YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

MODERN BROODS; OR, DEVELOPMENTS UNLOOKED FOR

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Yonge C.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I—TORTOISES AND HARES

"Whate'er is good to wish, ask that of Heaven,
Though it be what thou canst not hope to see."

—Hartley Coleridge.

The scene was a drawing-room, with old-fashioned heavy sash windows opening on a narrow brick-walled town-garden sloping down to a river, and neatly kept. The same might be said of the room, where heavy old-fashioned furniture, handsome but not new, was concealed by various flimsy modernisms, knicknacks, fans, brackets, china photographs and water-colours, a canary singing loud in the window in the winter sunshine.

"Miss Prescott," announced the maid; but, finding no auditor save the canary, she retreated, and Miss Prescott looked round her with a half sigh of recognition of the surroundings. She was herself a quiet-looking, gentle lady, rather small, with a sweet mouth and eyes of hazel, in a rather worn face, dressed in a soft woollen and grey fur, with headgear to suit, and there was an air of glad expectation, a little flush, that did not look permanent, on her thin cheeks.

"Is it you, my dear Miss Prescott?" was the greeting of the older hostess as she entered, her grey hair rough and uncovered, and her dress of well-used black silk, her complexion of the red that shows wear and care. "Then it is true?" she asked, as the kiss and double shake of the hand was exchanged.

"May I ask? Is it true? May I congratulate you?"

"Oh, yes, it is true!" said Miss Prescott, breathlessly. "I suppose the girls are at the High School?"

"Yes, they will be at home at one. Or shall I send for them?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Best. I shall like to have a little time with you first. I can stay till a quarter-past three."

"Then come and take off your things. I do not know when I have been so glad!"

"Do the girls know?" asked Miss Prescott, following upstairs to a comfortable bedroom, evidently serving also the purposes of a private room, for writing table and account books stood near the fire.

"They know something; Kate Bell heard a report from her cousins, and they have been watching anxiously for news from you."

"I would not write till I knew more. I hope they have not raised their expectations too high; for though it is enough to be an immense relief, it is not exactly affluence. I have been with Mr. Bell going into the matter and seeing the place," said Miss Prescott, sitting comfortably down in the arm-chair Mrs. Best placed for her, while she herself sat down in another, disposing themselves for a talk over the fire.

"Mr. Bell reckons it at about £600 a year."

"And an estate?"

"A very pretty cottage in a Devonshire valley, with the furniture and three acres of land."

"Oh! I believe the girls fancy that it is at least as large as Lord Coldhurst's."

"Yes, I was in hopes that they would have heard nothing about it."

"It came through some of their schoolfellows; one cannot help things getting into the air."

"And there getting inflated like bubbles," said Miss Prescott, smiling. "Well, their expectations will have a fall, poor dears!"

"And it does not come from their side of the family," said Mrs. Best. "Of course not! And it was wholly unexpected, was it not?"

"Yes, I had my name of Magdalen from my great aunt Tremlett; but she had never really forgiven my mother's marriage, though she consented to be my godmother. She offered to adopt me on my mother's death, and once when my father married again, and when we lost him, she wrote to propose my coming to live with her; but there would have been no payment, and so—"

"Yes, you dear good thing, you thought it your duty to go and work for your poor little stepmother and her children!"

"What else was my education good for, which has been a costly thing to poor father? And then the old lady was affronted for good, and never took any more notice of me, nor answered my letters. I did not even know she was dead, till I heard from Mr. Bell, who had learnt it from his lawyers!"

"It was quite right of her. Dear Magdalen, I am so glad," said Mrs. Best, crossing over to kiss her; for the first stiffness had worn off, and they were together again, as had been the solicitor's daughter and the chemist's daughter, who went to the same school till Magdalen had been sent away to be finished in Germany.

"Dear Sophy, I wish you had the good fortune, too!"

"Oh! my galleons are coming when George has prospered a little more in Queensland, and comes to fetch me. Sophia and he say they shall fight for me," said Mrs. Best, who had been bravely presiding over a high-school boarding-house ever since her husband, a railway engineer, had been killed by an accident, and left her with two children to bring up. "Dear children, they are very good to me."

"I am sure you have been goodness itself to us," said Magdalen, "in taking the care of these poor little ones when their mother died. I don't know how to be thankful enough to you and for all the blessings we have had! And that this should have come just now, especially when my life with Lady Milsom is coming to an end."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, the little boys are old enough for school, and the Colonel is going to take a house at Shrewsbury, where his mother will live with them, and want me no longer."

"You have been there seven years."

"Yes, and very happy. When Fanny married, Lady Milsom was left alone, and would not part with me, and then came the two little boys from India, so that she had an excuse for retaining me; but that is over now, or will be in a few weeks time. I had been trying for an engagement, and finding that beside your high-school diploma young ladies I am considered quite passée—"

"My dear! With your art, and music, and all!"

"Too true! And while I was digesting a polite hint that my terms were too high, and therewith Agatha's earnest appeal to be sent to Girton, there comes this inheritance! Taking my burthen off my back, and making me ready to throw up my heels like a young colt."

"Ah! you will be taking another burthen, perhaps."

"No doubt, I suppose so, but let me find it out by degrees. I can only think as yet of having my dear girls to myself, *moi*, as the French would say, after having seen so little of them."

"It has been very unfortunate. Epidemics have been strangely inconvenient."

"Yes. First there was whooping cough here to destroy the summer holidays; then came the Milsoms' measles, and I could not go and carry infection. Oh! and then Freddy broke his leg, and his grandmother was too nervous to be left with him. And by and by some one told her the scarlatina was in the town."

"It really was, you know."

"Any way, it would have been sheer selfish inhumanity to leave her, and then she had a real illness, which frightened us all very much. Next came influenza to every one. And these last holidays! What should the newly-come little one from India do, but catch a fever in the Red Sea, and I had to keep guard over the brothers at Weymouth till she was reported safe, and I don't believe it was infectious after all! Still, I am tired of 'other people's stairs.'"

"It is nearly five years since you have been with them, except for that one peep you took at Weston."

"And that is a great deal at their age. Agatha was a vehement reader; she would hardly look at me, so absorbed was she in 'The York and Lancaster Rose' which I had brought her."

"She is rather like that now. I conclude that you will wish to take them away?"

"Not this time, at any rate till the house is fit to put over their heads. Besides, you have so mothered them, dear Sophy, that I could not bear to make a sudden parting."

"There will be pain, especially over little Thekla and Polly. But if George comes home this spring, and I go out to Queensland with him, perhaps I should have asked you to take this house off my hands. May be it would be prudent in you to do so even now, considering all things; only I believe that transplanting would be good for them all."

"I am glad you think so, for I have a perfect longing for that little house of my own."

"You will be able to give them a superior kind of society to what they have had access to here. There is a good deal that I should like to talk over with you before they come in."

"Agatha seems to be in despair at her failure."

"So is all the house, for we were very proud of her, and, of course, we all thought it a fad of the examiners, but perhaps our headmistress might not say the same. She is a good, hardworking girl though, and ambitious, and quite worth further training."

"I am glad of being able to secure it to her at least, and by the time her course is finished I shall be able to judge about the others."

"You thought of taking them in hand yourself?"

"Certainly; how nice it will be to teach my own kin, and not endless strangers, lovable as they have been!"

"It will be very good for them all to see something of life and manners superior to what I can give them here. You will take them into a fresh sphere, and—as things were—besides that, I could not—I did not know whether their lives would not lie among our people here."

"Dear Sophy, don't concern yourself. I am quite certain you would never let them fall in with anything hurtful."

"Why, no! I hope not; but if I had known what was coming, I don't think I should have asked you to consent to Vera and Thekla's spending their holidays at Mr. Waring's country house."

"Very worthy people, you said. I remember Tom Waring, a very nice boy; and Jessie Dale went to school with us—I liked her. Fancy them having a country house."

"Waring Grange they call it. He has got on wonderfully as upholsterer, decorator, and auctioneer. It is a very handsome one, with a garden that gets the prizes at the horticultural shows. They are thoroughly good people, but I was afraid afterwards that there had been a good deal of noisiness among the young folks at Christmas. Hubert Delrio was there, and I fancy there was some nonsense going on."

"Ah, the Delrios! Are they here?"

"Yes, poor Fred did not make his art succeed when he had a family to provide for, and he is the head of the Art School here. His son has a good deal of talent, and very prudently has got taken on by the firm of Eccles and Co., who do a great deal of architectural decoration. The boy is doing very well, but there have been giggles and whispers that make me rejoice that Vera should be out of the neighbourhood."

"Is she not very pretty?"

"You will be very much struck with her, I think; and Paulina is pretty too, and more thoughtful. She would not go with Thekla, because Waring Grange is far from church, and she would not disturb her Christmas and Epiphany. She is the most religious of them all, and puts me in mind of our old missionary castles in the air."

"Ah, what castles they were! And they seem further off than ever! Or perhaps you will fulfil them, and go and teach the Australian blacks!"

"A very unpromising field," said Mrs. Best, "though I hear there is a Sister Angela at the station who does wonders with them. I hear the quarter striking—they will be back directly."

"Ah! before they come, we ought to talk over means! Something is owing for these last holidays. Oh! Sophy, I cannot find words to say how thankful I am to you for having helped me through this time, even to your own loss! It has made our life possible."

"Indeed, I was most thankful to do all I could for poor Agnes' children; and though I did not gain by them like my other boarders, I never *lost*, and they have been a great joy to me, yes, and a help, by giving my house a character."

"When I recollect how utterly crushed down I felt, seven years ago, when their mother died, and Aunt Magdalen refused help, and how despairingly I prayed, I feel all the more that there is an answer to even feeble almost worldly prayer."

"That it could not be when it was that you might be enabled to do the duty that was laid on you, my dear."

And with the exchange of a kiss, the two good women set themselves to practical pounds, shillings, and pence, which was just concluded when the patter of feet up the stone steps and voices in the hall announced the return of Mrs. Best's boarders.

Just as Magdalen was opening the door, there darted up, with the air of a privileged favourite, a little person of ten years old, with flying brown hair and round rosy cheeks, exclaiming breathlessly, "Is she come?"

The answer was to take her up with a motherly hug, and "My dear little Thekla!" There was not time for more than a hurried glance and embrace of the three on the steps of the stair, in their sailor hats and blue serge; but when in ten minutes more, the whole party, twenty in number, were seated round the dining table, observation was possible. Agatha, as senior scholar, sat at the foot of the table, fully occupied in dispensing Irish stew. She had a sensible face, to which projecting teeth gave a character, and a brow that would have shown itself finer but for the overhanging mass of hair. Vera and Paulina were so much alike and so nearly of the same age that they were often taken for twins, but on closer inspection Vera proved to be the prettiest, with a more delicately cut nose, clearer complexion, and bluer eyes; but Paulina, with paler cheeks, had softer eyes, and more pencilled brows, as well as a prettier lip and chin, though she would not strike the eye so much as her sister. Little Thekla was a round-faced, rosy little thing, childish for her nearly eleven years, smiling broadly and displaying enough white teeth to make Magdalen forebode that they would need much attention if they were not to be a desight like Agatha's.

She sat between Mrs. Best and Magdalen; and in the first pause, when the first course had just been distributed, she looked up with a great pair of grey eyes, and asked, in a shrill, clear little voice, "Sister, may I have a bicycle?"

"We will see about it, my dear," returned Magdalen, unwilling to pledge herself.

"But haven't you got a fortune?" undauntedly demanded Thekla.

"Something like it, Thekla. You shall hear about it after dinner." And Magdalen felt her colour flushing up under all those young eyes.

"Kitty Best said—"

But here Mrs. Best interposed. "We don't talk over such things at table, Thekla. Take care with the gravy. Did Mr. Jones give a lesson, this morning?"

"Yes, a very long one," said Vera.

"It was about the exact force of the words in the Revised Version," added Agatha, "compared with the Greek."

"That must have been very interesting!" said Magdalen.

Vera and her neighbour looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders; while some one else broke in with the news that another girl had not come back because she was down with influenza; and Magdalen, suspecting that "shop" was not talked at table, and also that the Scripture passage could not well be discussed there, saw that it was wise to let the conversation drift off, by Mrs. Best's leading, into anecdotes of the influenza.

All were glad when grace was chanted, and the five sisters could retreat into the drawing-room, which Mrs. Best let them have to themselves for the half hour before Magdalen's train, and the young ones' return to the High School. She was at once established with Thekla on her lap, and the others perched round on chairs and footstools. Of course the first question was, "And is it really true?"

"It is true, my dears, that my old great aunt has left me a house and some money; but you must not flatter yourselves that it is a great estate."

"Only mayn't I have a bicycle?" began Thekla again.

"Child, I believe you have bicycles on the brain," said Agatha. "But, sister, you do mean that we shall be better off, and I shall be able to go on with my education?"

"Yes, my dear, I think I can promise you so much," said Magdalen, caressing the serge shoulder.

"O thanks! Girton?" cried Agatha.

"There is much that I must inquire about before I decide—"

Again came, "Elsie Warner has a bicycle, and she is no older than me! Please, sister!"

"Hush now, my little Thekla," said the sister kindly; "I will talk to Mrs. Best, and see whether she thinks it will be good for you."

Thekla subsided with a pout, and Magdalen was able to explain her circumstances and plans a little more in detail; seeing however that the girls had no idea of the value of money, Paulina asked whether it meant being as well off as the Colonel and Lady Mary—

"Who keep a carriage and pair, and a butler," interposed Vera.

"Oh no, my dear. If I keep any kind of carriage it will be only a basket or governess cart, and a pony or donkey."

"That's all right," said Agatha. "I would not be rich and stupid for the world."

"Small fear of that!" said Magdalen, laughing. "Our home, the Goyle, is not more than a cottage, in a beautiful Devonshire valley—"

"What's the name of it?"

"The Goyle. I believe it is a diminutive of Gully, a narrow ravine. It is lovely even now, and will be delightful when you come to me in April—"

"Shall I leave school?" asked Vera. "I shall be seventeen in May."

"You will all leave school. Mrs. Best has made it easy to me by her wonderful goodness in keeping you on cheaper terms; but if Agatha goes to the University you must be content to work for a time with me."

"Oh!" cried Thekla. "Shall I have always holidays? My bicycle!"

Everybody burst out laughing at this—not a very trained cachinnation, but more of the giggle, even in Agatha; and Magdalen answered:

"You will have plenty of time for bicycling if the hills are not too steep, but I hope to make your lessons pleasant to you." She did not know whether to mention Mrs. Best's intention of soon giving up her house, which would have much increased her difficulties but for her legacy; and Agatha said, "You know, I think, that Vera and Polly both ought to make a real study of music. They both have talent, and cultivation would do a great deal for it."

Agatha spoke in a dogmatic way that amused Magdalen, and she said, "Well, I shall be able to judge when we are at the Goyle. Vera, I think you sing—"

Vera looked shy, and Agatha said, “She has a good voice, and Madame Lardner thinks it would answer to send her to some superior Conservatoire in process of time.”

Vera did not commit herself as to her wishes, and Mrs. Best returned to say that if Miss Prescott wished to see the headmistress it was time to set out for the school; and accordingly the whole party walked up together to the school, Magdalen with Agatha, who was chiefly occupied in explaining how entirely it was owing to the one-sidedness of the examiners that she had not gained the scholarship. Magdalen had heard of such examiners before from the mothers of her pupils.

She had to wish her sisters good-bye for the next three months, not having gathered very much about them, except their personal appearance. She administered a sovereign to each of them as they parted. Agatha thanked her in a tone as if afraid to betray what a boon it was; Vera, with an eager kiss, asking if she could spend it as she liked; Paulina, with a certain grave propriety; and Thekla, of course, wanted to know whether it would buy a bicycle, or, if not, how many rides could be purchased from it.

When they were absorbed in the routine of the day, the interview with the head mistress disclosed, what Magdalen had expected, that Agatha, was an industrious, ambitious girl, with very good abilities quite worth cultivating, though not extraordinary; that Vera had a certain sort of cleverness, but no application and not much taste for anything but music; and that Paulina was a good, dutiful, plodding girl, who surpassed brighter powers by dint of diligence. The little one was a mere child, who had not yet come much under notice from the higher authorities.

On the whole, Magdalen went away with pleasant hopes, and the affectionate impulses of kindred blood rising within her, to complete her term with Lady Milsom, by whom she could not well be spared till towards Easter; while, in the meantime, her house was being repaired.

CHAPTER II—THE GOYLE

"A poor thing, but mine own."—Shakespeare.

"Thaay stwuns, thaay stwuns, thaay stwuns, thaay stwuns."
—T. Hughes, Scouring of the White Horse.

Magdalen Prescott stood on her own little terrace. Her house was, like many Devonian ones, built high on the slope of a steep hill, running down into a narrow valley, and her abode was almost at the narrowest part, where a little lively brawling stream descended from the moor amid rocks and brushwood. If the history of the place were told, it had been built for a shooting box, then inherited by a lawyer who had embellished and spent his holidays there, and afterwards, his youngest daughter, a lonely and retiring woman, had spent her latter years there.

The house was low, stone built, and roofed with rough slate, with a narrow verandah in front, and creepers in bud covering it. Then came a terrace just wide enough for a carriage to drive up; and below, flower-beds bordered with stones found what vantage ground they could between the steep slopes of grass that led almost precipitously down to the stream, where the ground rose equally rapidly on the other side. Moss, ivy, rhododendrons, primroses, anemones, and the promise of ferns were there, and the adjacent beds had their full share of hepaticas and all the early daffodil kinds. Behind and on the southern side, lay the kitchen garden, also a succession of steps, and beyond as the ravine widened were small meadows, each with a big stone in the midst. The gulley, (or goyle) narrowed as it rose, and there was a disused limestone quarry, all wreathed over with creeping plants, a birch tree growing up all white and silvery in the middle, and above the house and garden was wood, not of fine trees, and interspersed with rocks, but giving shade and shelter. The opposite side had likewise fields below, with one grey farm house peeping in sight, and red cattle feeding in one, and above the same rocky woodland, meeting the other at the quarry; and then after a little cascade had tumbled down from the steeper ground, giving place to the heathery peaty moor, which ended, more than two miles off in a torr like a small sphinx. This could not be seen from Magdalen's territory, but from the highest walk in her kitchen garden, she could see the square tower of Arnscombe, her parish church; and on a clear day, the glittering water of Rockstone bay.

To Magdalen it was a delightful view, and delightful too had been the arranging of her house, and preparing for her sisters. All the furniture and contents of the abode had been left to her. It was solid and handsome of its kind, belonging to the days of the retired Q.C., and some of it would have been displaced for what was more fresh and tasteful if Magdalen had not consulted economy. So she depended on basket-chairs, screens, brackets and drapery to enliven the ancient mahagony and rosewood, and she had accumulated a good many water colours, vases and knick-knacks. The old grand piano was found to be past its work, so that she went the length of purchasing a cottage one for the drawing-room, and another for the sitting-room that was to be the girls' own property, and on which she expended much care and contrivance. It opened into the drawing-room, and like it, had glass doors into the verandah, as well as another door into the little hall. The drawing-room had a bow window looking over the fields towards the South, and this way too looked the dining-room, in which Magdalen bestowed whatever was least interesting, such as the "Hume and Smollett" and "Gibbon" of her grandfather's library and her own school books, from which she hoped to teach Thekla.

Her upstairs arrangements had for the moment been rather disturbed by Mrs. Best's wishing to come with her pupils; but she decided that Agatha should at once take possession of her own pretty room, and the two next sisters of theirs, while she herself would sleep in the dressing room which she

destined to Thekla, giving up her own chamber to Mrs. Best for these few days, and sending Thekla's little bed to Agatha's room.

And there she stood, on the little terrace, thinking how lovely the purple light on the moor was, and how all the newcomers would enjoy such a treat.

She had abstained from meeting them at the station, having respect to the capacities of the horse, even upon his native hills, and she had hired a farmer's cart to meet them and bring their luggage. Already she had a glimpse of the carriage, toiling up one hill, then disappearing between the hedges, and it was long before her gate, already open, was reached, and at her own *own* door, she received her little sister, followed by the others. And the first word she heard even before she had time to pay the driver was, "My dear Magdalen, what a road!"

Poor Mrs. Best! as the payment was put into the man's hand, Magdalen looked round and saw she looked quite worn out.

"Yes," said Paulina, "bumped to pieces and tired to death."

"I was afraid they had been mending the roads," said Magdalen.

"Mending! Strewing them with rocks, if you please," said Agatha.

"And such a distance!" added Paulina.

"Not quite three miles," replied Magdalen. "Here is some tea to repair you."

"My dear Magdalen"—in a chorus—"that really is quite impossible. It must be five, at least."

"Your nearest town ten miles off!" sighed Vera.

"Your nearest church," cried Paulina.

"Up in the wilds," said Agatha.

Magdalen felt as if these speeches were so many drops of water in her face and that of her beautiful Goyle, but she rose in its defence.

"It actually is less than three miles," she said. "I have walked it several times, and the cabs only charge three."

"That is testimony," said Mrs. Best, smiling; "but hills, perhaps, reckon for miles in one's feelings!"

"Particularly before you are rested," said Magdalen, setting her down in a comfortable wicker chair. "You will think little of it on your own feet, Vera, and the church is much nearer, Paulina, only on the other side of the hill."

"May I have a bicycle of my own?" burst in Thekla, again; while every one began laughing, and Agatha told her that Sister would think her brains were cycling.

> "With centric and concentric scribbled o'er
> Cycle and epicycle orb in orb."

"Epicycle?" cried Vera. "I saw it advertised in the *Queen*. A splendid one."

"Ah! Magdalen, you will think I have not taught them their Milton," said Mrs. Best, as both elders burst out laughing; and Agatha said, in an undertone, "Don't make yourself such a goose, Vera."

"I should think it rather rough sailing for bikes," said Paulina.

"I should have thought so, myself," returned Magdalen; "but the Clipstone girls do not seem to think so. I see them sailing merrily into Rockstone."

"You have neighbours, then?" said Vera.

"Certainly. Rockstone supplies a good deal. Here are various cards of people whose visits are yet to be returned. Clipstone is further off; but the daughters will be nice friends for you. I met one of them before, when she was staying at Lord Rotherwood's. But I am afraid your boxes are hardly come yet. Still, you will like to take off your things before dinner, even if you cannot unpack."

She led the way, and disposed of each girl in her new quarters, explaining to Agatha that her's and her little lodger were only temporary; but it struck upon her rather painfully that the only word

of approbation or comfort came from Mrs. Best, and there were no notes at all of admiration of the scenery.

"Well," she said to herself, "much is not to be expected from people who have been tired and shaken up in a station cab over newly-mended roads! Were they as bad when I came? But then I could look out, and did not hear poor Sophy's groans all the way. I rather wish she had not come with them, though I am glad to see her again for this last time."

Meantime the four girls had congregated in the room appropriated to Vera and Paulina. "Here are the necessaries of life," said Agatha, handing out a brush and comb. "That slow wain may roll its course in utter darkness before it comes here."

"To the other end of nowhere," said Vera.

"And I am so tired," whined Thekla. "These tight boots do hurt me so! I want to go to bed."

Paulina was already on her knees, removing the boots and accommodating a pair of slippers to the little feet.

"We might as well be in a desert island," continued Vera, "shut up from everything with an old frump."

"Take care," said Agatha, in warning, signing towards Thekla.

"I am sure she looks jolly and good-natured," said Paulina.

"But did you hear what Elsie Lee always calls her, 'our maiden aunt'?"

All three laughed, and Vera added, "All the girls say she can't be less than fifty."

"Topsy! You know she is only sixteen years older than I am."

"Well, that's half a hundred!"

"Sixteen and nineteen, what do they make?"

"Oh, never mind your sums. She has got the face and look of half a hundred!"

"Now, I thought her face and her dress like a girl's," said Paulina.

"Yes," said Vera, "that's just the way with old maids. They dress themselves up youthfully and affect girlish airs, and are all the more horrid."

"That's your experience!" said Agatha. "But there's the waggon creeping up at a snail's pace. Let us run down and see after our things."

CHAPTER III—THE FIRST SUNDAY

"Speed on, speed on, the footpath way,
And merrily hunt the stile-a;
A merry heart goes all the way,
A sad tires in a mile-a."

—Shakespeare.

Sunday morning rose with new and bright hopes. The girls looked out at their window, and saw that it was a beautiful morning, and that the spring sunshine glowed upon the purple summits of the hills. Agatha supposed there would be a pleasant walk to church; Paulina said she had heard good accounts of the services in that part of the country; Vera hoped that they would see what their neighbours were like, and Thekla was delighted with the jolly garden and places to scramble in.

On this first Sunday they were let alone to explore the garden before the walk to church, which Magdalen foresaw would be a long affair with Mrs. Best. After their decorous stillness at breakfast, it was a contrast to hear the merry voices and laughter outside, but it subsided as soon as she approached, though she did not hear the murmured ripple, "Here comes maiden aunt! Behold—Quite a spicy hat!"

In truth, Magdalen's hat was a pretty new one, not by any means unsuitable to her age and appearance, and altogether her air was more stylish than the country town breeding was accustomed to; her dress perfectly plain, but well made.

Vera was perhaps the most sensible of the perfection of the turn-out; Agatha chiefly felt that her more decorated skirt and mantle had their inconveniences in walking through the red mud of the lanes, impeded by books and umbrella, which left no leisure to admire the primroses that studded the deep banks and which delighted Thekla in the freedom of short skirts.

Magdalen herself had enough to do in steering along such a substantial craft as poor Mrs. Best, used to church-going along a street, and shrouded under a squirrel mantle of many pounds weight.

Barely in time was the convoy when at last the exhausted lady was helped over the stone stile that led to the churchyard. Highly picturesque was the grey structure outside, but within modernism had not done much; the chancel was feebly fitted after the ideas of the "fifties," but the faded woodwork of the nave was intact, and Magdalen still had to sit in the grim pew of her predecessors.

The girls' looks at each other might have suited the entrance to a condemned cell, and the pulpit towered above them with a faded green cushion, that seemed in danger of tumbling down over their heads.

The service was a plain one, but reverent and careful; the music had a considerable element of harmonium mixed with schoolchild voices, and the sermon from an elderly man was a good one; but when the move to go out was made, and the young ones were beyond ear-shot of their elders, the exclamations were, "Well, I never thought to have gone back to Georgian era."

"Exactly the element of our maiden aunt."

"And nobody to be seen."

"Naggie, why do they shut one up in boxes?"

"Just to daunt Flapsy's roving eye, Tickle, my dear."

"Don't, Polly. There was nobody to be seen if we hadn't been in a box. Of course no one comes there but stately old farmers and their smart daughters. I saw one with a Gainsborough hat, and a bunch of cock's feathers, with a scarlet cactus cocking it up behind."

"Flapsy made use of her opportunities, you see. Being 'emparocked in a pew' cannot daunt her spirit of research."

"Now, Nag, I only meant to show you what impossible people they are."

"Natives who will repay the study perhaps," continued Agatha, reading as though from a book of travels. "We were able to observe a group of the aborigines at their devotions. Conspicuous was a not ungraceful young female, whose head, ornamented with a plume of feathers, towered above the enclosure in which she was secluded, while an aged fakir, hakem or medicine man pronounced from a loftier structure resembling a sentry box."

"Children, children, that's the wrong way," came Magdalen's voice from behind. "You must turn into that lane. Wait a moment."

They waited till Mrs. Best's lagging steps allowed Magdalen to come up with them, but dead silence fell on them when Mrs. Best observed, "You were very merry." They could not speak of the cause. Perhaps Magdalen divined something, for she said, "We hope to make some improvements, and so indeed does Mr. Earl, but he is very poor. Besides, newcomers must work slowly."

The doubt whether she had heard Agatha's speech made the girls conscious enough to keep from responding, as she meant them to do, by cheerful criticisms, and indeed the task of cheering and dragging on Mrs. Best was quite enough to occupy her. There was only three years difference in their ages, but this seemed to have made a great interval between one whose *métier* had been to be youthful and active, and her who had to be staid and dignified.

The early dinner passed in all demureness and formality, and the poor visitor was too much tired for any more services to be thought of for her. Magdalen explained that when the days would be longer, she thought of walking to Rockstone for evensong, but now the best way was to go to the chapel at Clipstone, which was nearer than either of the others.

"There is a lovely little chapel there, beautifully fitted up by Lord Rotherwood and Sir Jasper Merrifield, for the hamlet," she said.

"How far?" asked Mrs. Best.

"About a mile and a half across the fields; further by the road. You will find your bicycles available when you know the way."

"Don't we go to Rockstone?" asked Paulina. "I am sure there is a really satisfactory church there."

"St. Kenelm's, do you mean? That is not so near as St. Andrew's Church, but that is very satisfactory, and I go to one or other of them on week-days. It is too late to come back on these spring Sundays."

"I should not like to live among so many churches," said Mrs. Best, "and so far from them all!"

"You love your old parish church, like a faithful old churchwoman," said Magdalen. "Well, you see, I am faithful enough to go to my parish in the morning, but I think we may be discursive afterwards. There is a Sunday school in which I was waiting to offer help till our party was made up."

Magdalen had looked twice for a responding smile, first from Agatha, and then from Paulina, but none was awakened. The girls clustered together in the bedroom, and the word "Goody" passed between them.

"Tempered by respect for my Lord and Sir Jasper," added Agatha.

"And avoiding St. Kenelm's because it is the real correct church," said Paulina.

"Oh, yes!" cried Vera. "Mr. Hubert Delrio went to see it in case Eccles and Beamster should have an order. We must go there."

"Of course," said Paulina, with a sympathetic nod.

"But," said Agatha, "there will be an embargo on all acquaintance except the grandees at Clipstone."

"I shall never drop old friends," cried Vera. "I am a rock of crystal as regards them, whatever swells may require, if they burst themselves like the frog and the ox."

"Well done, crystal rock; but suppose the old friends slide off and drop you?" laughed Agatha.

Vera tossed her head; and Thekla ran in to say that Sister was ready.

The walk was shorter and pleasanter than that in the morning, over moorland, but with a good road; but all Magdalen discovered on the walk was that though the girls had attended botanical classes, they did not recognise spear-wort when they saw it, and Agatha thought the old catalogue fashions of botany were quite exploded. This was a sentiment, and it gave hopes of something like an argument and a conversation, but they were at that moment overtaken by the neighbouring farmer's wife, who wanted to give Miss Prescott some information about a setting of eggs, which she did at some length, and with a rapid utterance of dialect that amused, while it puzzled, Magdalen, and her inquiries and comments were decided to be "thoroughly good-wife" by all save Thekla, who hailed the possible ownership of a hen and chicken as almost equal to that of a bicycle.

Magdalen further discovered that Thekla's name in common use was "Tickle," or else "Tick-tick"; Paulina was, of course, Paula or Polly; Vera had her old baby title of Flapsy, which somehow suited her restless nervous motions, and Agatha had become Nag. Well, it was the fashion of the day, though not a pretty one; but Magdalen recollected, with some pain, her father's pleasure in the selection of saintly names for his little daughters, and she wondered how he would have liked to hear them thus transmuted. There had been something bordering on sentiment in her father's character, and something in Paulina's expression made her hope to see it repeated by inheritance. She saw the countenance brighten out of the morning's antagonistic air when they entered the little chapel at Clipstone, and saw the altar adorned and carefully decked with white narcissus and golden daffodils.

The little chapel was old and plain, very small, but reverently cared for. There was no choir, but the chairs of those who could sing were placed near the harmonium, which was played by one of the young ladies from the large gabled house to which the chapel was attached, and the singing had the refined tones that belong to the music of cultivated people. The congregation was evidently of poor folks from the hamlet, dependants of the great house, and the family itself, a grey-haired, fine-looking general, a tall dark-eyed lady, a tall youth, a schoolboy, and four girls—one of whom was musician, and the other presided over the school children. The service was reverent, the catechising good and effective, the sermon brief, and summing up in a spiritual and devotional manner; Magdalen was happy, and trusted that Paulina was so likewise.

She expected to hear some commendation as they walked home, but Vera alone kept with her, to examine her on the names and standing of the persons she had seen, on which there was as yet little to tell, for the first move towards acquaintance had not yet been made. All that was known was that there were Sir Jasper and Lady Merrifield, connections of Lord Rotherwood, who owned most of the Rockstone property, and who with his family had once been staying in the country house where Magdalen had been governess; but it was a long time ago, and she only recollected that there were some nice little girls. At least she said no more, but her friend thought the more.

"I suppose they will call?" said Vera.

"Most likely they will."

"Has nobody called?"

"Mr. Earl, the Vicar of Arnscombe. He has promised to tell me how we can be of use here. I believe there is great want of a lady at the Sunday school."

This did not interest Vera—and she went on asking questions about the neighbourhood, and whether any of the Rockstone people had left cards, and whether there were any parties, garden or evening, at Rockstone—more than Magdalen could yet answer, though she was glad to promote any sort of conversation with either of the girls who did not stand aloof from her.

"I say, the M.A. (maiden aunt) knows nobody but that old clergyman, who wants her to teach his Sunday school."

"I'm out of that, thank goodness," said Agatha.

"And Sunday schools are a delusion, only hindering the children from going to church with their parents," said Paulina.

"And if nobody calls, and they all think her no better than an old governess, how awfully slow it will be," continued Vera.

"I do not suppose that will last," said Agatha. "There is Rockstone, remember."

"Ten miles off," said Vera disconsolately. "Oh, Nag, Nag, isn't it horrid! We shall be just smart enough to be taken for swells, and know nobody; and the swells won't have us because she is a governess. We might as well be upon a desert island at once."

Agatha could not help laughing and repeating—

"I am out of humanity's reach,
I must finish my journey alone—
Never hear the sweet music of speech,
I start at the sound of my own."

"But really, Nag," broke in Paulina, "it is horrid. Here we are equidistant from three or four churches, and condemned to the most behind the world of them all, and then to the one where there is this distant fragrance of swells, instead of the only Catholic one."

Agatha had a little more common sense than the other two, and she responded—

"After all, you know, you are better off than if you were still at school; and the M.A. is a good old soul at the bottom, and you may manage her, depend on it. Though I wish she had let me go to Girton."

Magdalen and Mrs. Best meantime were going over future prospects and old times. Mrs. Best's destination was Albertstown, in Queensland, where her son George had a good practice as a doctor, and where he assured her she would find church privileges—even a cathedral, so-called, and a bishop —though Bishop Fulmort was always out on some expedition among the colonists or the natives, but among his clergy there was always Sunday service. In fact, Magdalen thought the good old lady expected to find a town more like Filsted than the Goyle. There was a sisterhood located there too, which tried, mostly in vain, to train the wild native women—an attempt at which George Best laughed, though he allowed that the sisters were splendid nurses, especially Sister Angela, who had a wonderful way of bringing cases round.

Magdalen could feel secure that her old friend would be near kind people; and presently Mrs. Best, returning to the actual neighbourhood, observed—

"Merrifield! It is not a common name."

"No; but I do not think this is the same family. This is a retired general, living in a house of Lord Rotherwood's. I once met one of his little girls, who came to Castle Towers with the Rotherwood party, and though she had a brother of the name, he was evidently not the same person."

Mrs. Best asked no more, for tell-tale colour had arisen in Magdalen's cheeks; and she had been the confidante of an engagement with a certain Henry Merrifield, who had been employed in the bank at Filsted when Magdalen was a very young girl. His father had come down suddenly, had found debt and dissipation, had broken all off decidedly, and no more had been heard of the young man. It was many years previously; but those cheeks and the tone of the reply made her suspect that there was still poignancy in the remembrance.

CHAPTER IV—CYCLES

"What flowers grow in my field wherewith to dress thee."

—E. Barrett Browning.

Mrs. Best departed early the next morning. It was probably a parting for life between the two old friends; and Magdalen keenly felt the severance from the one person whom she had always known, and on whose sympathy she could rely. Their conversations had been very precious to her, and she felt desolate without the entire companionship. Yet, on the other hand, she felt as if she could have begun better with her sisters if Sophy Best had not come with them, to hand them over, as it were, when she wanted to start on the same level with them, and be more like their contemporary than their authority.

They all stood on the terrace, watching the fly go down the hill, and she turned to them and said—

"We will all settle ourselves this morning, and you will see how the land lies, so that to-morrow we can arrange our day and see what work to do. Thekla, when you have had a run round the garden, you might bring your books to the dining-room and let me see how far you have gone."

"Oh, sister, it is holidays!"

"Well, my dear, you have had a week, and your holiday time cannot last for ever. Looking at your books cannot spoil it."

"Yes, it will; they are so nasty."

"Perhaps you will not always think so; but now you had better put on your hat and your thick boots, for the grass is still very wet, and explore the country. The same advice to you," she added, turning to the others; "it is warm here, but the dew lies long on the slopes."

"We have got a great deal too much to do," said Agatha, "for dawdling about just now."

Really, she was chiefly prompted by the satisfaction of not being ordered about; and the other two followed suit, while Magdalen turned away to her household business.

They found the housemaid in possession of the bedrooms, so that the unpacking plans could not conveniently be begun; and while Agatha was struggling with the straps of a book box, Thekla burst in upon them.

"Oh, Nag, Nag, there is the loveliest angel of a bicycle in the stable, and a dear little pony besides! 'New tyre wheels,' he says."

"A bicycle! Well, if she has got it for us, she is an angel indeed," said Vera.

"It is a big one," said Thekla, "but the pony is a dear little thing; Pixy is his name, and I can ride him! Do come, Flapsy, and see! Earwaker will show you. It is he that does the oiling of Pixy and harnessing the bicycle. I mean—"

"Tick, Tick, which does he oil and which does he harness?" said Paula.

"That little tongue wants both," said Agatha.

"But do, do come and see," said Thekla, not at all disconcerted by being laughed at; and Vera came, only asserting her independence by not putting on either hat or boots.

Thekla led the way to the stable, tucked under the hill at the back, and presiding over a linhay, as she had already learnt to call the tiny farm-court, containing accommodation for two cows, a pig, and sundry fowls. There was a shed attached with a wicker pony carriage and the bicycle, a handsome modern one, with all the newest appendages, including the "Nevertires," as Thekla had translated them.

But disappointment was in store for Vera. Magdalen came out during the inspection, and was received with—

"Sister, you never told us of this beauty."

"It was a parting present from General Mansell," she said, "and he took great pains to get me a very good one."

"And you bike!"

"Oh, yes; I learnt to go out with the Colvins. But I do not venture to use it much here, unless the road is good. Those rocks, freshly laid towards Rockstone, would make regular havoc of the pneumatic tyres."

Vera saw that this was prohibitive, and felt too much vexed to mention Thekla's version of the same; but Magdalen asked, "Have you learnt?"

"They were always going to teach me at Warner Grange, but it always snowed, or rained, or skated, I mean we skated, or something, whenever Hubert had time; but I am perfectly dying to learn."

"Well, before you expire, we may teach you a little on these smoother paths; and hire one perhaps, by the time the stones are passable. Just at present, I think our own legs and Pixy's are safer for that descent."

Vera was pacified enough to look on with a certain degree of complacency, while Thekla was enraptured at being set to take out the eggs from the hens' nests.

But the conclave in the sitting-room on Vera's report decided, "Selfish old thing, it is only an excuse! Of course we should take care not to spoil it. It shows what will be the way with everything."

No one knew of a still more secret conclave within Magdalen's own breast, one of those held at times by many an elder, between the claims of loyalty to the keepsakes of affection and old association and the gratification of present desires. Magdalen thought of the rules of convents forbidding the appropriation of personal trifles, and wondered if it were wise, if stern; but for the present she decided that it could not be her duty to risk what had been carefully and kindly selected for her in unpractised and careless hands; and she further compromised the matter by reckoning whether her funds, which were not excessive, would admit of the hire or purchase of machines that might allay the burning aspirations of her young people.

The upshot of her reckoning was that when they all met at the early dinner, she announced, "I think we might go to Rock Quay this afternoon, between the pony carriage and Shanks's mare. I want to ask about some lessons, and we could see about the hire of a bicycle for you to learn upon."

It was only Agatha who answered, "Thank you, but it is not worth while for me, I shall be away so soon."

Thekla cried out, "Me too!"—and Paulina mumbled something. In truth, besides the thought of the bicycle in the stable, the other two had lived enough in the country-town atmosphere to be foolishly disgusted at being obliged to dine early. That they had always been used to it made them only think it beneath their age as well as their dignity, and, "What a horrid nuisance!" had been on their tongues when the bell was ringing.

Moreover, they had enough of silly prejudice about them to feel aggrieved at the sight of hash, nice as it was with fresh vegetables, and they were not disposed to good temper when they sat down to their meal. "They" perhaps properly means the middle pair, for Agatha had more notion of manners and of respect, and Thekla had an endless store of chatter about her discoveries.

The pony-carriage was brought round in due time, but just then another vehicle of the same kind, only prettier and with two ponies, was seen at the gate, too late for the barbarian instinct of rushing away to hide from morning visitors to be carried out, before Lady Merrifield and a daughter, were up the slope and on the levelled road before the verandah.

"I think this is an old acquaintance," said Lady Merrifield as she shook hands, "though perhaps Mysie is grown out of remembrance."

"Oh, yes," said an honest open-faced maiden, eagerly putting out her hand. "Don't you remember, Miss Prescott, our all staying at Castle Towers? I came with Phyllis Devereux, and she and I took poor Betty Bernard out after blackberries, and she thought it was a mad bull when it was

a railway whistle, and ran into a cow-pond, and Cousin Rotherwood came and Captain Grantley and got her out."

Magdalen was smiling and nodding recollection, and added, "It was really one of the boys."

"Oh, yes."

> "I thought it was a crazy bull
> Firing a blunderbuss—"

She paused for recollection, and Magdalen went on—

> "I thought it was a crazy bull
> Firing a blunderbuss;
> I looked again, and, lo, it was
> A water polypus.
> 'Oh, guard my life,' I said, 'for she
> Will make an awful fuss.'"

"Ah! do you remember that?" cried Mysie. "I have so often tried to recollect what it really was when she looked again. Captain Grantley made it, you know, when we were trying to comfort Betty."

"I remember you and Lady Phyllis said you would go and confess to Mrs. Bernard and take all the blame, and Lord Rotherwood said he would escort you!"

"Yes, and Betty said it was no good, for if her mother forgave her ten times over, still that spiteful French maid would put her to bed and say she had no *robe convenable*," went on Mysie. "But then you took her to your own room, and washed her and mended her, so that she came out all right at luncheon, and nobody knew anything, but she thought that horrid woman guessed and tweaked her hair all the harder for it."

"Poor child, she looked as if she were under a tyranny."

"Have you seen her since?"

"No; but Phyllis tells me she has burst forth into liberty, bicycles, and wild doings that would drive her parents to distraction if she dreamt of them."

"How is Lady Phyllis? Did I not hear that the family had gone abroad for her health?"

"Oh yes, and I went with them. They all had influenza, and were frightened, but it ended in our meeting with Franceska Vanderkist, the very most charming looking being I ever did see; and Ivinghoe had fallen in love with her when she was Miranda, and he married her like a real old hero. Do you remember Ivinghoe?"

"No; I suppose he was one of an indistinguishable troop of schoolboys."

"I remember Lord Rotherwood's good nature and fun when he met the bedraggled party," said Magdalen, smiling.

"That is what every one remembers about him," said Lady Merrifield, smiling. "You have imported a large party of youth, Miss Prescott."

"My young sisters," responded Magdalen; "but I shall soon part with Agatha; she is going to Oxford."

"Indeed! To which College? I have a daughter at Oxford, and a niece just leaving Cambridge. Such is our lot in these days. No, not this one, but her elder sister Gillian is at Lady Catharine's."

"I am going to St. Robert's," said Agatha, abruptly.

"Close to Lady Catharine's! Gillian will be glad to tell her anything she would like to ask about it. You had better come over to tea some afternoon."

The time was fixed, and then Magdalen showed some of the advertisements of tuition in art, music, languages, and everything imaginable, which had begun to pour in upon her, and was very

glad of a little counsel on the reputation of each professor. Lady Merrifield saying, however, that her experience was small, as her young people in general were not musical, with the single exception of her son Wilfred, who was at home, reading to go up for the Civil Service, and recreating himself with the Choral Society and lessons on the violin. "My youngest is fifteen," she said, "and we provide for her lessons amongst us, except for the School of Art, and calisthenics at the High School, which is under superior management now, and very much improved."

Mysie echoed, "Oh, calisthenics are such fun!" and took the reins to drive away.

"Oh! she is very nice," exclaimed Mysie, as they drove down the hill.

"Yes, there is something very charming about her. I wonder whether Sam made a great mistake."

"Mamma, what do you mean?"

"Have I been meditating aloud? You said when you met her at Castle Towers, she asked you whether you had a brother Harry."

"Yes, she did. I only said yes, but he was going to be a clergyman, and when she heard his age, she said he was not the one she had known; I did not speak of cousin Henry because you said we were not to mention him. What was it, if I may know, mamma?"

"There is no reason that you should not, except that it is a painful matter to mention to Bessie or any of the Stokesley cousins. Harry was never like the rest, I believe, but I had never seen him since he was almost a baby. He never would work, and was not fit for any examination."

"Our Harry used to say that Bessie and David had carried off all the brains of the family."

"The others have sense and principle, though. Well, they put their Hal into a Bank at Filsted, and by and by they found he was in a great scrape, with gambling debts; and I believe that but for the forbearance of the partners, he might have been prosecuted for embezzling a sum—or at least he was very near it; besides which he had engaged himself to an attorney's daughter, very young, and with a very disagreeable mother or stepmother. The Admiral came down in great indignation, thought these Prescotts had inveigled poor Henry, broke everything hastily off, and shipped him off to Canada to his brothers, George and John. They found some employment for him, but Susan and Bessie doubt whether they were very kind to him, and in a few years more he was in fresh scrapes, and with worse stains and questions of his integrity. It ended in his running away to the States, and no trace has been found of him since. I am afraid he took away money of his brothers."

"How long ago was it, mamma?"

"At least twenty years. It was while we were in Malta."

"Who would have thought of those dear Stokesley cousins having such a skeleton in their cupboard?"

"Ah! my dear, no one knows the secrets of others' hearts."

"And you really think that this Miss Prescott was his love?"

"I know it was the same name, and Bessie told me that he used to talk to her of his Magdalen, or Maidie; and when I heard of your meeting her at Castle Towers I wondered if it were the same. And now I see what she is, and what she is undertaking for these young sisters; I have wondered whether your uncle was wise to insist on the utter break, and whether she might not have been an anchor to hold him fast to his moorings."

"Only," said Mysie, "if he had really cared, would he have let his father break it off so entirely?"

"I think your uncle expected implicit obedience."

"But—," said Mysie, and left the rest unsaid, while both she and her mother went off into meditations on different lines on the exigencies of parental discipline and of the requirements of full-grown hearts.

And, on the whole, the younger one was the most for strict obedience, the experienced parent in favour of liberty. But then Mysie was old-fashioned and dutiful.

CHAPTER V—CLIPSTONE FRIENDS

"What idle progeny succeed
To chase the rolling circle's speed,
Or urge the flying ball."—Gray.

The afternoon at Clipstone was a success. Gillian was at home, and every one found congeners. Lady Merrifield's sister, Miss Mohun, pounced upon Miss Prescott as a coadjutor in the alphabet of good works needed in the neglected district of Arnscombe, where Mr. Earl was wifeless, and the farm ladies heedless; but they were interrupted by Mysie running up to claim Miss Prescott for a game at croquet. "Uncle Redgie was so glad to see the hoops come into fashion again," and Vera and Paula hardly knew the game, they had always played at lawn tennis; but they were delighted to learn, for Uncle Redgie proved to be a very fine-looking retired General, and there was a lad besides, grown to manly height; and one boy, at home for Easter, who, caring not for croquet, went with Primrose to exhibit to Thekla the tame menagerie, where a mungoose, called of course Raki raki, was the last acquisition. She was also shown the kittens of the beloved Begum, and presented with Phœbus, a tabby with a wise face and a head marked like a Greek lyre, to be transplanted to the Goyle in due time.

"If Sister will let me have it," said Thekla.

"Of course she will," said Primrose. "Mysie says she is so jolly."

"Dear me! all the girls at our school said she was a regular Old Maid."

"What shocking bad form!" exclaimed Primrose. "Just like cads of girls," muttered Fergus, unheard; for Thekla continued—"Why, they said she must be our maiden aunt, instead of our sister."

"The best thing going!" said Fergus.

"Maiden aunts in books are always horrid," said Thekla.

"Then the books ought to be hung, drawn, and quartered, and spifflicated besides," said Fergus.

"Fergus doesn't like anybody so well as Aunt Jane," said Primrose, "because nobody else understands his machines."

Thekla made a grimace.

"Ah!" said Primrose. "I see it is just as mamma and Mysie said when they came home, that Miss Prescott was very nice indeed, and it was famous that she should make a home for you all, only they were afraid you seemed as if—you might be—tiresome," ended Primrose, looking for a word.

"Well, you know she wants to be our governess," said Thekla.

"Well?" repeated Primrose.

"And of course no one ever likes their governess."

This aphorism, so uttered by Thekla, provoked a yell from Primrose, echoed by Fergus; and Primrose, getting her breath, declared that dear Miss Winter was a great darling, and since she had gone away, more's the pity, mamma was real governess to herself, Valetta, and Mysie, and she always looked at their translations and heard their reading if Gillian was not at home.

"And they are quite grown-up young ladies!"

"Mysie is; but I don't know about Val. Only I don't see why any one should be silly and do nothing if one is grown up ever so much," said Primrose.

"As the Eiffel Tower," put in Fergus.

"Nonsense!" said Primrose, bent on being improving. "Don't you know what that old book of mamma's says, 'When will Miss Rosamond's education be finished?' She answered 'Never.'"

Thekla gave a groan, whether of pity for Rosamond or for herself might be doubted; and a lop-eared rabbit was a favourable diversion.

There was a triad who seemed to be of Rosamond's opinion regarding education, for Agatha was eagerly availing herself of the counsel of Gillian, and the books shown to her; with the further assistance of the cousin, Dolores Mohun, now an accredited lecturer in technical classes, though making her home and headquarters at Clipstone.

Thekla's views of young ladyhood were a good deal more fulfilled by the lessons on cycling which were going on among the other young people after the game of croquet had ended. Every size and variety seemed to exist among the Clipstone population, under certain regulations of not coasting down the hills, the girls not going out alone, and never into the town, but always "putting up" at Aunt Jane's.

Vera and Paulina were in ecstasy, and there was a continual mounting, attempting and nearly falling, or turning anywhere but the right, little screams, and much laughter, Jasper attending upon Vera, who, in spite of her failures, looked remarkably pretty and graceful upon Valetta's machine; while Paula, whom Mysie and Valetta were both assisting, learnt more easily and steadily, but looked on with a few qualms as to the entire crystal rock constancy that Vera had professed, more especially when Jasper volunteered to come over to the Goyle and give another lesson.

Magdalen, after her game at croquet, had spent a very pleasant time with Lady Merrifield and her brother and sister, till they were imperiously summoned by Primrose to come and give consent to the transfer of Phœbus, or to choose between him and the Mufti, to whom Thekla had begun to incline.

The whole party adjourned to the back settlements, where Magdalen was edified by the antics of the mungoose, and admired the Begum and her progeny with a heartiness that would have won Thekla's heart, save that she remembered hearing Vera say, over the domestic cat in the morning, that M.A.'s were always devoted to cats. But, on the whole, the visit had done much to reconcile the young sisters to their new surroundings; books, bicycles, and kitten had reconciled them even to the intimacy with "swells."

The hired bicycle and tricycle had arrived in their absence, and the moment breakfast was over the next morning, the three younger ones all rushed off to the enjoyment, and, at ten minutes past the appointed hour for the early reading and study, Agatha felt obliged to go out and tell them that the M.A. was sitting like Patience on a monument, waiting for them; on which three tongues said "Bother," and "She ought to let us off till the proper end of the holidays."

"Then you should have propitiated her by asking leave after the Scripture was done," said Agatha; "you might have known she would not let you off that."

"Bother," said Vera again; "just like an M.A."

"I did forget," said Paula; "and you know it was only just going through a lesson for form's sake, like the old superlative."

They had, in fact, read the day before; when Thekla had made such frightful work of every unaccustomed word, and the elders by one or two observations had betrayed so much ignorance alike of Samuel's history and of the Gospel of St. Luke, that she had resolved to endeavour at a thorough teaching of the Old and New Testaments for the first hour on alternate days, giving one day in the week to Catechism and Prayer Book.

She asked what they had done before.

"Mrs. Best always read something at prayers."

"Something?"

"Something out of the Bible."

"No, the Testament."

"I am sure it was the Bible, it was so fat."

"And Saul was in it, and we had him yesterday."

"That was St. Paul before he was converted," said Paula.

There their knowledge seemed to end, and it further appeared that Mrs. Best heard the Catechism and Collect on Sundays from the unconfirmed, and had tried to get the Gospel repeated by heart, but had not succeeded.

"We did not think it fair," said Vera. "None of the other houses did."

"Yes," said Agatha, "Miss Ferris's did."

"Oh, she is a regular old Prot," said Paula, "almost a Dissenter, and it is not the Gospel either, only texts out of her own head."

"Polly!" said Agatha. "Texts out of her own head!"

"It is Bible, of course, only what she fancies; and they have to work out the sermon, and if they can't do the sermon, a text. They might as well be Dissenters at once!" said Paula.

"Janet M'Leod is," said Vera. "It was really Dissentish."

Magdalen could not help saying, "So you would not learn the Gospel because Dissenters learnt pieces of Scripture! You seem to me like the Roman Catholic child, who said there were five sacraments, there ought to be seven, but the Protestants had got two of them."

She was sorry she had said it, for though Agatha laughed, the other two drew into themselves, as if their feelings were hurt. "These are the boarding-house habits," she said. "What is done at the High School itself?"

"The Vicar comes when he has time, and gives a lecture on an Epistle," said Agatha, "or a curate, if he doesn't; but I was working for the exam., and didn't go this last term. What was it, Polly?"

"On the—on the Apollonians," answered Paulina, hesitating.

"My dear, where did he find it?"

"I know it was something about Apollo," said Vera.

"It was Corinthians," said Paula. "I ought to have recollected, but the lectures are very dull and disjointed; you said so yourself, Nag, and the Rector is very low church."

"So you could not learn from him!"

"Really, sister," said Agatha, "the lectures are not well managed, they are in too many hands, and too uncertain, and it is not easy to learn much from them."

"Well, that being the case, I think we had better begin at the beginning. Suppose I ask you to say the first answer in the Catechism."

On which Vera said they had all been confirmed except Thekla, and passed it on to her.

However, the endeavours of that half-hour need not be recounted, and the moment half-past ten chimed out the young ladies jumped up, and would have been off to the bicycles, if Magdalen had not felt that the time was come for asserting authority, and said, "Not yet, if you please. We cannot waste whole days. You know Herr Gnadiger is coming to-morrow, and it would be well to practise that sonata beforehand; you ought each to practise it; Paula, you had better begin, and Vera, you prepare this first scene of Marie Stuart to read with me when Thekla's lessons are over. Change over when Paula has done."

"It is of no use my doing anything while anyone is playing," said Vera.

"Nonsense," Agatha muttered; but Magdalen said, "You can sit in the drawing-room or your own room. Come, Tick-tick, where's your slate? Come along."

"Don't sulk, Flapsy," said the elder sister, "it is of no use. The M.A. means to be minded, and will be, and you know it is all for your good."

"I hate my good," said naughty Vera.

"So does every one when it is against the grain," said Agatha; "but remember it is a preparation for a free life of our own."

"It is our cross," said Paula, as she placed herself on the music stool with a look of resignation almost comical.

Nor did her performance interfere with the equations which Agatha was diligently working out; but Vera, though refusing to take refuge from the piano, to which, in fact, she was perfectly inured, worried her elder as much as she durst, by inquiries after the meaning of words, or what horrid verb to look out in the dictionary; and it was a pleasing change when Paula proceeded to work the same scene out for herself without having recourse to explanations, so that Agatha was undisturbed except by the careless notes, which almost equally worried Magdalen in the more distant dining-room.

This was really the crisis of the battle of study. As the girls were accustomed to it, and knew that they were of an age to be ground down, they followed Agatha's advice, and submitted without further open struggle, though there was a good deal of low murmur, and the foreman's work was not essentially disagreeable, even while Vera maintained, what she believed to be an axiom, that governesses were detestable, and that the M.A. must incur the penalty of acting as such.

Very soon after luncheon appeared three figures on bicycles. Wilfred Merrifield, with Mysie and Valetta, come to give another lesson on the "flying circle's speed."

Magdalen came out with her young people to enjoy their amusement, as well as to watch over her own precious machine, as Vera said. It was admired, as became connoisseurs in the article; and she soon saw that Wilfred was to be trusted with the care of it, so she consented to its being ridden in the practice, provided it was not taken out into the lanes.

Mysie turned off from the practising, where she was not wanted, and joined Miss Prescott in walking through the garden terraces, and planning what would best adorn them, talking over favourite books, and enjoying themselves very much; then going on to the quarry, where Mysie looked about with a critical eye to see if it displayed any fresh geological treasures to send Fergus in quest of. She began eagerly to pour forth the sister's never-ending tale of her brother's cleverness, and thus they came down the outside lane to the lower gate, seeing beforehand the sparkle of bicycles in its immediate proximity.

It was not open, but Vera might be seen standing with one hand on the latch, the other on Magdalen's bicycle, her face lifted with imploring, enticing smiles to Wilfred, who had fallen a little back, while Paula had decidedly drawn away.

None of them had seen Magdalen and Mysie till they were round the low stone wall and close upon them. There was a general start, and Vera exclaimed, "We haven't been outside! No, we haven't! And it is not the Rockquay Road either, sister! I only wanted a run down that lane up above."

Wilfred laughed a little oddly. It was quite plain that he had been withstanding the temptress, only how long would the resistance have lasted?

Downright Mysie exclaimed, "It would have been a great shame if you had, and I am glad Wilfred hindered you."

"Thank you," said Magdalen, smiling to him. "You know better than my sisters what Devon lanes and pneumatic tyres are!"

Perhaps Wilfred was a little vexed, though he had resisted, for he was ready to agree with Mysie that they could not stay and drink tea.

But he did not escape his sister's displeasure, for Mysie began at once, "How lucky it was that we came in time. I do believe that naughty little thing was just going to talk you over into doing what her sister had forbidden."

"A savage, old, selfish bear. It was only the lane."

"Full of crystals as sharp as needles, enough to cut any tyre in two," said Mysie.

"Like your tongue, eh, Mysie?"

"Well, you did not do it! That is a comfort. You would not let her transgress, and ruin her sister's good bicycle."

"She is an uncommonly pretty little sprite, and the selfish hag of a sister only left orders that I was to take care of the bike! I could see where there was a stone as well as anybody else."

"Hag!" angrily cried Mysie, "she is the only nice one of the whole lot. Vera is a nasty little thing, or she would never think of meddling with what does not belong to her, or trying to persuade you to allow it."

"I call it abominable selfishness, dog in the mangerish, to shut up such a machine as that, and condemn her sisters to one great lumbering one."

"That's one account," said Valetta. "Paula said it was only till they had learnt to ride properly, and till the stones have a little worn in."

"Yes," said Mysie, "I could see Vera is an exaggerating monkey, just talking over and deluding Will, just as men like when they get a silly fit."

By this time Wilfred had thought it expedient to put his bicycle to greater speed, and indulge in a long whistle to show how contemptible he thought his sisters as he went out of hearing.

"Paulina is nice and good," said Valetta, "she has heard all about St. Kenelm's, and wants to go there. Yes, and she means to be a Sister of Charity, only she is afraid her sister is narrow and low church."

"That is stuff and nonsense," said Mysie. "I have had a great deal of talk with Miss Prescott. She loves all the same books that we do. She is going to have G. F. S. and Mothers' Union, and all at poor Arnscombe, and she told me to call her Magdalen."

With which proofs of congeniality Valetta could not choose but be impressed.

CHAPTER VI—THE FRESCOES OF ST. KENELM'S

Earn well the thrifty months, nor wed
Raw Haste, half-sister to Delay.—Tennyson.

The deferred expedition to Rockquay also began, Magdalen driving Vera and Thekla. She was pleased with her visitors, and hoped that the girls would feel the same, but Vera began by declaring that *that* Miss Merrifield was not pretty.

"Not exactly, but it is an honest, winning face."

"So broad, and such a wide mouth, and no style at all, as I should have expected after all that about lords and ladies! An old blue serge and sailor hat!"

"You don't expect people to drive about the country in silk attire?"

"Well, perhaps she is not out! Sister, do you know I am seventeen?"

"Yes, my dear, certainly."

"Oh, look, look, there's a dear little calf!" broke in Thekla, "and, oh! what horns the cows have. I shall be afraid to go near them! Was it only a sham mad bull when the little girl ran into the pond?"

"It was the railway whistle, and she had never heard it in the fields. She rushed away in a great fright and ran into the pond, full of horrible black mud. The gentlemen heard the scream and dragged her out, and it would have all been fun and a good story if she had not been so much afraid of the French lady's maid. It is curious how the sight of those brown eyes brought the whole scene back to me. We all grew so fond of Mysie Merrifield in the few days we spent together, and she is very little altered."

"Is she out?" asked Vera once more.

"Oh, yes, she cannot be less than twenty."

"And I am seventeen," said Vera, returning to the charge. "I ought to be out."

"If there are nice invitations, I shall be quite ready to accept them for you."

"But I am too old for the schoolroom and lessons and masters."

"Too old or too wise?" said Magdalen laughing.

"I have got into the highest form in everything. Every one at Filston of my age is leaving off all the bother."

"Not Agatha."

"Oh, but Agatha is—!"

"Is what?

"Agatha is awfully clever, and wants to be something!"

"Something? But do you want to evaporate? To be nothing at all, I mean," said Magdalen, seeing her first word was bewildering, and Thekla put in—

"Flapsy couldn't go off in steam, could she? Isn't that evaporating?"

"I think what she wants is to be a young lady at large! Eh, Vera? Only I don't quite see how that is to be managed, even if it is quite a worthy ambition. But we will talk that over another time. Do you see how pretty those sails are crossing the bay?"

Neither girl seemed to have eyes for the lovely blue of the sea in the spring sunshine, nor the striking forms of ruddy peaks of rock that enclosed it. Uneducated eyes, she thought, as she slowly manœuvred the pony down the steep hill before coming to the Rockstone Cliff Road. The other two girls were following her direction across field and road, and making their observations.

"A dose of lords and ladies," said Agatha.

"I thought they were rather nice," said Paula.

"I see how it will be," said Agatha. "They will patronise the M.A. as Lady Somebody's old governess, and she will fawn upon them and run after them, and we shall be on those terms."

"But I thought you meant to be a governess?"

"I shall make my own line. I know how swells look on a governess of the *ancien régime*, and how they will introduce her as the kindly old goody who mends my little lady's frock!"

"The girl had not any airs," said Paula. "She told me about the churches down there in the town—not the ones we went to on Sunday; but there's one that is very low indeed, and St. Andrew's, which is their parish church, was suiting the moderate high church folk; and there is St. Kenelm's, very high indeed, Mr. Flight's, I think I have heard of him, and it is just the right thing, I am sure."

"Don't flatter yourself that the M.A. will let you have much pleasure in it. It is just what people of her sort think dangerous."

"But do you know, Nag, I do believe that it is the church that Hubert Delrio was sent down to study and make a design for."

"Whew! There will be a pretty kettle of fish if he comes down about it! That is, if he and Flapsy have not forgotten all about the ice and the forfeits at Warner's Grange, as is devoutly to be hoped."

"Do you hope it really, Nag, for Flapsy really was very much—did care very much."

"I have no great faith in Flapsy's affections surviving the contact with greater swells."

"Poor Hubert!"

"Perhaps his will not survive common sense. I am sure I hope not for both their sakes."

"But, Nag, it would be very horrid of them if they had no constancy," declared the more romantic Paula.

"It will be a regular mess if they do have it, and bring on horrid scrapes with the M.A. Just think. It is all very well to say she has known Hubert all his life; but she can't treat him as a gentleman, or she won't. She has a position to keep up with all these swells, and he will be only the man who paints the church! I only hope he will not come. There will be nothing but bother if he does, unless they both have more sense and less constancy than you expect. Well, this really is a splendid view. Old Mr. Delrio would be wild about it."

Here the steep and stony hill brought them into contact with the pony carriage, nor were there any more confidential conversations. The pony was put up at the top of the hill leading from Rockstone to Rockquay, and thence the party walked down for Miss Prescott to make a few purchases, and, moreover, to begin by gratifying Thekla's reiterated entreaty for a bicycle, though, as she was unpractised and growing so fast, it was decided to be better to hire a tricycle for practice, and one bicycle on which Vera and Paula might learn the art.

The choice was a long one, and left only just time for a peep into the two churches and a study of the hours of their services. St. Kenelm's was decided to be a "perfect gem," ornaments, beauty, and all, a little overdone, perhaps, in Magdalen's opinion, but perfectly "the thing" in her sisters'.

This St. Andrew's fulfilled to her mind, being handsome, reverent, and decorous in all the arrangements, while to the younger folk it was "all very well," but quite of the old times. Little did they know of "old times" beyond the quarter century of their birth! Poor old Arnscombe might feebly represent them, but even that had struggled out of the modern "dark ages." Magdalen had decided on talking to Agatha and seeing how far she understood the situation, and she came to her room to put her in possession now that Mrs. Best had left the guest chamber free.

"This is your home when you are here. You must put up any belongings that you do not want to take to St. Robert's."

"Thank you; it is a nice pleasant room."

"And, my dear, may I stay a few minutes? I think we had better have a talk, and quite understand one another."

"Very well."

It was not quite encouraging, but Agatha really wished to hear, and she advanced a wicker chair for her elder sister, and sat down on the window seat.

"Thank you, my dear; I do not know how much Mrs. Best has told you."

"She told us that you had always been very good to us, and that you had been our guardian ever since we lost our mother."

"Did she tell you what we have of our own that our father could leave us?"

"No."

"What amounts to about £40 a year apiece. Mrs. Best in her very great goodness has taken you four for that amount, though her proper charge is eighty."

"And she never let any one guess it," said Agatha, more warmly, "for fear we might feel the difference. How very good of her."

She seemed more impressed by Mrs. Best's bounty than by Magdalen's, but probably she took the latter as a matter of course and obligation; besides, the sense of it involved a sum in subtraction. However, this was not observed by her sister, who did not want to feel obliged.

"Now that this property has come in," continued Magdalen, "we can live comfortably together upon it for the present, and your expenses at Oxford can be paid, as well as masters in what may be needful for the others, and an allowance for dress. I suppose you will want the £40 while you are at St. Robert's, besides the regular expenses?"

"Thank you," warmly said.

"But I want you to understand, as I think you do, about the future, for you must be prepared to be independent."

"I should have wished for a career if I had been a millionaire," said Agatha.

"I believe you would, and it is well that you should have every advantage. But the others. If I left you all this property, it would not be a comfortable maintenance divided among four; and you would not like to be dependent, or to leave the last who might not marry to a pittance alone."

"Certainly not," said Agatha, with flashing eyes.

"Then you see that it is needful that you should be able to do something for yourselves. I can give one of you at a time the power of going to the University."

"I don't think Vera or Polly would wish for that," said Agatha.

"Well, what would they wish for? I can do something towards preparing them, and I can teach Thekla, but I should like to know what you think would be best for them."

"Vera's strong point is music," said Agatha. "She cares for that more than anything else, and Mr. Selby thought she had talent and might sing, only she must not strain her voice. I don't believe she will do much in any other line. And Polly—she is very good, and always does her best because it is right, but I don't think anything is any particular pleasure to her, except needlework. She is always wanting to make things for the church. She really has a better voice than Flapsy, and can play better, but that is because she is so much steadier."

"Seventeen and sixteen, are they not?"

"Yes; but Polly seems ever so much older than Flapsy."

"Mrs. Best showed me that she had higher marks. She must be a thoroughly good girl."

"That she is," cried Agatha, warmly. "She never had any task for getting into mischief."

"Well, they are both so young that a little study with me will be good for them, and there will be time to judge what they are fit for. In art I think they are not much interested."

"Paula draws pretty well, but Vera hates it. Old Mr. Delrio is always cross to her now; but—" Agatha stopped short, remembering that there might be a reason why the drawing master no longer made her a favourite pupil.

"Do you think him a good judge?"

"Yes; Mrs. Best thinks much of him. He had an artist's education, and sometimes has a picture in the Water Colour Exhibition; but I believe he did not find it answer, and so he took our school of art."

Agatha had talked sensibly throughout the conference, but not confidentially; much, in fact, as she would have discussed her sisters with Mrs. Best. She was glad that at the moment the sound of the piano set them listening. She did not feel bound to mention to "sister" any more than she would to the head mistress, that when staying at Mr. Waring's country house a sort of semi-flirtation had begun with Hubert Delrio, a young man to whose education his father had sacrificed a great deal, and who was a well-informed and intelligent gentleman in all his ways. He had engaged himself to the great firm of Eccles and Beamster, ecclesiastical decorators, and might be employed upon the intended frescoes of St. Kenelm's Church.

Ought "Sister" to be told?

But Agatha thought it would be betraying confidence to "set on the dragon"; and besides nobody ever could tell how much Vera's descriptions meant. She knew already that the sweetest countenance in the world and the loveliest dark eyes belonged to a fairly good-looking young man, and she could also suspect that the "squeeze of my hand" might be an ordinary shake, and the kneeling before the one he loved best might have been only the customary forfeit. On the whole, it would be better to let things take their course; it was not likely that either was seriously smitten, and it was more than probable that Hubert Delrio would be too busy to look after a young lady now in a different stratum, and that Vera would have found another sweetest countenance in the world.

All this passed through her mind while Magdalen listened, and pronounced—

"That is brilliant—a clever touch—only—"

"Yes, that is Vera—I know what you are noticing, but this is only amusement; she is not taking pains."

"It is very clever—especially as probably she has no music. But there—"

"Polly's? Oh, yes; she is really steady-going. That is just what you will find her. This is a charming room, sister; thank you very much."

"Make it your home, my dear."

But in reality they were not much nearer together than before the conference.

CHAPTER VII—SISTER AND SISTERS

"Have we not all, amid earth's petty strife,
Some pure ideal of a nobler life?
We lost it in the daily jar and fact,
And now live idly in a vain regret."

Adelaide Procter.

Agatha was so much absorbed in her preparation for St. Robert's that she did not pay very much heed to her younger sisters or their relations with Magdalen. She had induced them to submit to the regulation of their studies with her pretty much as if she had been Mrs. Best, looking upon her, however, as something out of date, and hardly up to recent opinions, not realising that, of late, Magdalen's world had been a wide one.

Perhaps, in Agatha's feelings, there was an undercurrent inherited from her mother, who had always felt the better connected, better educated step-daughter, a sort of alien element, exciting jealousy by her companionship to her father, and after his death, apt to be regarded as a scarcely willing, and perhaps censorious pay-master.

"Your sister might call it too expensive." "I must ask your sister." "No, your sister does not think she can afford it. I am sure she might. Her expenses must be nothing." All this had been no preparation for full sisterly confidence with "Sister," even when a sort of grudging gratitude was extracted, and Agatha had been quite old enough to imbibe an undefined antagonism, though, being a sensible girl, she repressed the manifestations, kept her sisters in order and taught them not to love but to submit, and herself remained in a state of civil coolness, without an approach beyond formal signs of affection, and such confidence.

It was the more disappointing to Magdalen, because Agatha and Paulina both showed so much unconscious likeness to their father, not only in features, but in little touches of gesture and manner. She longed to pet them, and say, "Oh, my dears, how like papa!" but the only time she attempted it, she was met by a severe, uncomprehending look and manner.

And Agatha went away to Oxford without any thawing on her part.

The only real ground that had been gained was with little Thekla, who was soon very fond of "Sister," and depended on her more and more for sympathy and amusement. Girls of seventeen and sixteen do not delight in the sports of nine-year-olds, except in the case of special pets and *protégées*, and Thekla was snubbed when a partner was required to assist in doll's dramas, or in evening games. Only "Sister" would play unreservedly with her, unaware or unheeding that this was looked on as keeping up the *métier* of governess. Indeed, Thekla's reports of schoolroom murmurs and sneers about the M.A. had to be silenced. Peace and good will could best be guarded by closed ears. Yet, even then, Thekla missed child companionship, and, even more, competition, the lack of which rendered her dull and listless over her lessons, and when reproved, she would beg to be sent to school, or, at least, to attend the High School on her bicycle. Not admiring the manners or the attainments of the specimens before her, Magdalen felt bound to refuse, and the sisters' pity kept alive the grievance.

She had, however, decided on granting the bicycles. She had found plenty of use for her own, for it was possible with prudent use of it, avoiding the worst parts of the road, to be at early celebration at St. Andrew's, and get to the Sunday school at Arnscombe afterwards; and Paulina, with a little demur, decided on giving her assistance there.

At a Propagation of the Gospel meeting at the town hall, the Misses Prescott were introduced to the Reverend Augustine Flight, of St. Kenelm's, and his mother, Lady Flight, who sat next to

Magdalen, and began to talk eagerly of the designs for the ceiling of their church, and the very promising young artist who was coming down from Eccles and Beamster to undertake the work.

The church had not yet been seen, and the conversation ended in the sisters coming back to tea, at which Paula was very happy, for the talk had something of the rather exclusive High Church tone that was her ideal. She had seen it in books, but had never heard it before in real life, and Vera was in a restless state, longing to hear whether the promising young artist was really Hubert Delrio, and hoping, while she believed that she feared, that she should blush when she heard his name. However, she did not, though Mr. Flight unfolded his rough plans for the frescoes, which were to be of virgin and child martyrs, Magdalen hesitating a little over those that seemed too legendary; while old Lady Flight, portly and sentimental, declared them so sweet and touching. After tea, they went on to the church. Just at the entrance of the porch, Vera clutched at Paula, with the whisper, "Wasn't that Wilfred Merrifield? There, crossing?"

"Nonsense," was Paula's reply, as she lingered over the illuminated list of the hours of services displayed at the door, and feeling as if she had attained dreamland, as she saw two fully habited Sisters enter, and bend low as they did so.

The church was very elaborately ornamented, small, but showing that no expense had been spared, though there was something that did not quite accord with Magdalen's ideas of the best taste; so that when they went out she answered Paula's raptures of admiration somewhat coldly, or what so appeared to the enthusiastic girl.

The next day, meeting Miss Mohun over cutting out for a working party, Magdalen asked her about the Flights and St. Kenelm's.

"He is an excellent good man," said Jane Mohun, "and has laid out immense sums on the church and parish."

"All his own? Not subscription?"

"No. He is the only son of a very rich City man, a brewer, and came here with his mother as a curate, as a good place for health. They found a miserable little corrugated-iron place, called the Kennel Chapel, and worked it up, raising the people, and doing no end of good till it came to be a district, as St. Kenelm's."

"Very ornamental?"

"Oh, very," said Jane, warming out of caution, as she felt she might venture showing city gorgeousness all over. "But it is infinitely to his credit. He had a Fortunatus' purse, and was a spoilt child—not in the bad sense—but with an utterly idolising mother, and he tried a good many experiments that made our hair stand on end; but he has sobered down, and is a much wiser man now —though I would not be bound to admire all he does."

"I see there are Sisters? Do they belong to his arrangements?"

"Yes. They are what my brother calls Cousins of Mercy. The elder one has tried two or three Sisterhoods, and being dissatisfied with all the rules, I fancy she has some notion of trying to set up one on her own account at Mr. Flight's. They are both relations of his mother, and are really one of his experiments—fancy names and fancy rules, of course. I believe the young one wanted to call herself Sister Philomena, but that he could not stand. So they act as parish women here, and they do it very well. I liked Sister Beata when I have come in contact with her, and I am sure she is an excellent nurse. They will do your nieces no harm, though I don't like the irregular."

Of this assurance Magdalen felt very glad, when at the door of the parish room, where the ladies were to hold a working party for the missions, Carrigaboola Missions at Albertstown, she and her nieces were introduced to the two ladies in hoods and veils; and Paula's eyes sparkled with delight as she settled into a chair next to Sister Mena. She looked as happy as Vera looked bored!

Conversation was not possible while a missionary memoir was being read aloud, but the history of Mother Constance, once Lady Herbert Somerville, but then head at Dearport, and founder of the Daughter Sisterhood at Carrigaboola. To the Merrifields it was intensely interesting, and also to

Magdalen; but all the time she could see demonstrations passing between Paula and Sister Mena, a nice-looking girl, much embellished by the setting of the hood and veil, as if the lending of a pair of scissors or the turning of a hem were an act of tender admiration. So sweet a look came out on Paula's face that she longed to awaken the like. Vera meantime looked as if her only consolation lay in the neighbourhood of a window, whence she could see up the street, as soon as she had found whispers to Mysie Merrifield treated as impossible.

The party at the Goyle had begun to fall into regular habits, and struggles were infrequent. There was study in the forenoon, walks or cycle expeditions in the afternoon, varied by the lessons in music and in art, which Vera and Paula attended on Wednesdays and Fridays, the one in the morning, the other after dinner. It was possible to go to St. Andrew's matins at ten o'clock before the drawing class, and to St. Kenelm's at five, after the music was over. Magdalen, whenever it was possible, went with her sisters on their bicycles to St. Andrew's, and sometimes devised errands that she might join them at St. Kenelm's, but neither could always be done by the head of the household. And she could perceive that her company was not specially welcome.

Valetta, the only one of the Clipstone family whose drawing was worth cultivating, used to ride into Rockstone, escorted by her brother Wilfred, who was in course of "cramming" with a curate on his way to his tutor, and Vera found in casual but well-cultivated meetings and partings, abundant excitement in "nods and becks and wreathed smiles," and now and then in the gift of a flower.

Paula on the other hand found equal interest and delight in meetings with Sister Mena, especially after a thunderstorm had driven the two to take refuge at what the Sisters called "the cell of St. Kenelm," and tea had unfolded their young simple hearts to one another! Magdalen had called on the Sisters and asked them to tea at the Goyle, and there had come to the conclusion that Sister Beata was an admirable, religious, hardworking woman, of strong opinions, and not much cultivated, with a certain provincial twang in her voice. She had a vehement desire for self-devotion and consecration, but perhaps not the same for obedience. She sharply criticised all the regulations of the Sisterhoods with which she was acquainted, wore a dress of her own device, and with Sister Mena, a young cousin of her own, meant to make St. Kenelm's a nucleus for a Sisterhood of her own invention.

Sister Mena had been bred up in a Sisterhood's school, from five years old and upwards, and had no near relatives. Mr. Flight was Saint, Pope and hero to both, and Mena knew little beyond the horizon of St. Kenelm's, but she and Paula were fascinated with one another; and Magdalen saw more danger in interfering than in acquiescing, though she gave no consent to Paulina's aspirations after admission into the perfect Sisterhood that was to be.

CHAPTER VIII—SNOBBISHNESS

"Why then should vain repinings rise,
That to thy lover fate denies
A nobler name, a wide domain?"—Scott.

The friendship with the Sisters was about three weeks old when, one morning, scaffold poles were being erected in the new side aisle of St. Kenelm's Church, and superintending them was a tall dark-haired young man. There was a start of mutual recognition; and by and by he met Paula and Vera in the porch, and there were eager hand-clasps and greetings, as befitted old friends meeting in a strange place.

"Mr. Hubert! I heard you were coming!"

"Miss Vera! Miss Paula! This is a pleasure."

Then followed an introduction of Sister Mena, whose elder companion was away, attending a sick person.

"May I ask whether you are living here?"

"Two miles off at the Goyle, at Arnscombe, with our sister."

"So I heard! I shall see you again." And he turned aside to give an order, bowing as he did so.

"Is he the artist of those sweet designs?" asked Sister Mena.

"Did we not tell you?"

"And now he is going to execute them? How delicious!"

"I trust so! We must see him again. We have not heard of Edie and Nellie, nor any one."

"He will call on you?" said Sister Mena.

"I do not think so," said Paula. "At least his father is really an artist, but he is drawing-master at the High School, and Hubert works for this firm. They are not what you call in society, and our sister is all for getting in with Lady Merrifield and General Mohun and all the swells, so it would never do for him to call."

"She would first be stiff and stuck up," said Vera, "and I could not stand that."

"I thought she was so kind," said Mena.

"You don't understand," said Vera. "She would be kind to a workman in a fever; but this sort —oh, no."

"To be on an equality with the man painting the church?" said Paula. "No, indeed! not if he were Fra Angelico and Ary Scheffer and Michelangelo rolled into one."

At that moment the subject referred to in that mighty conglomeration reappeared. He was a handsome young man, his touch of Italian blood showing just enough to give him a romantic air; and Sister Philomena listened, much impressed by the interchange of question and answer about "Edie and Nellie," and the dear Warings, and the happy Christmas at the Grange; and Vera blushed again, and Paula coloured in sympathy, as it appeared that Mr. Delrio had never had such a splendid time.

The colloquy was ended by Mr. Flight being descried, approaching with his mother, whereupon the two girls fled away like guilty creatures.

Presently Vera exclaimed, "Oh, Polly dear, what a complication! Poor dear fellow! he cares for me as much as ever."

"And you will be staunch to him in spite of all the worldly allurements," said Paula.

"Well, I mean Mr. Wilfred Merrifield is not half so handsome," returned Vera.

"Nor is he engaged in sacred work; only bent on frivolity," said Paula; "yet see how the M.A. encourages him with tennis and games and nonsense."

Poor M.A., when the encouragement had only been some general merriment, and a few games on the lawn Paulina, who had heard many confidences when Vera returned from Waring Grange, believed altogether in the true love of the damsel and Hubert Delrio, who had been wont to single out the prettiest of the girls at Filstead, and she was resolved to do all she could in their cause, being schoolgirl enough to have no scruple as to secrecy towards Magdalen, though on the next opportunity she poured out all to Sister Philomena's by no means unwilling ears.

Lovers had never fallen within the young Sister's experience, either personally or through friends; and they had only been revealed to her in a few very carefully-selected tales, where they were more the necessary machinery than the main interest, for she had been bred up in an orphanage by Sister Beata, and had never seen beyond it. So to her Paula's story, little as there was of it, was a perfect romance, and it gained in colour when she related it to her senior.

Sister Beata hesitated a little, having rather more knowledge of the world, remembering that Vera Prescott was not eighteen years old, and doubting whether an underhand intimacy ought to be encouraged; but then Mr. Flight had spoken of Mr. Delrio as a highly praiseworthy young man, of decided Catholic principles; he was regular at Church services, and had dined or supped at the Vicarage. The intercourse, as the girls had explained, had been sanctioned by Mrs. Best in their native town, where all parties were well known, and thus there could be no harm in letting it continue. While as to the elder Miss Prescott, she was understood to be unduly bent on county and titled society, and to be exclusive towards inferiors. Moreover, she was an attendant at St. Andrew's Church, and thus regarded as out of the pale of sympathy of the St. Kenelm's flock.

So no obstacle was put in the way of the gossips, for they were really nothing more, except that there was admiration of the designs for the side chapel, which were of the Scripture children on one side, and on the other of child martyrs. Now and then there was a reference to the chilliness and hardship of living with an unsympathising sister, and being obliged to go to churches of which they did not approve. Sometimes too there were airy castles of a distant future to be shared by the magnificent architect, together with Vera, while Paula nursed in the convent with Mother Beata and Sister Philomena.

But all this did not prevent an excitement and eager laughter and chatter whenever Wilfred Merrifield came in the way, and he certainly was enough attracted by Vera's pretty face and lively graces to make his sisters think him very absurd; but his mother had seen so many passing fancies among her elder sons as to hold that blindness was better than serious treatment.

There was the further effect that Magdalen had no suspicion that the vehement attraction to St. Kenelm's went beyond the harmless quarter of the two nursing Sisters and some hero worship of Mr. Flight. Miss Mohun, who knew everything, had indeed hinted that something foolish might be going on there; but Magdalen had not decided on the mutual fairness of the two congregations, and deferred investigation till Agatha should come home, when she would have a reasonable, if cold, person to deal with. Nor did Thekla's chatter excite any suspicion; for the only time when she had been present at a meeting with Mr. Delrio, she had been half bribed, half threatened into silence, and she was quite schoolgirl enough to feel that such was the natural treatment of authority, though she had become really fond of "sister."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.