to bring you down.'

She spoke low, and in an accent that Dolores afterwards learnt was Scotch; and she was a tall, thin, bony woman, with sandy hair, who looked as if she had never been young. She brushed and plaited the dark hair in a manner that seemed to the owner more wearisome and less tender than Caroline's fashion; and did not talk more than to inquire into the fashion of wearing it, and to say that Miss Mohun's boxes had been sent from London, demanding the keys that they might be unpacked.

'I can do that myself,' said Dolores, who did not like any stranger to meddle with her things.

'Ye could tak them oot, nae doubt, but I must sort them. It's my lady's orders,' said Mrs. Halfpenny, with all the determination of the sergeant, her husband, and Dolores, with a sense of despair, and a sort of expectation that she should be deprived of all her treasures on one plea or another, gave up the keys.

Mrs. Halfpenny then observed that the frock which had been worn for the last two days on the railway, and evening and morning, needed a better brushing and setting to rights than she had had time to give it. She had better take out another. Which box were her frocks in?

Dolores expected her heartless relations to insist on her leaving off her mourning, and she knew she ought to struggle and shed tears over it; but, to tell the truth, she was a good deal tired of her hot and fusty black; and when she had followed Mrs. Halfpenny into a passage where the boxes stood uncorded; and the first dress that came to light was a pretty fresh-looking holland that had been sent home just before the accident, she exclaimed—

'Oh, let me put that on.'

'Bless me, miss, it has blue braid, and you in mourning for your poor mamma!'

Dolores stood abashed, but a grey alpaca, which she had always much disliked, came out next, and Mrs. Halfpenny decided that with her black ribbons that would do, though it turned out to be rather shockingly short, and to show a great display of black legs; but as the box containing the clothes in present wear had not come to hand, this must stand for the present—and besides, a voice was heard, saying, 'Is Dora ready?' and a young person darted up, put her arms round her neck, and kissed her before she knew what she was about. 'Mamma said I should come because I am just your age, thirteen and a half,' she said. 'I'm Mysie, though my proper name is Maria Millicent.'

Dolores looked her over. She was a good deal taller than herself, and had rich-looking shining brown hair, dark brown eyes full of merriment, and a bright rosy colour, and she danced on her active feet as if she were full of perpetual life. 'All happy and not caring,' thought Dolores.

'Now don't fash Miss Mohun with your tricks. She has stood like a lamb,' said Mrs. Halfpenny reprovingly. 'There, we'll not keep her to find an apron.'

'I don't wear pinafores,' said Mysie, 'but I don't mind pretty aprons like this. 'Why, my sisters had them for tennis, before they went out to India. Come along, Dora,' grasping her hand.

'My name isn't Dora,' said the new-comer, as they went down the passage.

'No,' said Mysie, in a low voice; 'but mamma told Gill—that's Gillian, and me, that we had better not tell anybody, because if the boys heard they might tease you so about it; for Wilfred is a tease, and there's no stopping him when mamma isn't there. So she said she would call you Dora, or Dolly, whichever you liked, and you are not a bit like a Dolly.'

'They always called me Dolly,' said Dolores; 'and if I am not to have my name, I like that best; but I had rather have my proper name.'

'Oh, very well,' said Mysie; 'it is more out of the way, only it is very long.'

By this time they had descended a long narrow flight of uncarpeted stairs, 'the back ones,' as Mysie explained, and had reached a slippery oak hall with high-backed chairs, and all the odds and ends of a family-garden hats, waterproofs, galoshes, bats, rackets, umbrellas, etc., ranged round, and a great white cockatoo upon a stand, who observed—'Mysie, Cockie wants his breakfast,' as they went by towards the door, whence proceeded a hubbub of voices and a clatter of knives and jingle of teaspoons and cups, a room that as Mysie threw open the door seemed a blaze of sunshine, pouring in at the large window, and reflected in the glass and silver. Yes, and in the bright eyes and glossy hair of the party who sat round the breakfast-table, further brightened by the fire, pleasant in the early autumn.

Eyes, as it seemed to Dolores, eyes without number were levelled on her, as Mysie led her in, saying—

'Here's a place by mamma; she kept it for you, between her and Uncle William.'

'No, don't all jump up at once and rush at her,' said Lady Merrifield. 'Give her a little time. Here, my dear;' and she held out her hand and drew in the stranger to her, kissing her kindly, and placing her in a chair close to herself, as she presided over the teacups—not at the end, but at the middle of the table—while all that could be desired to eat and drink found its way at once to Dolores, who had arrived at being hungry now, and was glad to have the employment for hands and eyes, instead of feeling herself gazed at. She was not so much occupied, however, as not to perceive that Uncle William's voice had a free, merry ring in it, such as she had never heard in his visits to her father, and that there was a great deal of fun and laughter going on over the thin sheets of an Indian letter, which Aunt Lily was reading aloud.

No one seemed to be attending to anything else, when Dolores ventured to cast a glance around and endeavour to count heads as she sat between her uncle and aunt. Two boys and a girl were opposite. Harry, who had come to meet them last night, was at one end of the table, a tall girl, but still a schoolroom girl, was at the other, and Mysie had been lost sights of on her own side of the table; also there was a very tiny girl on a high chair on the other side of her mamma. 'Seven,' thought Dolores with sinking heart. 'Eight oppressors!'

They were mostly brown-eyed, well-grown creatures. One boy, at the further corner, had a cast in his eye, and was thin and wizen-looking, and when he saw her eyes on him, he made up an ugly face, which he got rid of like a flash of lightning before any one else could see it, but her heart sank all the more for it. He must be Wilfred, the teaser.

Aunt Lilias was a tall, slender woman, dressed in some kind of soft grey, with a little carnation colour at her throat, and a pretty lace cap on her still rich, abundant, dark brown hair, where diligent search could only detect a very few white threads. Her complexion was always of a soft, paly, brunette tint, and though her cheeks showed signs that she was not young, her dark, soft, long-lashed eyes and sweet-looking lips made her face full of life and freshness; and the figure and long slender hands had

the kind of grace that some people call willowy, but which is perhaps more like the general air of a young birch tree, or, as Hal had once said, 'Early pointed architecture reminded him of his mother.'

The little one was getting restless, and two of the boys began filliping crumbs at one another.

'Wilfred! Fergus!' said the mother quite low and gently; but they stopped directly. 'We will say grace,' she said, lifting the little one down. 'Now, Primrose.'

Every one stood up, to Dolores' surprise, a pair of little fat hands were put together, a little clear voice said a few words of thanksgiving perfectly pronounced.

'You may go, if you like,' she said. 'Hal, take care of Prim.'

Up jumped the two boys and a sprite of a girl, who took the hand of little Primrose, a beautiful little maiden with rich chestnut wavy curls. They all paused at the door, the boys making a salute, the girls a little curtsey. Primrose's was as pretty a little 'bob' as ever was seen.

'I am glad you keep that custom up,' said Mr. Mohun.

'Jasper had been brought up to it, and wished it to be the habit among us; and I find it a great protection against bouncing and rudeness.'

But Dolly's blood boiled at such stupid, antiquated, military nonsense. She would never give in to it, if they made her live on bread and water!

The uncle and aunt, who perhaps had lengthened out their breakfast from politeness to her, had finished when she had, and the pony-chaise came to the door, in which Hal was to drive Uncle William to the station. Everybody flocked to the door to bid him good-bye, and then Aunt Lilias stooped down to ask Dolores if she were quite rested and felt quite well, Mysie standing anxiously by as if she felt her a great charge.

'Quite well, quite rested, thank you,' the girl answered in her stiff, shy way.

'There is half an hour to spare before Miss Vincent comes. The children generally spend it in feeding the creatures. I am not going to give a holiday, because I think people get more pleasantly acquainted over something, than over nothing, to do, but you need not begin lessons to-day if you had rather settle your thoughts and write your letters.'

'I had rather begin at once,' said Dolores, who thought she would now establish her pre-eminence at the cost of any amount of jealousy.

'Very well, then, when you hear the gong—'

'Mamma,' said Mysie solemnly, after long waiting, 'she says she had rather not be called out of her name.'

'I thought you had been called Dolly, my dear.'

'Yes, at home,' with a strong emphasis.

'Well, my dear, I dare say it may be better to keep to your proper name at once. We won't take liberties with it, till you feel as if you could call this home,' said Lady Merrifield, looking as if she would have kissed her niece on the slightest encouragement, but no one ever looked less kissable than Dolores Mohun at that moment. Was it not cruel and hypocritical to talk of this tiresome multitude as ever making home?

CHAPTER IV. – TURNED IN AMONG THEM

‘Do you like pets?’ asked Mysie eagerly, as her mother left the two girls together.

‘I never had any,’ said Dolores.

‘Oh how dreadful! Why, old Cockie, and Aga and Begum, the two oldest pussies, have been everywhere with us. And, besides, there’s Basto, the big Pyrenean dog, and,—oh, here comes little Quiz, mamma’s little Maltese—Quiz, Quiz.’

Dolores started, she did not like either dogs or cats; and the little spun-glass looking dog smelt about her.

‘I must go and feed my guinea-pig,’ said Mysie; ‘won’t you come? Here are some over shoes and Poncho.’

Dolores was afraid Poncho was another beast, but it turned out to be a sort of cape, and she discovered that all the cloaks and most of the sticks had names of their own. She was afraid to be left standing on the steps alone lest any amount of animals or boys should fall on her there, so she consented to accompany Mysie, who shuffled along in a pair of overshoes vastly too big for her, since she had put her cousin into the well-fitting ones. She chattered all the way.

‘We do like this place so. It is the nicest we have ever been in. All that is wanting is that papa will buy it, and then we shall never go away again.’

It was a pleasant place, though not grand; a homely-looking, roomy, red-brick house, covered with creepers—the Virginian one with its leaves just beginning to be painted. There was a bright sunny garden full of flowers in front, and then a paddock, with cows belonging to a farmer, Mysie said. It was her ambition to have them of their own ‘when papa came home,’ when all good things were to happen. Behind there were large stable-yards and offices, too large for Lady Merrifield’s one horse and one pony, and thus available for the children’s menagerie of rabbits, guinea-pigs, magpie, and the like. On the way Mysie was only too happy to explain the family as she called it, when she had recovered from her astonishment that Dolores, always living in England, could not ‘count up her cousins.’ ‘Why they always had been shown their photographs on a Sunday evening after the Bible pictures, and even little Primrose knew all the likeness, even of those she had never seen.’

The catalogue of names and ages followed.

Dolores heard it with a feeling of bewilderment, and a sense that one Maude was worth all the eight put together with whom she was called on to be familiar. She found herself standing in a court, rather grass-grown, where Gillian, with little Primrose by her side, was flinging peas to a number of pigeons, grey, white, and brown, who fluttered round her. Valetta and Fergus were on the granary steps, throwing meal and sop mixed together to a host of cackling, struggling fowls, who tried to leap over each other’s backs. Wilfred seemed busy at some hutches where some rabbits twitched their noses at cabbage leaves. Mysie proceeded to minister to some black and rust-coloured guinea-pigs, which Dolores thought very ugly, uninteresting, and odorous.

Then there were dogs jumping about everywhere, and cats and kittens parading before people’s feet, so that Dolores felt as if she had been turned into a den of wild beasts, and resolved against ever again venturing into the court at ‘feeding-time.’ A big bell gathered all the children up together into a race to the house. There was another scurry to change shoes and wash hands, and then Mysie conducted her cousin into a large, cheerful, wainscoted room on the ground floor, with deep windows, and numerous little, solid-looking deal tables. There were Lady Merrifield and a young lady in spectacles, to whom Dolores was presented as ‘your new pupil,’ and every one sat down at one of the little tables, on which there were Bibles and Prayer-books.

Lady Merrifield took the two youngest on each side of her. Dolores found a table ready for her with the books. A passage in the New Testament was given out and read verse by verse, to the end of the subject, which was the Parable of the Tares, and then Lady Merrifield gave a short lesson

on it, asking questions, and causing references to be found, according to a book of notes, she had ready at hand.

'Just like a charity school,' thought Dolores, when she was able to glance at the time-table, and saw that two days in the week there was Old Testament, two days New, one day Catechism, one day Prayer-book. Only half an hour was thus appropriated, but to her mind it was an old-fashioned waste of time, and very tiresome.

Then came a ring at the door-bell. 'Mr. Poulter,' she heard, and to her amazement, she found that Gillian and Mysie, as well as their brothers, had Latin lessons in the dining-room with the curate. The two girls and Fergus only went to him every other day, Wilfred every day, as Gillian was learning Greek and mathematics. What was Dolores to do?

'Have you done any Latin, my dear?' asked her aunt.

'Not yet. Father wished to be quite convinced that the professor was a good scholar,' said Dolores.

'Very well. We will wait a little,' said Aunt Lilias, and Dolores indignantly thought that she was amused.

Mysie was sent off to her music in the drawing-room, whither her mother followed with Primrose's little lessons, leaving the schoolroom piano to Valetta, and Fergus to write copies and to do sums, while Miss Vincent examined the new-comer, which she did by giving her some questions to answer in writing, and some French and German to translate and parse also in writing.

The music was inconvenient to a girl who had always prepared her work alone. She could do the language work easily, but the questions teased her. They seemed to her of no use, and quite out of her beat. No dates, none of the subject she had specially got up. Why, if Miss Vincent did not know that people were not to be expected to answer stupid questions about history quite out of their own line, that was her fault.

She did what she knew, and then sat biting the top of her pen till her aunt came back, and there was a change in occupations all round, resulting in her having to read French aloud, which she knew she did well; but it was provoking to find that Gillian read quite as well, and knew a word at which she had made a shot, and a wrong one.

She heard the observation pass between her aunt and the governess, 'Languages fair, but she seems to have very little general information.'

General information, indeed! Just as if she who had lived in London, gone to lectures, and travelled on the Continent, must not know more than these children cast up and down in a soldier's life; and as if her Fraulein, with all her diplomas, must not be far superior to a mere little daily governess, and a mother! It was all for the sake of depreciating her.

At twelve o'clock, to her further indignation, she found there was to be an hour of reading aloud and of needlework-actual plain needlework. The three girls were making under-garments for themselves; and on Dolores proving to have no work of any sort, her aunt sent Gillian to the drawer, and produced a child's pinafore, which she was desired to hem. Each, however, had a quarter of an hour's reading aloud of history to do in turn, all from one big book, a history of Rome, and there was a map hung up over the black board, where they were in turn to point to the places mentioned. Before Gillian began reading, the date, and something about the former lesson was required to be told by the children, and it came quite readily, Valetta especially declaring that she did love Pyrrhus, which the others seemed to think very bad taste.

Dolores knew nothing about ancient history, and thought it foolish to study anything that did not tell in a Cambridge examination; but she supposed they knew no better down there; and when it came to her turn to read, she mangled the names so, that Val burst out laughing when she spoke of A-pious-Claudius. Lady Merrifield hushed this at once, and the girl read in a bewildered manner, and as one affronted. She saw he aunt looking at her piece of hemming, which, to say the truth, would not have done credit to Primrose, and the recollection came across her of all the oppressed orphans

who had been made household drudges, so that her reading did not become more intelligible. As the clock struck one, a warning gong was heard; everybody jumped up, the work was folded away, and with the obeisance at the door, Gillian and Val ran away.

Mysie stayed a little longer, it being her turn to tidy the room; and Lady Merrifield said to Dolores—

'I must teach you how to hold your needle tomorrow, my dear.'

'I hate work,' responded Dolores.

'Val does not like it,' said her aunt; 'nor indeed did I at your age; but one cannot be an independent woman without being able to take care of one's own clothes, so I resolved that these children should learn better than I did. Do you like a take a run with Mysie before dinner? Or there is the amusing shelf. Books may be taken out after one o'clock, and they must be put back at eight, or they are confiscated for the ensuing day,' she added, pointing to a paper below where this sentence was written.

Dolores was still rather tired, and more inclined to make friends with the books than with the cousins. There were fewer than she expected, and nothing like so many absolute stories as she was used to reading with Maude Sefton.

'Those are such grown-up books,' she said to Mysie, who came to assist her choice, and pointed to the upper shelves.

'Oh, but grown-up books are nicest!' returned Mysie; 'at least, when they don't begin being stupid and marrying too soon. They must do it at last to get out of the story, and it's nicer than dying, but they can have lots of nice adventures first. But here are the 'Feats on the Fiords' and the 'Crofton Boys' and 'Water Babies,' and all the volumes of 'Aunt Judy,' if you like the younger sort. Or the dear, dear 'Thorn Fortress;' that's good for young and old.'

'Haven't you any books of your own?'

'Oh yes; this 'Thorn Fortress' is Val's, and 'A York and a Lancaster Rose' is mine, but whenever any one gives us a book, if it is not a weeny little gem like Gill's 'Christian Year,' or my 'Little Pillow,' or Val's 'Children in the Wood,' we bring it to mother, and if it is nice, we keep it here, for every one to read. If it is just rather silly, and stupid, we may read it once, and then she keeps it; and if it is very silly indeed, she puts it out of the way.'

Mysie said it as if it had been killing an animal.

'Have you got many books?'

'Yes; but I don't mean to have them knocked about by all the boys, nor put out of the way neither.'

'Mamma said we were to be all like sisters,' said Mysie, with rather a craving for the new books; but Dolores tossed up her head and said—

'We can't be. It's nonsense to say so.'

To her surprise, Mysie turned round to Lady Merrifield, who was looking at some exercises that Miss Vincent had laid before her.

'Mamma,' she said, 'is it fair that Dolores should read our books, if she won't give you up hers to look over, and be like ours?'

'Mysie,' said Lady Merrifield, 'you can't expect Dolores to like all our home plans till she is used to them. No, my dear, you need not be afraid; you shall keep your books in your own room, and nobody shall meddle with them. I am sure your cousins would not wish to be so unkind as to deprive you of the use of theirs.'

By the time Dolores had made up her mind to take 'Tom Brown,' it was time for the general flight to prepare for dinner, and she found her room made to look very pleasant, and almost homelike, for her books and little knickknacks had been put out, not quite as she preferred, but still so as to make the place seem like her own. She was pleased enough to be quite gracious to Mysie and Val who came to visit her, and to offer to let them read any of her books; when they both thanked her and said—

'If mamma lets us.'

'Oh, then you won't have them,' said Dolores; 'I'm not going to let her have my books to take away.'

'You don't think she would take them away, when she said she wouldn't?' said Mysie, hotly.

'Why, what would she do if she didn't happen to approve of them?'

'Only tell us not to read them.'

'And wouldn't you?'

'Why, Dolores!' in such a tone as made her ashamed of her question; and she said, 'Well, father never makes any fuss about what I read. He has other things to think of.'

'How do you get books, then?'

'I buy them. And Maude Sefton, she's my great friend, has lots given to her, but nobody bothers about reading them. They aren't grown-up books, you know.'

'How stupid,' said Val. 'You had better read the 'Talisman,' and then you'll see how nice a grown-up book is.'

'The 'Talisman!' Why, Maude Sefton's brother had to get it up for his holiday task, and he said it was all rot and bosh.'

'What a horridly stupid boy he must be,' returned Mysie. 'Why, I remember when Jasper once had the 'Talisman' to do, and the big ones were so delighted. Mamma read it out, and I was just old enough to listen. I remembered all about Sir Kenneth and Roswal.'

'Tom Sefton's not stupid!' said Dolores, in wrath; 'but—but the book is stupid and out of date! I heard father and the professor say it was gone by.'

Mysie and Valetta looked perfectly astounded, and Dolores pursued her advantage.

'Of course it is all very well for you that have never lived in London, nor had any advantages.'

'But we have advantages!' cried Val.

'You don't know what advantages are,' said Dolores.

'There's the gong,' cried Mysie, and down they all plunged into the dining-room, where the family were again collected, with Hal at one end and his mother at the other.

Dolores was amazed when, at the first pause, after every one was help, Valetta's voice arose.

'Mamma, what are advantages?'

'Don't you know, Val?'

'Dolores says we haven't any. And I said we have. And she says I don't know what advantages are.'

Hal and Gillian were both laughing with all their might. Their mother kept her countenance, and said—

'I suppose every one has advantages of some sort, and perhaps without knowing them.'

'I'm sure I know,' cried Fergus.

'Well, what are they?' asked Harry.

'Having mamma!' cried the little boy.

'Hear, hear! That's right, Fergy man! Couldn't be better!' cried Harry, and there was a general acclamation, which inspired gentle Mysie with the fear that her motherless cousin might feel the contrast, and, though against rules, she whispered—

'She will make you like one of us.'

'That wasn't what I meant,' returned Dolores, a little contemptuously.

'What did you mean?' said Mysie.

'Why, you've no classes, nor lectures, nor master, and only just a mere daily governess.'

Dolores did not mean this to be heard beyond her neighbour, but Mysie demanded—

'What, do you want to be doing lessons all day long?'

'No, but good governesses never are daily!'

'That's a pity,' said Gillian, turning round on her. 'Perhaps you don't know that Miss Vincent has a First Class Cambridge Certificate in everything, and is daily, because she likes to live with her mother.'

'I think,' added Lady Merrifield, with a smile, 'that Dolores has been in the way of seeing more clever people, and getting superior teaching of some kind, but we will do the best we can for her, and try not to let her miss many advantages.'

Dolores felt a little abashed, and decidedly angry at being put in the wrong.

The elders kindly turned away the general attention from her. There was a great deal of merry family fun going on, which was quite like a new language to her. Fergus and Primrose wanted to go out in search of blackberries. Gillian undertook to drive them in the cart, but as the donkey had once or twice refused to cross a little stream of water that traversed the road, the brothers foretold that she would ignominiously come back again.

'Gill and water are perilous!' observed Hal.

'Jack's not here,' said Gillian; 'besides, it is down, not up the hill, and I'm sure I don't want to draw a pail of water.'

'No—Sancho will do that.'

'The gong will sound and sound, buzz and roar,' said Wilfred. 'No Gill! no little ones! We shall send out and find them stuck fast in the lane, Sancho with his feet spread out wide, Gill with three or four sticks lying broken on the road round her, the kids reduced to eating blackberries like the children in the wood.'

'Don't Fred,' said Gillian. 'You'll frighten them.'

'Little donkeys!' said Wilfred.

'If they were, we shouldn't want Sancho,' said Val.

It was not a very sublime bit of wit, but there was a great laugh at it all round the table. Val and Fergus declared they would go too, till they heard that Nurse Halfpenny said she would not let the little ones go out without her to tear their clothes to pieces.

Every one unanimously declared that would be no fun at all, and turned to mamma to beg her to forbid nurse to come out and spoil everything.

'That's just her view,' said mamma, laughing; 'she thinks you spoil everything.'

'Oh, that's clothes! Spoiling fun is worse.'

'But were you really going with the old Halfpenny, Gill?' said Mysie, turning to her.

'Yes,' said Gillian. 'You know I can manage her pretty well when it is only the little ones and they wouldn't have any pleasure otherwise.'

'Oh come, Gill,' intreated Fergus, 'or nurse will make us sit in the donkey-cart all the time while Lois picks the blackberries!'

'Mamma, do tell her not to come,' intreated Valetta, and more of them joined in with her.

'No, my dears, I don't like to vex her when she thinks she is doing her duty.'

'She wouldn't come if you did, mamma,' and there was a general outcry of intreaty that mamma would come with them, and defend them from Mrs. Halfpenny, as Fergus, who was rather a formal little fellow, expressed it, and mamma, after a little consideration, consented to drive the pony-carriage in that direction, and to announce to Nurse Halfpenny that she herself would take charge of the children. Whereupon there was a whoop and a war-dance of jubilee, quite overwhelming to Dolores, who could not but privately ask Mysie if Nurse Halfpenny was so very cross.

'Awfully,' said Mysie, and Wilfred added—

'As savage as a bear with a sore head.'

'Like Mrs. Crabtree?' asked Dolores.

'Exactly. Jasper called her so when he wanted to lash her up, till at lash she got hold of his 'Holiday House' and threw it into the sea, and it was in Malta and we couldn't get another,' said Mysie.

'And haven't you one?'

'Yes, Gill and I save for it; but mamma only let us have it on condition we made a solemn promise never to tease nurse about it.'

'And does she go at you with that dreadful thing—what's it name—the tawse?'

'Ah! you'll soon know,' said Wilfred.

'No, no; nonsense, Fred,' said Mysie, as Dolores' face worked with consternation. 'She never hits us, not if we are ever so tiresome. Papa and mamma would not let her.'

'But why do they let her be so dreadful? Maude's nurse used to be horrid and slap her, and when her mother found it out the woman was sent away directly.'

Nurse Halfpenny isn't that sort,' said Mysie. 'Her husband was papa's colour-sergeant, and he got a sun-stroke and died, and then she came when Gillian was just born, and so weak and tiny that she would never have lived if nurse hadn't watched her day and night, and so Gillian's her favourite, except the youngest, and she is ever so good, you know. I've heard the ladies, when we were with the dear old 111th, telling mamma how they envied her her trustworthy treasure.'

'I'm sure they might have had her at half-price,' said Wilfred. 'She's be dear at a farthing!'

At that moment Mrs. Halfpenny's voice was heard demanding if it were really her ladyship's pleasure to go out, fatiguing herself to the very death with all the children rampaging about her and tearing themselves to pieces, if not poisoning themselves with all sorts of nasty berries.

'Indeed I'll take care of them and bring them back safe to you,' responded her ladyship, very much in the tone of one of her own children making promises. 'Put them on their brown hollands and they can't come to much harm.'

'Well, if it's your wish, ma'am, my leddy; what must be, must, but I know how it will be—you'll come back tired out, fit to drop, and Miss Val and Miss Primrose won't have a rag fit to be seen on them. But if it's your will, what must be must, for you're no better than a bairn yourself, general's lady though you be, and G.C.B.'

'No, nurse, you'll be G.C.B.—Grand Commander of the Bath—when we come home,' called out Hall, who was leaning on the banister at the bottom, and there was a general laugh, during which Dolly tardily climbed the stairs, so tardily that her aunt, meeting her, asked whether she was still tired, and if she would rather have the afternoon to arrange her room.

She said 'yes,' but not 'thank you,' and went on, relieved that Mysie did not offer to stay and help her, and yet rather offended at being left alone, while all the others went their own way. She heard them pattering and clattering, shouting and calling up and down the passages, and then came a great silence, while they could be seen going down the drive, some on foot, some in the pony-chaise or donkey-cart.

Her things had all been unpacked and put in order, and her room had a very cheerful window. It was prettily furnished with fresh pink and white dimity, and choice-looking earthenware, but to London eyes like those of Dolores it seemed very old-fashioned and what she called 'poked up.' The paper was ugly, the chimney-piece was a narrow, painting thing, of the same dull, stone-colour as the door and the window-frame. And then the clear air, the perfect stillness, the absence of anything moving in the view from the window gave the citybred child a sense of dreadful loneliness and dreariness as she sat on the side of her bed, with one foot under her, gazing dolefully round her, and in he head composing her own memoirs.

'Fully occupied with their own plans and amusements, the lonely orphan was left in solitude. Her aunt knew not how her heart ached after the home she had left, but the machine of the family went its own way and trod her under its wheels.'

This was such a fine sentence that it was almost a comfort, and she thought of writing it to Maude Sefton, but as she got up to fetch her writing-case from the schoolroom, she saw that her books were standing just in the way she did not like, and with all the volumes mixed up together. So she tumbled them all out of the shelves on the floor, and at that moment Mrs. Halfpenny looked into the room.

'Well, to be sure!' she exclaimed, 'when me and Lois have been working at them books all the morning.'

'They were all nohow—as I don't like them,' said Dolores.

'Oh, very well, please yourself then, miss, if that's all the thanks you have in your pocket, you may put them up your own way, for all I care. Only my lady will have the young ladies' rooms kept neat and orderly, or they lose marks for it.'

'I don't want any help,' said Dolores, crossly, and Mrs. Halfpenny shut the door with a bang. 'The menials are insulting me,' said Dolores to herself, and a tear came to her eye, while all the time there was a certain mournful satisfaction in being so entirely the heroine of a book.

She went to work upon her books, at first hotly and sharply, and very carefully putting the tallest in the centre so as to form a gradual ascent with the tops and not for the world letting a second volume stand before its elder brother, but she soon got tired, took to peeping at one or two parting gifts which she had not yet been able to read, and at last got quite absorbed in the sorrows of a certain Clare, whose golden hair was cut short by her wicked aunt, because it outshone her cousin's sandy locks. There was reason to think that a tress of this same golden hair would lead to her recognition by some grandfather of unknown magnificence, as exactly like that of his long-lost Claribel, and this might result in her assuming splendours that would annihilate the aunt. Things seemed tending to a fracture of the ice under the cruellest cousin of all, and her rescue by Clare, when they would be carried senseless into the great house, and the recognition of Clare and the discomfiture of her foes would take place. How could Dolores shut the book at such a critical moment!

So there she was sitting in the midst of her scattered books, when the galloping and scampering began again, and Mysie knocked at the door to tell her there were pears, apples, biscuits, and milk in the dining-room, and that after consuming them, lessons had to be learnt for the next day, and then would follow amusements, evening toilette, seven o'clock tea, and either games or reading aloud till bedtime. As to the books, Mysie stood aghast.

'I thought nurse and Lois had done them all for you.'

'They did them all wrong, so I took them down.'

Oh, dear! We must put them in, or there'll be a report.'

'A report!'

'Yes, Nurse Halfpenny reports us whenever she doesn't find our rooms tidy, and then we get a bad mark. Perhaps mamma wouldn't give you one this first day, but it is best to make sure. Shall I help you, or you won't have time to eat any pears?'

Dolores was thankful for help, and the books were scrambled in anyhow on the shelves; for Mysie's good nature was endangering her share of the afternoon's gouter, though perhaps it consoled her that her curiosity was gratified by a hasty glance at the backs of her cousin's story-books.

By the time the two girls got down to the dining-table, every one had left the room, and there only remained one doubtful pear, and three baked apples, besides the loaf and the jug of milk. Mysie explained that not being a regular meal, no one was obliged to come punctually to it, or to come at all, but these who came tardily might fare the worse. As to the blackberries, for which Dolores inquired, the girls were going to make jam of them themselves the next day; but Mysie added, with an effort, she would fetch some, as her cousin had had none in the gathering.

'Oh no, thank you; I hate blackberries,' said Dolores, helping herself to an apple.

'Do you?' said Mysie, blankly. 'We don't. They are such fun. You can't think how delicious the great overhanging clusters are in the lane. Some was up so high that Hal had to stand up in the cart to reach them, and to take Fergus up on his shoulder. We never had such a blackberrying as with mamma and Hal to help us. And only think, a great carriage came by, with some very grand people in it; we think it was the Dean; and they looked down the lane and stared, so surprised to see what great mind to call out, 'Fee, faw, fum.' You know nothing makes such a good giant as Fergus standing

on Hal's shoulders, and a curtain over them to hide Hal's face. Oh dear, I wish I hadn't told you! You would have been a new person to show it to.'

Dolores made very little answer, finished her apple, and followed to the schoolroom, where an irregular verb, some geography, and some dates awaited her.

Then followed another rush of the populace for the evening meal of the live stock, but in this Dolores was too wary to share. She made her way up to her retreat again, and tried to lose the sense of her trouble and loneliness in a book. Then came the warning bell, and a prodigious scuffling, racing and chasing, accompanied by yells as of terror and roars as of victory, all cut short by the growls of Mrs. Halfpenny. Everything then subsided. The world was dressing; Dolores dressed too, feeling hurt and forlorn at no one's coming to help her, and yet worried when Mysie arrived with orders from Mrs. Halfpenny to come to her to have her sash tied.

'I think a servant ought to come to me. Caroline always does,' said the only daughter with dignity.

'She can't, for she is putting Primrose to bed. Oh, it's so delicious to see Prim in her bath,' said Mysie, with a little skip. 'Make haste, or we shall miss her, the darling.'

Dolores did not feel pressed to behold the spectacle, and not being in the habit of dressing without assistance, she was tardy, and Mysie fidgeted about and nearly distracted her. Thus, when she reached the nursery, Primrose was already in her little white bed-gown, and was being incited by Valetta to caper about on her cot, like a little acrobat, as her sisters said, while Mrs. Halfpenny declared that 'they were making the child that rampageous, she should not get her to sleep till midnight.'

They would have been turned out much sooner, and Primrose hushed into silence, if nurse's soul had not been horrified by the state of Dolores' hair and the general set of her garments.

'My certie!' she exclaimed—a dreadful exclamation in the eyes of the family, who knew it implied that in all her experience Mrs. Halfpenny had never known the like! And taking Dolores by the hand, she led the wrathful and indignant girl back into her bedroom, untied and tied, unbuttoned and buttoned, brushed and combed in spite of the second bell ringing, the general scamper, and the sudden apparition of Mysie and Val, whom she bade run away and tell her leddyship that 'Miss Mohoone should come as soon as she was sorted, but she ought to come up early to have her hair looked to, for 'twas shame to see how thae fine London servants sorted a motherless bairn.'

Dolores felt herself insulted; she turned red all over, with feelings the old Scotchwoman could not understand. She expected to hear the message roared out to the whole assembly round the tea-table, but Mysie had discretion enough to withhold her sister from making it public.

The tea itself, though partaken of by Lady Merrifield, seemed an indignity to the young lady accustomed to late dinners. After it, the whole family played at 'dumb crambo.' Dolores was invited to join, and instructed to 'do the thing you think it is;' but she was entirely unused to social games, and thought it only ridiculous and stupid when the word being a rhyme to ite, Fergus gave rather too real a blow to Wilfred, and Gillian answered, "Tis not smite;' Wilfred held out a hand, and was told, "Tis not right;' Val flourished in the air as if holding a string, and was informed that 'kite' was wrong; when Hal ran away as if pursued by Fergus by way of flight; and Mysie performed antics which she was finally obliged to explain were those of a sprite. Dolores could not recollect anything, and only felt annoyed at being made to feel stupid by such nonsense, when Mysie tried to make her a present of a suggestion by pointing to the back of a letter. Neither write nor white would come into her head, though little Fergus signalized himself, just before he was swept off to bed, by seizing a pen and making strokes!

After his departure, Lady Merrifield read aloud 'The Old oak Staircase,' which had been kept to begin when Dolores came, Hal taking the book in turn with his mother. And so ended Dolores' first day of banishment.

CHAPTER V. – THE FIRST WALK

‘What a lot of letters for you, mamma!’ cried Mysie.

‘Papa!’ exclaimed Fergus and Primrose.

‘No, it is not the right day, my dears. But here is a letter from Aunt Ada.’

‘Oh!’ in a different tone.

‘She writes for Aunt Jane. They will come down here next Monday because Aunt Jane is wanted to address the girls at the G.F.S. festival on Tuesday.’

‘Aunt Jane seems to have taken to public speaking,’ said Harry. ‘It would be rather a lark to hear her.’

‘You may have a chance,’ said Lady Merrifield, ‘for here is a note from Mrs. Blackburn to ask if I will be so very kind as to let them have the festival here. They had reckoned upon Tillington Park, where they have always had it before, but they hear that all the little Tillingtons have the measles, and they don’t think it safe to venture there.’

‘It will be great fun!’ said Gillian. ‘We will have all sorts of games, only I’m afraid they will be much stupider than the Irish girls.’

‘And ever so much stupider than the dear 111th children,’ sighed Mysie.

‘Aren’t they all great big girls?’ asked Valetta, disconsolately.

‘I believe twelve years old is the limit,’ said her mother. ‘Twelve-year-old girls have plenty of play in them, Vals, haven’t they, Mysie? Let me see—two hundred and thirty of them.’

‘For you to feast?’ asked Harry.

‘Oh, no—that cost comes out of their own funds, Mrs. Blackburn takes care to tell me, and Miss Hacket will find some one in Siverfold who will provide tables and forms and crockery. I must go down and talk to Miss Hacket as soon as lessons are over. Or perhaps it would save time and trouble if I wrote and asked her to come up to luncheon and see the capabilities of the place. Why, what’s the matter?’ pausing at the blank looks.

‘The jam, mamma—the blackberry jam!’ cried Valetta.

‘Well?’

‘We can’t do it without Gill, and she will have to be after that Miss Constance,’ explained Val.

‘Oh! never mind. She won’t stay all the afternoon,’ said Gillian, cheerfully. ‘Luncheon people don’t.’

‘Yes, but then there will be lessons to be learnt.’

‘Look here, Val,’ said Gillian, ‘if you and Mysie will learn your lessons for tomorrow while I’m bound to Miss Con., I’ll do mine some time in the evening, and be free for the jam when she is gone.’

‘The dear delicious jam!’ cried Val, springing about upon her chair; and Lady Merrifield further said—

‘I wonder whether Mysie and Dolores would like to take the note down. They could bring back a message by word of mouth.’

‘Oh, thank you, mamma!’ cried Mysie.

‘Then I will write the note as soon as we have done breakfast. Don’t dawdle, Fergus boy.’

‘Mayn’t I go?’ demanded Wilfred.

‘No, my dear. It is your morning with Mr. Poulter. And you must take care not to come back later than eleven, Mysie dear; I cannot have him kept waiting. Dolores, do you like to go?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Dolores, partly because it was at any rate gain to escape from that charity-school lesson in the morning, and partly because Valetta was looking at her in the ardent hope that she would refuse the privilege of the walk, and it therefore became valuable; but there was so little alacrity in her voice that her aunt asked her whether she were quite rested and really liked the walk, which would be only half a mile to the outskirts of the town.

Dolores hated personal inquiries beyond everything, and replied that she was quite well, and didn't mind.

So soon as she and Mysie had finished, they were sent off to get ready, while Aunt Lilias wrote her note in pencil at the corner of the table, which she never left, while Fergus and Primrose were finishing their meal; but she had to silence a storm at the 'didn't mind'—Gillian even venturing to ask how she could send one to whom it was evidently no pleasure to go. 'I think she likes it more than she shows,' said the mother, 'and she wants air, and will settle to her lessons the better for it. What's that, Val?'

'It was my turn, mamma,' said Valetta, in an injured voice.

'It will be your turn next, Val,' said her mother, cheerfully. 'Dolores comes between you and Mysie, so she must take her place accordingly. And today we grant her the privilege of the new-comer.'

Dolores would have esteemed the privilege more, if, while she was going upstairs to put on her hat, the recollection had not occurred to her of one of the victim's of an aunt's cruelty who was always made to run on errands while her favoured cousins were at their studies. Was this the beginning? Somehow, though her better sense knew this was a foolish fancy, she had a secret pleasure in pitying herself, and posing to herself as a persecuted heroine. And then she was greatly fretted to find the housemaid in her room, looking as if no one else had any business there. What was worse, she could not find her jacket. She pulled out all her drawers with fierce, noisy jerks, and then turned round on the maid, sharply demanding—

'Who has taken my jacket?'

'I'm sure I don't know, Miss Dollars. You'd best ask Mrs. Halfpenny.'

'If—' but at that moment Mysie ran in, holding the jacket in her hand. 'I saw it in the nursery,' she said, triumphantly. 'Nurse had taken it to mend! Come along. Where's your hat?'

But there was pursuit; Mrs. Halfpenny was at the door. 'Young ladies, you are not going out of the policy in that fashion.'

'Mamma sent us. Mamma wants us to take a note in a hurry. Only to Miss Hacket,' pleaded Mysie, as Mrs. Halfpenny laid violent hands on her brown Holland jacket, observing—

'My leddy never bade ye run off mair like a wild worricow than a general officer's daughter, Miss Mysie. What's that? Only Miss Hacket, do you say? You should respect yourself and them you come of mair than to show yourself to a blind beetle in an unbecoming way. 'Tis well that there's one in the house that knows what is befitting. Miss Dollars, you stand still; I must sort your necktie before you go. 'Tis all of a wisp. Miss Mysie, you tell your mamma that I should be fain to know her pleasure about Miss Dollars' frocks. She've scarce got one—coloured or mourning—that don't want altering.'

Mrs. Halfpenny always caused Dolores such extreme astonishment and awe that she obeyed her instantly, but to be turned about and tidied by an authoritative hand was extremely disagreeable to the independent young lady. Caroline had never treated her thus, being more willing to permit untidiness than to endure her temper. She only durst, after the pair were released, remonstrate with Mysie on being termed Miss Dollars.

'They can't make out your name,' said Mysie. 'I tried to teach Lois, but nurse said she had no notion of new-fangled nonsense names.'

'I'm sure Valetta and Primrose are worse.'

'Ah! but Val was born at Malta, and mamma had always loved the Grand Master La Valetta so much, and had written verses about him when she was only sixteen. And Primrose was named after the first primrose mamma had seen for twelve years—the first one Val and I had ever seen.'

'They called me Miss Mohun at home.'

'Yes, but we can't here, because of Aunt Jane.'

All this was chattered forth on the stairs before the two girls reached the dining-room, where Mysie committed the feeding of her pets to Val, and received the note, with fresh injunctions to

come home by eleven, and bring word whether Miss Hacket and Miss Constance would both come to luncheon.

'Oh dear!' sighed Gillian, and there was a general groan round the table.

'It can't be helped, my dear.'

'Oh no, I know it can't,' said Gillian, resignedly.

'You see,' said Mysie. 'Yes, come along, Basto dear. You see Gill has to be—down, Basto, I say!—a young lady when.... Never mind him, Dolores, he won't hurt. When Miss Constance Hacket and—leave her alone, Basto, I say!—and she is such a goose. Not you, Dolores, but Miss Constance.'

'Oh that dog! I wish you would not take him.'

'Not take dear old Basto! Why 'tis such a treat for him to get a walk in the morning—the delight of his jolly old black heart. Isn't he a dear old fellow? and he never hurt anybody in his life! It's only setting off! He will quiet down in a minute; but I couldn't disappoint him. Could I, my old man?'

Never having lived with animals nor entered into their feelings, Dolores could not understand how a dog's pleasure could be preferred to her comfort, and felt a good deal hurt, though Basto's antics subsided as soon as they were past the inner gate shutting in the garden from the paddock, which was let out to a farmer. Mysie, however, ran on as usual with her stream of information—

'The Miss Hacket were sister or daughters or something to some old man who used to be clergyman here, and they are all married up but these two, and they've got the dearest little house you ever saw. They had a nephew in the 111th, and so they came and called on us at once. Miss Hacket is a regular old dear, but we none of us can bear Miss Constance, except that mamma says we ought to be sorry for her because she leads such a confined life. Miss Hacket and Aunt Jane always do go on so about the G.F.S. They both are branch secretaries, you know.'

'I know! Aunt Jane did bother Mrs. Sefton so that she says she will never have another of those G.F.S. girls. She says it is a society for interference.'

'Mamma likes it,' said Mysie.

'Oh! but she is only just come.'

'Yes; but she always looked after the school children at Beechcroft before she married, and she and Alethea and Phyllis had the soldiers' children up on Sunday. Alethea taught the little drummer boys, and they were so funny. I wonder who teaches them now! Gill always goes down to help Miss Hacket with her G.F.S. classes. She has one on Sunday afternoon, and one on Tuesday for sewing, and she is the only young lady in the place who can do plain needlework properly.'

'Sewing-machines can work. What the use of fussing about it!'

'They can't mend,' said Mysie. 'Besides, do you know, in the American war, all the sewing-machines in the Southern States got out of order, and as all the machinery people were in the north, the poor ladies didn't know what to do, and couldn't work without them.'

'Sewing-machines are a recent invention,' said Dolores.

'Oh! you didn't think I meant the great old War of Independence. No, I meant the war about the slaves—secession they called it.'

'That is not in the history of England,' said Dolores, as if Mysie had no business to look beyond.

'Why! of course not, when it happened in America. Papa told us about it. He read it in some paper, I think. Don't you like learning things in that way?'

'No. I don't approve of irregular unsystematic knowledge.'

Dolores has heard her mother say something of this kind, and it came into her head most opportunely as a defence of her father—for she would not for the world have confessed that he did not talk to her as Sir Jasper Merrifield seemed to have done to his children. In fact she rather despised the General for so doing.

'Oh! but it is such fun picking up things out of lesson time!' said Mysie.

'That is the Edge—,' Dolores was not sure of the word Edgeworthian, so she went on to 'system. Professor Sefton says he does not approve of harassing children with cramming them with irregular

information at all sorts of times. Let play be play and lessons be lessons, he says, not mixed up together, and so Rex and Maude never learnt anything—not a letter—till they were seven years old.'

'How stupid!' cried Mysie.

'Maude's not stupid!' cried Dolores, 'nor the professor either! She's my great friend.'

'I didn't say she was stupid,' said Mysie, apologetically, 'only that it must be very stupid not to be able to read till one was seven. Could you?'

'Oh, yes. I can't remember when I couldn't read. But Maude used to play with a little girl who could read and talk French at five years old, and she died of water upon her brain.'

'Dear me! Primrose can read quite well,' said Mysie, somewhat alarmed; 'but then,' she went on in a reassured voice, 'so could all of us except Jasper and Gillian, and they felt the heat so much at Gibraltar that they were quite stupid while they were there.'

This discussion brought the two girls across the paddock out into a road with a broad, neat footpath, where numerous little children were being exercised with nurses and perambulators. At first it was bordered by fields on either side, but villas soon began to spring up, and presently the girls reached what looked like a long, low 'cottage residence,' but was really two, with a verandah along the front, and a garden divided in the middle by a paling covered with canary nasturtium shrubs. The verandah on one side was hung with a rich purple pall of the dark clematis, on the other by a Gloire de Dijon rose. There were bright flower beds, and the dormer windows over the verandah looked like smiling eyes under their deep brows of creeper-trimmed verge-board. What London-bred Dolores saw was a sight that shocked her—a lady standing unbonnetted just beyond the verandah, talking to a girl whose black hat and jacket looked what Mysie called 'very G.F.S.-y.'

The lady did not turn out to be young or beautiful. She was near middle age, and looked as if she were far too busy to be ever plump; she had a very considerable amount of nose and rather thin, dark hair, done in a fashion which, like that of her navy blue linen dress, looked perfectly antiquated to Dolores. As she saw the two girls at the gate she came down the path eagerly to welcome them.

'Ah! my dear Mysie! so kind of your dear mother! I thought I should hear from her.' And as she kissed Mysie, she added, 'And this is the new cousin. My dear, I am glad to see you here.'

Dolores thought her own dignified manner had kept off a kiss, not knowing that Miss Hacket was far too ladylike to be over-familiar, and that there was no need to put on such a forbidding look.

Mysie gave her message and note, but Miss Hacket could not give the verbal answer at once till she had consulted her sister. She was not sure whether Constance had not made an engagement to play lawn-tennis, so they must come in.

There sounded 'coo-roo-oo coo-roo-oo' in the verandah, and Mysie cried—

'Oh, the dear doves!'

Miss Hacket said she had been just feeding them when the G.F.S. girl arrived, and as Mysie came to a halt in delight at the aspect of a young one that had just crept out into public life, the sister was called to the window. She was a great deal younger and more of the present day in style than her sister, and had pensive-looking grey eyes, with a somewhat bored languid manner as she shook hands with the early visitors.

The sisters had a little consultation over the note, during which Dolores studied them, and Mysie studied the doves, longing to see the curious process of feeding the young ones.

When Miss Hacket turned back to her with the acceptance of the invitation, she thought she might wait just to help Miss Hacket to put in the corn and the sop. Meantime Miss Constance talked to Dolores.

'Did you arrive yesterday?'

'No, the day before.'

'Ah! it must be a great change to you.'

'Indeed it is.'

'This must be the dullest place in England, I think,' said Miss Constance. 'No variety, no advantages of any kind! And have not you lived in London?'

'Yes.'

'That is my ambition! I once spent six weeks in London, and it was an absolute revelation—the opening of another world. And I understand that Mr. Maurice Mohun is such a clever man, and that you saw a great deal of his friends.'

'I used,' said Dolores, thinking of those days of her mother when she was the pet and plaything of the guests, incited to say clever and pert things, which then were passed round and embellished till she neither knew them nor comprehended them.

'That is what I pine for!' exclaimed Miss Constance. 'Nobody here has any ideas. You can't conceive how borne and prejudiced every one her who is used to something better! Don't you love art needlework?'

'Maude Sefton has been working Goosey Goosey Gander on a toilet-cover.'

'Oh! how sweet! We never get any new patterns here! Do come in and see, I don't know which to take; I brought three beginnings home to choose from, and I am quite undecided.'

'Mrs. Sefton draws her own patterns,' said Dolores. 'Something she gets ideas from Lorenzo Dellman—he's an artist, you know, and a regular aesthete! He made her do a dado all sunflowers last year, but they are a little gone out now, and are very staring besides, and I think she will have some nymphs dancing among almond-trees in blue vases instead, as soon as she has designed it.'

'Isn't that lovely! Oh! what would I not give for such opportunities? Do let me have your opinion.'

So Dolores went in with her, and looked at three patterns, one of tall daisies; another of odd-looking doves, one on each side of a red Etruscan vase, where the water must have been as much out of their reach as that in the pitcher was beyond the crow's; and a third, of Little Bo Peep. Having given her opinion in favour of Bo Peep, she was taken upstairs to inspect the young lady's store of crewels, and choose the colours.

Dolores neither knew nor cared anything about fancy work, but to be treated as an authority was quite soothing, and she fully believed that the mere glimpses she had had of Mrs. Sefton's work and the shop windows, enabled her to give great enlightenment to this poor country mouse; so she gladly went to the bedroom, with a muslin-worked toilet-cover, embroidered curtains, plates fastened against the wall, and table all over knick-knacks, which Miss Constance called her little den, where she could study beauty after her own bent, while her sister Mary was wholly engrossed with the useful, and could endure nothing but the prose of the last century.

Meantime Mysie had forgotten how time flew in her belief that in one minute more the young doves would want to be fed, and then in amusement at seeing them pursue their parents with low squeaks and flutterings, watching, too, the airs and graces, bowing, cooing, and laughing of the old ones. When at last she was startled by hearing eleven struck, there had to be a great hunt for Dolores in the drawing-room and garden, and when at last Miss Hacket's calls for her sister brought the tow downstairs more than ten minutes had passed! Mysie was too much dismayed, and in too great a hurry to do anything but cry, 'Come along, Dolores,' and set off at such a gallop as to scandalize the Londoner, even when Mysie recollected that it was too public a place for running, and slackened her pace. Dolores was soon gasping, and with a stitch in her side. Mysie would have exclaimed, 'What were you doing with Miss Constance?' but breathlessness happily prevented it. The way across the paddock seemed endless, and Mysie was chafed at having to hold back for her companion, who panted in distress, leant against a tree, declared she could not go on, she did not care, and then when, Mysie set off running, was seized with fright at being left alone in this vast unknown space, cried after her and made a rush, soon ending in sobbing breath.

At last they were at the door, and Wilfred just coming out of the dining-room greeted them with, 'A quarter to twelve. Won't you catch it? Oh my!'

'Are they come?' said Lady Merrifield, looking out of the schoolroom. 'My dear children! Did Miss Hacket keep you?'

'No, mamma,' gasped Mysie. 'At least it was my fault for watching the doves.'

'Ah! Mysie, I must not send you on a message next time. Mr. Poulter has been waiting these twenty minutes, and I am afraid you are not fit to take a lesson now. Dolores looks quite done up! I shall send you both to lie down on your beds and learn your poetry for an hour. And you must write an apology to Mr. Poulter this afternoon. No, don't go in now. Go up at once, Gillian shall bring your books. Does Miss Hacket come?'

'Yes, mamma,' said Mysie humbly, looking at Dolores all the time. She was too generous to say that part of the delay had been caused by looking for her cousin, and having to adapt her pace to the slower one, but she decidedly expected the avowal from Dolores, and thought it mean not to make it. 'And, oh, the jam!' she mourned as she went upstairs. While, on the other hand, Dolores considered what she called 'being sent to bed' an unmerited and unjust sentence given without a hearing; when their tardiness had been all Mysie's fault, not hers. She had no notion that her aunt only sent them to lie down, because they looked heated, tired, and spent, and was really letting them off their morning's lessons. It was a pity that she felt too forlorn and sullen even to complain when Gillian brought up Macaulay's 'Armada' for her to learn the first twelve lines, or she might have come to an understanding, but all that was elicited from her was a glum 'No,' when asked if she knew it already. Gillian told her not to keep her dusty boots on the bed, and she vouchsafed no answer, for she did not consider Gillian her mistress, though, after she was left to herself, she found them so tight and hot that she took them off. Then she looked over the verses rather contemptuously—she who always learnt German poetry; and she had a great mind to assert her independence by getting off the bed, and writing a letter to Maude Sefton, describing the narrow stupidity of the whole family, and how her aunt, without hearing her, had send her to be for Mysie's fault. However she felt so shaky and tired that she thought she had better rest a little first, and somehow she fell fast asleep, and was only awakened by the gong. She jumped up in haste, recollecting that the delightful sympathizing Miss Constance was coming to luncheon, and set her hair and dress to rights eagerly, observing, however, to herself, that her horrid aunt was quite capable of imprisoning her all the time for not having learnt that stupid poetry.

She hesitated a little where to go when she reached the hall, but the schoolroom door was open, and she heard a mournful voice concluding with a gasp—

'Our glorious semper eadem, the banner of our pride.'

And Miss Vincent saying, 'Now, my dear, go and wash your face, and try not to be such a dismal spectacle.'

And then Mysie came out, with heavy eyes and a mottled face, showing that she had been crying all the time she had been learning, over her own fault certainly, but likewise over mamma's displeasure and Dolly's shabbiness.

'Well, Dora,' said Miss Vincent, 'have you come to repeat your poetry?'

'No,' said Dolores. 'I went to sleep instead.'

'Oh! I'm glad of that. I wish poor Mysie had done the same. I believe it was what Lady Merrifield intended, you both looked so knocked up.'

Dolores cleared up a little at this, especially as Miss Vincent was no relation, and she thought it a good time to make her protest against mere English.

'Oh!' she said. 'I supposed that was the reason she gave me such a stupid, childish, sing-song nursery rhyme to learn. I can say lots of Schiller and some Goethe.'

'I advise you not to let any one hear you call Lord Macaulay's poem a nursery rhyme, or it might never be forgotten,' said Miss Vincent gaily. Then seeing the cloud return to Dolores's face,

she added, 'You have been brought forward in German, I see. We must try to bring your knowledge of English literature up to be even with it.'

Dolores liked this better than anything she had yet heard, chiefly because she had learnt from her books that governesses were not uniformly so cruel as aunts. And besides, she felt that she had been spared a public humiliation.

By this time the guests were ringing at the door, and Miss Vincent, with her had on, only waiting till their entrance was made to depart. Dolores asked whether to go into the drawing-room, and was told that Lady Merrifield preferred that the children should only appear in the dining-room on the sound of the gong, which was not long in being heard.

The Merrifields were trained not to chatter when there was company at table, besides Mysie and Val were in low spirits about the chance of the blackberry cookery. Miss Hacket sat on one side of Lady Merrifield, and talked about what associates had answered her letters, and what villages would send contingents of girls, and it sounded very dull to the young people. Miss Constance was next to Hal. She looked amiable and sympathetic at Dolores on the opposite side of the table, but discussed lawn-tennis tournaments with her neighbour, which was quite as little interesting to the general public as was the G.F.S. However, as soon as Primrose had said grace, Lady Merrifield proposed to take Miss Hacket down to the stable-yard; and the whole train followed excepting the two girls, who trusted Hal to see whether their pets would suffer inconvenience. However it soon was made evident to Gillian that she was not wanted, and that Dolores and Constance had no notion of wandering about the paved courts and bare coach-houses, among the dogs and cats, guinea-pigs, and fowls. Indeed, Constance, who was at least seven years older than Gillian, and a full-blown young lady, dismissed her by saying 'that she was going to see Miss Mohun's books.'

'Oh, certainly,' said Gillian, in a voice as though she were rather surprised, though much relieved.

So off the friends went together—for of course they were to be friends. The Miss Mohun had been uttered in a tone that clearly meant to be asked to drop it, so they were to be Dolores and Constance henceforth, if not Dolly and Cons. Dolores was such a lovely name that Constance could not mangle it, and was sure there was some reason for it. The girl had, in fact, been named after a Spanish lady, whom her mother had known and admired in early girlhood, and to whom she had made a promise of naming her first daughter after her. No doubt Dolores did not know that Mrs. Mohun had regretted the childish promise which she had felt bound to keep in spite of her husband's dislike to the name, which he declared would be a misfortune to the child.

Dolores was really proud of its peculiarity, and delighted to have any one to sympathize with her, in that and a great deal besides, which she communicated to her new friend in the window-seat of her room. When the two ladies went home, Constance told her sister that 'dear little Dolores was a remarkable character, sadly misunderstood among those common-place people, the Merrifields, and unjustly used, too, and she should do her best for her!'

Meantime Gillian, finding herself not wanted, had repaired to the schoolroom.

'Oh, it is of no use,' sighed Mysie, disconsolately. 'I've ever so much morning's work to make up, too. And I never shall! I've muzzled my head!'

By which remarkable expression Mysie signified that fatigue, crying, and dinner had made her brains dull and heavy; but Gillian was a sensible elder sister.

'Don't try your sum yet, then,' she said. 'Practise your scales for half an hour, while I do my algebra, and then we'll go over your German verbs together. I'll tell Miss Vincent, and she wont' mind, and I think mamma will be pleased if you try.'

Gillian was too much used to noises not to be able to work an equation, and prepare her Virgil, to the sound of scales, and Mysie was a good deal restored by them and by hope.

So when at length Constance had been summoned by her sister, who tore herself away from the arrangements, being bound to five-o'clock tea elsewhere, Mysie was discovered with a face still

rather woe-begone, but hopeful and persevering, and though there still was a 'bill of parcels' where 11 and 3/4 lbs. of mutton at 13 and 1/2d. per lb. refused to come right, Lady Merrifield kissed her, said she had been a diligent child, and sent her off prancing in bliss to the old 'still-room' stove, where they were allowed a fire, basins, spoons, and strainers, and where the sugar lay in a snowy heap, and the blackberries in a sanguine pile.

'There's partiality!' thought Dolores, and scowled, as she stood at the front door still gazing after Constance.

'Won't you come, Dolly?' said Mysie. 'Or haven't you learnt your lessons?'

'No,' said Dolly, making one answer serve for both questions.

'Oh! then you can't. Shall I ask mamma to let you off?'

'No, I don't care. I don't like messes! And what's the use if you haven't a cookery class?'

'It's such fun,' said Val.

'And our sisters did go to a cookery class at Dublin and taught Gill,' added Mysie.

'But if you haven't done your lessons, you can't go,' said Valetta decidedly.

Off they went, and Lady Merrifield presently crossed the hall, and saw Dolores' attitude.

'My dear, are you waiting to say those verses?' she said kindly.

'I hadn't time to learn them, I went to sleep,' said Dolores.

'A very good thing too, my dear. Suppose we go over them together.'

Aunt Lilias took the unwilling hand, led Dolores into the schoolroom, and for half an hour she went over the verses with her, explaining what was new to the girl, and vividly describing the agitation of Plymouth, and the flocks of people thronging in. 'I must show her that I will be minded, but I will make it pleasant to her, poor child,' she thought.

And it could not have been otherwise than pleasant to her, but that she was reflecting all this time that she was being punished while Mysie was enjoying herself. Therefore she put the lid on her intellect, and was inconceivably stupid.

CHAPTER VI. – PERSECUTION

On Monday afternoon Dolores was sitting at the end of the long garden walk, upon a green garden-bench, with a crocodile's head and tail roughly carved. The shouts of the others were audible in the distance beyond the belt of trees. Aunt Lily had driven into the town to meet her sisters, taking Fergus with her, whereas Dolores had never been out in the carriage. There was partiality! Though, to be sure, Fergus was to have a tooth out! Harry and Gillian were playing with the rest, and she had been invited to join, but she had made answer that she hated romping, and on being assured that no romping was necessary, she replied that she only wanted to read in peace. She had refused the "Thorn Fortress," which she was told would explain the game, and had hunted out "Clare, or No Home," to compare her lot with that of the homeless one.

Certainly, she had not yet been sent to bed with a box on the ear because a countess had shown symptoms of noticing her more than her ugly, over-dressed cousin. But then Aunt Lily would not allow her to walk down alone to the Casement Villas to see dear Constance, and would let that farmer keep all those dreadful cows in the paddock, so that even going escorted was a terror to her.

Nor had her handsome mourning been taken from her and old clothes of her cousin substituted for it. No, but she had been cruelly pulled about between Mrs. Halfpenny and the Silverton dressmaker with a mouthful of pins; and Aunt Lily had insisted on her dress being trimmed with velvet, instead of the jingling jet she preferred.

Did they intercept her letters? She had had one from her father, sent from Falmouth, but only one from Maude Sefton in ten days! Moreover, she had one from Constance in her apron pocket, arrived that very afternoon, asking her to come down with Gillian on the Sundays, that the friends might enjoy themselves together while the classes were going on; but she made sure that all were so jealous of her friendship with Constance that no consent would be given.

She did not hear or notice the whisperings in the laurels behind her—

'Do you see that sulky old Croat, smoking his pipe under the tree?'

'No, he is a Black Brunswicker.'

'Nonsense, Willie; the Black Brunswickers weren't till Bonaparte's time.'

'I don't care, he is anything black and nasty; here goes!'

'Oh stop; don't shoot. I believe he is only a vivandiere. Besides, it's treacherous—'

'I tell you he is laying a train to blow up the tower. There!'

An arrow struck the bench beside Dolores, who, more angry than she had ever been in her life, snatched it up, unheeding that it had no point to speak of, rushed headlong in pursuit, while, with a tremendous shout, Valetta and Wilfred flew before her to a waste overgrown place at the end of the kitchen garden.

'We've shot a Croat!'

'No, a Black Brunswicker.'

'Oh ah! They are coming—the enemy! Into the fortress! Bar the wolf's passage!'

And as Dolores struggled through the bushes, she saw the whole family dashing into an outhouse, and the door slammed. She pushed against it, but an unearthly compound of howls, yells, shouts and bangs replied.

'Gillian! Harry, I say,' she cried in great anger; 'come out, I want to speak to you.'

But her voice was lost in the war-whoops within, and the louder she knocked, the louder grew the din, till she walked off, swelling with grief and indignation. Mysie, after all her professions of friendship, to use her in this way! And Harry and Gillian, who should have kept the others within bounds!

Slowly she crossed the lawn, just as Lady Merrifield, the other two aunts, and Fergus, all came out from the glass door of the drawing-room. Aunt Jane, a trim little dark-eyed woman, looking at

two and forty much the same as she might have done at five and twenty; and Aunt Adeline, pretty and delicately fair, with somewhat of the same grace as Lady Merrifield, but more languor, and an air as if everything about her were for effect. Though not specially fond of theses aunts, Dolores was glad to have them as witnesses of her ill-usage.

'There stands Dolly, like a statue of Diana, dart in hand,' exclaimed Aunt Adeline.

'Yes,' said Dolores; 'I wish to know, Aunt Lilias, if Wilfred and Valetta are to call me names, and shoot arrows at me?'

'What do you mean, my dear?'

'They came at me while I was sitting quietly reading—there—and shot at me, and called me such horrid names I can't repeat them, and ran away. Then the others, Gillian and Harry and all, would not listen to me, but shut themselves up in an out-house and shouted at me.'

'I think there must be some mistake, Dolores,' said her aunt. 'Where are they?'

'Out beyond there,' said Dolores, pointing in the direction in which Fergus was running.

Lady Merrifield set off with her, and the other two ladies followed more slowly.

'I thought it would not do,' said Aunt Jane.

'Lily's children are so rough,' added Aunt Adeline.

'I am not so sure that the fault is theirs,' was the reply. 'She is a priggish little puss, who wants shaking up.'

'Ah! here come the hordes,' sighed Adeline, shrinking a little, as the entire population, summoned by Fergus, came pouring forth to meet the advancing mother.

'How is this, Wilfred? Have you been shooting arrows at your cousin?'

'Mama!' cried Valetta, indignantly, 'he did not shoot at her; he only pretended, and shot the old crocodile-bench. He never meant any more. It was only play.'

'Have you not been forbidden to shoot in the direction of any person?'

'Nor I didn't!' said Wilfred. 'I only shot the crocodile. I never tried to hit her. She is quite big enough to miss.'

'And she did look such a nice Croat, mamma,' added Valetta. 'We were scouts out of the Thorn Fortress, Willie and I, and it was such a jolly dodge to steal upon one of the enemy.'

'You should have warned her.'

Then it would not have been a surprise,' said Val, seriously.

'Was she not at play with you?'

'No, mamma,' said Mysie. 'We asked her, and she would not. I say,' pausing in consternation, 'Dolores, was it you that came and called at the door of the Wolf's passage?'

'Of course. I wanted to show Gillian how Wilfred behaved to me.'

I thought it was Fergus come home to be the enemy.'

'Didn't you know her voice?' asked the mother

'We were all making such a noise ourselves in the dark,' said Gillian, 'that there was no hearing any one; and Primrose was rather frightened, so that Hal was attending to her. Indeed, Dolores, I am very sorry. If we had guessed that it was you, we would have opened the door at once, and then you would have known that it was all fun and play, and not have troubled mamma about it.'

'Wilfred and Valetta knew,' said Dolores, rather sullenly.

'Oh! but it was such fun,' said Val.

'It was fun that became unkindness on your part,' said her mother. 'You ought not to have kept it up without warning to her. And what do I hear about names? I hope that was also misunderstanding of the game. What did you call her?'

'Only a Croat,' said Valetta, indignantly, 'and a Black Brunswicker.'

'Was that it, Dolores?'

'Perhaps,' she muttered, disconcerted by a laugh from her Aunt Jane.

'I do not know what you took them for,' said Lady Merrifield, 'but you see some part of this trouble arose from a mistake on you part. Now, Wilfred and Valetta, remember that is not right to force a person into play against her will. And as to the shooting near, but not at her, you both know perfectly well that it is forbidden. So give me your bow, Wilfred. I shall keep it for a week, that you may remember obedience.'

Wilfred looked sullen, but obeyed. Dolores could not call her aunt unjust, but as she look round, she met glances that made her think it prudent to shelter herself among the elders. Aunt Jane asked what the game was.

'The Thorn Fortress,' said Gillian. 'It comes out of that delightful S.P.C.K. book so called, where, in the 'Thirty Years' War,' all the people of a village took refuge from the soldiers in a field in the middle of a forest guarded by a tremendous hedge of thorns. Val had it for a birthday present, and the children have been acting it ever since.'

'It has quite put out the Desert Island passion, which used to be a regular stage in these children's lives. Every voyage we have taken, somebody has come to ask whether there was any hope of being wrecked on one.'

'Fergus even asked when we crossed from Dublin,' said Gillian.

'He was put up to that, to keep up the tradition,' observed Harry.

On reaching the house, the elders proceeded to five o'clock tea in the drawing-room, the juniors to gouter in the dining-room. As Dolores entered, she beheld a row of all her five younger cousins drawn up looking at her as if she had committed high treason, and she was instantly addressed—

'Tell-take tit!' began Valetta.

'Sneak!' cried Wilfred.

'I will call her Croat!' added Fergus.

'Worse than Croat! Bashi Bazouk!' exclaimed Valetta.

'Worse than Crow!' chimed in Primrose.

'Oh, Dolores! How could you?' said Mysie.

'To get poor Willie punished!' said Val.

Dolores stood her ground. 'It was time to speak when it came to shooting arrows at me.'

'Hush! hush! Willie,' cried Mysie. 'I told you so. Now Dolores, listen. Nobody ever tells of anybody when it is only being tiresome and they don't mean it, or there never would be any peace at all. That's honour! Do you see? One may go to Gill sometimes.'

'One's a sneak if one does,' put in Wilfred; but Mysie, unheeding went on—

'And Gill can help without a fuss or going to mamma.'

'Mamma always knows,' said Val.

'Mamma knows all about everything,' said Mysie. 'I think it's nature; ad if she does not always take notice at the time, she will have it out sooner or later.' Then resuming the thread of her discourse: 'So you see, Dolly, we have made up our minds that we will forgive you this time, because you are an only child and don't know what's what, and that's some excuse. Only you mustn't go on telling tales whenever an evident happens.'

Dolores thought it was she who ought to forgive, but the force against her was overpowering, though still she hesitated. 'But if I promise not to tell,' she said, 'how do I know what may be done to me?'

'You might trust us,' cried Mysie, with flashing eyes.

'And I can tell you,' added Wilfred, 'that if you do tell, it will be ever so much the worse for you—girl that you are.'

'War to the knife! Cried Valetta, and everybody except Mysie joined in the outcry. 'War to the knife with traitors in the camp.'

Mysie managed to produce a pause, and again acted orator. 'You see, Dolores, if you did tell, it would not be possible for mamma or Gill to be always looking after you, and I couldn't do you much

good—and if all these three are set against you, and are horrid to you, and I couldn't do you much good—horrid to you, you'll have no peace in your life; and, after all, we only ask of you to give and take in a good-natured sort of way, and not to be always making a fuss about everything you don't like. It is the only way, I assure you.'

Dolores saw the fates were against her, and said—

'Very well.'

'You promise?'

'Yes.'

'Then we forgive you, and here's the box of chocolate things Aunt Ada brought. We'll have a cigar all round and be friends. Smoke the pipe of peace.'

Dolores afterwards thought how grand it would have been to have replied, 'Dolores Mohun will never be intimidated;' but the fact was that her spirit did quail at the thought of the tortures which the two boys might inflict on her if Mysie abandoned her to their mercy, and she was relieved, as well as surprised to find that her offence was condoned, and she was treated as if nothing had happened.

Meantime Aunt Jane was asking in the drawing-room, 'How do you get on?'

'Fairly well,' was Lady Merrifield's answer. 'We shall work together in time.'

'What does Gill say?' asked the aunt, rather mischievously.

'Well,' said the young lady, 'I don't think we get on at all, not even poor Mysie, who works steadily on at her, gets snubbed a dozen times a day, and never seems to feel it.'

I hoped her father would have sent her to school,' said Aunt Adeline. 'I knew she would be troublesome. She has all her mother's pride.'

'The proudest people are those who have least to be proud of,' said Aunt Jane.

'School would have hardened the crust and kept up the alienation,' said Lady Merrifield.

'Perhaps not. It might teach her to value the holidays, and learn that blood is thicker than water,' said Miss Jane.

'It is always in reserve,' added Miss Adeline.

'Yes, Maurice told her to send her if I grew tired of her, as he said,' replied Lady Merrifield, 'but of course I should not think of that unless for very strong reasons.'

'Oh, mamma!' and Gillian remained with her mouth open.

'Well?' said Aunt Jane.

'I meant to have told you mamma, but Mr. Leadbitter came in about the G.F.S. and stopped me, and I have never seen you to speak to since. Yesterday you know, I stayed from evensong to look after the little ones, and you said Dolores might do as she pleased, so she stayed at home. The children were looking at the book of Bible Pictures, and it came out that Dolly knew nothing at all about Joshua and the walls of Jericho, nor Gideon and the lamps in the pitchers, nor anything else. Then, when I was surprised, she said that it was not the present system to perplex children with the myths of ancient Jewish history.'

Gillian was speaking rapidly, in the growing consciousness that her mother had rather have had this communication reserved for her private ear—and her answer was, 'Poor child!'

'Just what I should expect!' said Aunt Jane.

'Probably it was jargon half understood, and repeated in defence of her ignorance,' said Lady Merrifield. 'She is an odd mixture of defiant loyalty and self-defence.'

'What shall you do about this kind of talk?' asked her sister.

'One must hear it sooner or later,' said Harry.

'That is true,' returned his mother, 'but I suppose Fergus and Primrose did not hear or understand.'

'Oh no, mamma. I know they did not, for they were squabbling because Primrose wanted to turn over before Fergus had done with Gideon.'

'Then I don't think there is any harm done. If it comes before Mysie or Val I will talk to them, and I mean to take this poor child alone for a little while each day in the week and try to get at her.'

'There's another thing,' said Gillian. 'Is she to go down with me always to Casement Cottages on Sunday afternoons when I take the class?'

'To teach or to learn?' ironically exclaimed Aunt Jane.

'Neither,' said Gillian. 'To chatter to Constance Hacket. They both spoke to me about it yesterday before I went home, and I believe Constance has written a note to her to ask her today! Fancy, that goose told me my sweet cousin was a dear, and that we didn't appreciate her. Even Miss Hacket gave me quite a lecture on kindness and consideration to an orphan stranger.'

'Not uncalled for, perhaps,' said Aunt Jane. 'I hope you received it in an edifying manner.'

'Now, Aunt Jane! Well, I believe I said we were as kind as she would let us be, especially Mysie.'

Lady Merrifield here made the move to conduct her sisters to their rooms; Miss Mohun detained her when they had reached hers, and had left Adeline to rest on her sofa. The two, though very unlike, had still the habits of absolute confidential intimacy belonging to sisters next in age.

'Lily,' said Miss Mohun, 'Gillian spoke of a note. Did Maurice give you any directions about this child's correspondence?'

'You know I did not see him. I was so much disappointed. I would give anything to have talked her over with him.'

'I am not sure that you would have gained much. I doubt whether he knows much about her, poor fellow. But the letters?'

'He wrote that she had been a good deal with Professor Sefton's family, and he thought they might like to keep up their intercourse.'

'Nothing about Flinders? He ought to have warned you.'

'No. Who is he?'

'A half-brother—no, a step-brother to poor Mary. He was the son by a former marriage of her father's first wife, and has been always a thorn in their sides. He is a low, dissipated kind of creature; writes theatrical criticisms for third-rate papers, or something of that kind, when he is at his best. I believe Mary was really fond of him, and helped him more than Maurice could well bear, and since her death the man has perfectly pestered him with appeals to her memory. I really believe one reason he welcomed this post was to get out of his reach.'

'You always know everything Jenny. Now how did you know this?'

'I called once in the midst of an interview between him and Mary. And afterwards I came on poor Maurice when he was really very much provoked, and had it all out; ad since her death—well, I saw him get a begging letter from the man, and he spoke of it again. I wish I had advised him to warn you against the wretch.'

'I don't suppose he knows where the child is. He is no relation to her, you say?'

'None at all, happily. But on that occasion, when I was an uncomfortable third, Maurice was very angry that she should have been allowed to call him Uncle Alfred; and Mary screwed up her little mouth, and evidently rather liked the aggravation to Mohun pride.'

'Poor Maurice, so he had a skeleton! Well, I don't see how it can hurt us. The man probably knows nothing about us, and even if he could trace the girl, he must know that she can do nothing for him.'

'You had better keep an eye on her letters. He is quite capable of asking for the poor child's half sovereigns. I wish Maurice had given you authority.'

'Perhaps he spoke to her about it. At any rate, what he said of the Seftons is quite sufficient to imply that there is no sanction to any other correspondence.'

'That is true. Really, Lily, I believe you are the most likely person to do some good with her, though I don't think you know what you are in for. But Gillian does!'

'I believe it is very good for the children to have to exercise a little forbearance. In spite of all our knocking about the world, our family exclusiveness is pretty much what ours was in the old Beechcroft days—'

'When Rotherwood and Robert Mohun were out only outsiders and the Westons came on us like new revelations!'

'It is curious to look back on,' said Lady Merrifield. 'It seems to me that the system, or no system, on which we were brought up was rather passing away even then.'

'Specks we growed,' said Jane. 'What do you call the system?'

'Just that people thought it their own business to bring up their children themselves, and let the actual technical teaching depend upon opportunities, whereas now they get them taught, but let the bringing up take it chance.'

'People lived with their children then—yes, I see what you mean, Lily. Poor Eleanor, intending with all her might to be a mother to us, brought us up, as you call it, with all her powers; but public opinion would never have suffered us to get merely the odd sort of teaching that she could give us. It was regular, or course; but oh! do you remember the old atlas, with Germany divided into circles, and everything as it was before the Congress of Vienna?'

'You liked geography; I hated it.'

'Yes, I was young enough to come in for the elder boys' old school atlases, which had some sense in them. It seems to me that we had more the spirit of working for ourselves according to our individual tastes than people have now. We learnt, they are taught.'

'Well! and what did we learn?'

'As much as we could carry,' said Aunt Jane, laughing. 'Assimilate, if you like it better; and I doubt if people will turn out to have done more now. What becomes of all the German that is crammed down girl's throats, whether they have a turn for languages or not? Do they ever read a German book? Now you learnt it for love of Fouque and Max Piccolomini, and you have kept it up ever since.'

'Yes, by cramming it down my children's throats. But what I complain of, Jane, in the young folk that come across me is not over-knowledge, but want of knowledge—want of general culture. This Dolores, for instance, can do what she has been taught better than Mysie, some tings better than Gillian, but she has absolutely no interest in general knowledge, not even in the glaciers which she has seen; she does not know whether Homer wrote in Greek or Latin, considers "Marmion" a lesson, cannot tell a planet from a star, and neither knows nor cares anything about the two Napoleons. Now we seem to have breathed in such things. Why! I remember being made into Astyanax for a very unwilling Andromache (poor Eleanor) for caress, and being told to shudder at the bright copper coal-scuttle, before Harry went to school.'

'Of course poor Maurice could not cultivate his child. Yet, after all, we grew up without a mother; but then the dear old Baron lived among us, and knew what we were doing, instead of shutting us up in a schoolroom with some one, with only knowledge, not culture. Those very late dinners have quite upset all the intelligent intercourse between fathers and children not come out.'

'Yes, Jasper and I have felt that difficulty. But after all, Jenny, when I look back, I cannot say I think ours was a model bringing up. What a strange year that was after Eleanor's marriage!'

'Ah! you felt responsible and were too young for it, but to me it was a very jolly time, though I suppose I was an ingredient in your troubles. Yes, we brought ourselves up; but I maintain that it was better alternative than being drilled so hard as never to think of anything but arrant idling out of lesson-time.'

'Lessons should be lessons, and play, play, is one of the professor's maxims to which that poor child has treated us.'

'Ah! on that system, where would have been all your grand heraldic pedigrees? I've got them still.'

‘Oh! Jenny, you good old Brownie, have you? How I should like to look at them again and show them the Gillian and Mysie. Do you remember the little scalloped line we drew round all the true knights?’

‘Ay! and where would have been all your romancing about Sir Maurice de Mohun, the pride of his name? For my part, I much prefer a cavalier dead two hundred years ago as the object of a girl’s enthusiasm—if enthusiasm she must have—to the existing lieutenant, or even curate.’

‘Certainly; I should be sorry to have been bred up to history with individual interest and romance squeezed out of it. You see when Jasper came home from the Crimea he exactly continued mine.’

‘You have fulfilled your ideal better than falls to the lot of most people, even to the item of knighthood.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.