

Marsh Richard

# Confessions of a Young Lady: Her Doings and Misdoings



Richard Marsh

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# Marsh Richard

## Confessions of a Young Lady: Her Doings and Misdoings

### I A WONDERFUL GIRL

As a small girl I must have been a curiosity. At least I hope so. Because if I was only an average child what a time parents, and guardians, and schoolmistresses, and those sort of persons, must have of it. To this hour I am a creature of impulse. But then-! I did a thing; started to regret it when it was about half done; and if I ever thought at all about the advisability of doing it, it was certainly only when everything was over.

Take the case of my very fleeting association with Bradford's Royal Theatre.

So far as I can fix it, at the time I must have been about twelve. A small, elf-like creature, with eyes which were ever so much too big for my face, and a mass of unruly, very dark brown, hair. Some people have told me that then it was black. But I doubt it. For there are those who tell me that it is black now, which I have the very best of reasons for knowing it is not. At that school they called me The Witch; in allusion, I believe, not only to my personal appearance but also to my uncanny goings-on.

The school was in a Sussex village. To that village there used to come each year a travelling theatre. It took the form of a good-sized oblong tent, which was erected in a field which was attached to the Half Moon Hotel. I imagine that the whole countryside must have patronised Bradford's Royal Theatre, because sometimes it would stay there for two months at a time. It put in its first appearance, so far as I was concerned, during my second term at Miss Pritchard's school. We girls were not supposed to know anything about it. But well do I remember the awe with which I used to gaze at the exceedingly dingy canvas structure as we passed it in our walks. And once when Nelly Haynes, with whom I was walking, pointing to an individual who was lounging in his shirt sleeves at the entrance to the field, observed that that was one of the principal actors-though what she knew about it I have not the faintest notion-I could not have stared at him with greater curiosity had he been the Slave of Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp.

Even yet, when I am in the mood, I read everything in the way of print that I can lay my hand on. In that respect, also, I fear that the girl was mother to the woman. I had recently come across an article in a magazine treating of infant phenomena; I am not quite sure if the plural ought to be written with an *a* or an *s* when using the word in that particular sense; but, any way, I will leave it. How I had lighted on the magazine I cannot remember. But I rather fancy that it must have been the property of one of the governesses, who had left it lying about, and that I borrowed it without going through the form of asking leave. I know that I took it to a corner of the orchard of which we had the freedom when there was no fruit upon the trees, and that I devoured that article. It was all about precocious children. Recording how Mozart had composed masses-whatever they were! – at the age of two, or less, and how some little girl had won fame as a dancer at the age of three, or perhaps a trifle more. But in particular it told of the Infant Roscius. The story of that Wonderful Boy-he was throughout alluded to as The Wonderful Boy-set my brain in a whirl. I do not think that I have read much-if anything-about William Henry West Betty since; but I do believe that I recollect nearly all that I read then. He took London by storm when he was twelve years old; my age! the tale of my own years nearly to a tick! As Selim in *Barbarossa*-when one thinks of it, it must have been a wonderful

part in a truly wonderful play for that Wonderful Boy! – the whole world of wit, and wealth, and fashion was at his feet. In the course of a single season he gained over seventeen thousand pounds.

Those are facts and figures for you. Especially were they facts and figures for me then. By the time I had reached the end of that article my mind was firmly resolved upon one point—that I would be an Infant Phenomenon. There should be a Wonderful Girl as well as a Wonderful Boy. It seemed clear to me that girls, of the proper type, might be made quite as attractive as boys. The mystery was that there should not have been a Wonderful Girl already. But the want should be immediately supplied.

Of course, one or two difficulties were in the way. I had never acted myself, or seen anybody else act, and knew as much about plays as about Mars. And then Betty was encouraged; while I had an inward conviction that that would not be the case with me. Under these circumstances I did not quite see, at the moment, how I was to play the principal part at Covent Garden, nor even begin to charm the world—as young Betty had done—at a theatre in Ireland. But not for one moment did I allow myself to be daunted by considerations of that kind.

I think it was the very next day—my enthusiasm lasted all through the night, which was not always the case, for I have gone to sleep intending to marry a missionary and woke up bent on being a queen of the cannibals—that Fate threw in my way the very opportunity I wanted—at Bradford's Royal Theatre.

I imagine that it must have been pretty bad weather about that time. When it was not raining it was blowing; and when, as the Irishman said, it was doing neither, it was doing both. Climatic conditions unfavourably affected the attendance at Bradford's Royal Theatre. I know such was the case because I heard the governesses saying so. It all comes back to me. It was after morning lessons; I was in the schoolroom writing to someone at home—in those days I was a tremendous correspondent—and some of the governesses were talking together close to where I sat. They paid no attention to the pair of large ears attached to the small person close at hand. The theme of their conversation was Bradford's Royal Theatre, and they were expressing their fears that things had lately gone very badly with the company thereof. Two remarks stick in my memory: – that on one occasion there had only been one and ninepence taken at the door; and that at the close of a recent week there had been less than two pounds to divide among seven people. What warrant they had for their statements I cannot say. But I know that they made a vivid impression on me at the time. And when they spoke of certain individuals being in actual want, it was all I could do to refrain from showing more interest in the topic under discussion than, under the circumstances, would have been discreet.

Because, as I listened, it burst in upon me in one of those sudden flashes of illumination to which I was singularly liable that here was the very opening I wanted. Here was a chance to figure, in a double sense, as a Wonderful Girl.

On the one hand I would dower these unfortunate people with the wealth of which they stood so much in need; on the other, I would take the world by storm. At Bradford's Royal Theatre, in the guise of a benevolent fairy, I would commence that career compared to which that of the Infant Roscius would be as nothing.

I did not stop to consider—it was not my custom. Stealing from the schoolroom, taking my hat from its peg, crossing the playground, paying no attention to the girls who spoke to me, through the gate out into the road, I marched right straight away to Bradford's Royal Theatre.

When I think of it I hardly know whether to laugh or cry. The eager little creature that I was, with my heart swelling in my bosom, my head full of unutterable things, striding along the country road, now breaking into a run, now compelled to relax my speed for want of breath. It must have been nearly one o'clock, our dinner-time at school. I remember that I had twopence in my pocket. I fancy that at Miss Pritchard's—my first boarding-school—my allowance was threepence a week; and as that was paid on Saturday, and I still had twopence left, it is probable that I adventured in the regions of infant phenomena upon a Monday. My way lay past a solitary shop. I got hungry as I walked—in those days I did get hungry—the presence of that shop brought the fact vividly home to me. I paused to see what might be bought. My instinct pointed to sweets. Just as I was about to follow my instinct

I perceived, on a dish in the corner of the window, a German sausage-or rather, a portion of one. I thought of the hungry folk at Bradford's Royal Theatre. My mind was made up on the instant. Into the shop I went and asked for two pennyworths of German sausage. Whoever it was that served me must have stared, for I can hardly have looked like an individual who might be expected to make a purchase of the kind. But, anyhow, I got what I desired, and with it in my hand, wrapped in a piece of newspaper, I pursued my way.

I would not only present these unfortunates with the first-fruits of my great gifts, I would furnish them with food as well.

Whether, while I was being served with that German sausage, I had time to begin to reflect, I cannot say, but I have a clear recollection that, after quitting that emporium of commerce, my steps were not marked by that enthusiasm which had originally sent me speeding like an arrow from a bow. Probably the whole distance was not more than three-quarters of a mile, and of that less than two hundred yards remained. But that two hundred yards took me longer than all the rest had done.

I was beginning-positively-to be afraid. When I reached a point at which the histrionic temple was only on the other side of the road I stood still. I was conscious of considerable reluctance to cross from the side on which I was to the side on which it was. For one thing, I was appalled by the peculiar dreariness of its appearance. I could not fancy the Infant Roscius commencing his career in that. The tent itself did look so shabby; the living waggons, which stood disconsolately together in the mud, were so much in want of painting; about the whole there was such an atmosphere of meanness, such a wealth of mire, that my heart began to sink. A small girl ran from the tent to a waggon, and from the waggon back to the tent. She struck me as being the dirtiest and most disreputable-looking creature I had ever seen. I called to her, meaning to give her that twopennyworth of German sausage and then retire, postponing the opening of my career until a future time. But either I did not call loud enough or she was in too much haste to heed. She disappeared without a glance in my direction.

The moment she was gone sudden consciousness of the shameful thing that I would do swept over me. I had come to help those poor people, and just because they evidently were so much in want of help I proposed to leave them to their fate. Was I attempting to quiet my conscience by pretending that it would be enough to present them with two pennyworths of German sausage? What-my thoughts flying back to what the governess had said-was two pennyworths of German sausage among seven? Why, I could eat it all myself-and more! Over the road I tore, clattered along the boards which formed a causeway through the thick, upstanding filth; in a flash was through the entrance and in the theatre.

Then I paused. Without, the day was dull. Inside, to my unaccustomed eyes, all at first was darkness. I have not forgotten the anguish with which I began to realise some of the details of my surroundings. It was all so dreadful-so different to anything I had expected. To begin with, there was the smell. As the merest dot I never could stand odours of any kind. Even now, whoever presents me with a bottle of scent makes of me an enemy. That smelt as if all the bad air was kept in and all the good kept out. Then it was so small; to me it perhaps appeared smaller than it actually was, because I thought that Miss Pritchard's pupils would have filled it. And dirty, untidy, comfortless, beyond my powers of description. There was nothing on the ground to protect one's feet from the oozing damp. If the audience sat at all I could not think. I saw nothing in the way of seats, unless they were represented by some boards which were piled upon each other at one side. At one end, raised a little from the ground, was a platform of rough planks, so small that there could hardly have been room on it for half a dozen persons standing abreast. It never occurred to me till afterwards that that was the stage. I kept wondering where the stage was. I knew that theatres had stages.

While, as they became used to the light, my keen young eyes were taking these things in, I perceived that the place had occupants. There were four men and three women. I should have put them down as the seven I had heard alluded to, had there not also been a litter of children. It was only the children who seemed to take any interest in me. They clustered round, a ragamuffin crowd, regarding me as if I were some strange beast. At last one of them exclaimed, -

"Mother, here's a little girl!"

The woman whom, I supposed, the child addressed, looked up from some potatoes which she was washing in a pail of water.

"Well, little girl, what is it you're wanting?"

The place, the people, their surroundings, everything was so altogether different to the vague something I had anticipated, that, like the creature of moods I was, I seemed, all at once, to have passed from a world of fact into a world of dream. It was like one in a dream I answered, -

"I have come to be the Infant Roscius."

Not unnaturally the lady who was washing the potatoes failed to understand.

"What's that?" she demanded.

I repeated my assertion.

"I have come to be the Infant Roscius."

Other of the grown-ups roused themselves to stare at me.

"What's she talking about?" inquired a second woman, who had a baby at her breast.

An elderly man, who was perched on the edge of the platform smoking a pipe, hazarded an explanation.

"She's after tickets; that's what it is she wants."

The potato washer seemed to be brightened by the hint.

"Has your mother sent you to buy some tickets?"

I shook my head solemnly.

"I have come to act."

"To-what?"

That my appearance, words and manner together were creating some sort of a sensation I understood. That these were ignorant people I had already-with my wonted promptitude-concluded. It seemed to me that it would be necessary to treat them as children-and dull of comprehension at that-to whom I, as a grown-up person, had to explain, in the clearest possible manner, exactly what it was that had brought me there. This I at once proceeded to do, with what I have no doubt whatever was an air of ineffable superiority.

"I am going to be a Wonderful Girl. I am nearly twelve, and Young Betty was only twelve, and he earned over seventeen thousand pounds in one season, and if I earn as much as that I will give it all to you." I paused-to reflect. "At least I would give you a great deal of it. Of course, I should like to keep some, because a Wonderful Girl mayn't go on long, and when I stop of course I should want to have a fortune to live upon, like Young Betty had. But still that wouldn't matter, because there'd be plenty for seven."

Amid my confused imaginings I had pictured the announcement of my purpose being received with wild applause. Those who heard would cast themselves at my feet, throw their arms about me, and rain tears upon my head. Not that that sort of thing would be altogether agreeable. But something of the kind would have to be put up with. When people were beside themselves with gratitude at seeing themselves snatched from the gaping jaws of feelings had to be allowed them. If, however, the persons to whom my explanation was actually addressed were beside themselves with gratitude they managed to conceal the fact with astonishing success. It struck me that they did not understand me even yet, which showed that they must be excessively dull. More stupid even than the teeny weeny tots in the first class who could not be got to see things.

The seven looked from me to each other, then back again to me. The woman with the baby repeated her former question, as if she had no sense of comprehension. I wondered if she was deaf.

"What's she talking about?"

The man who had dropped the hint about the tickets, descending from his perch upon the platform, came sauntering in my direction. As he moved he placed his hand against his forehead.

"Barmy on the crumpet," he observed.



What he meant I had not a notion. It moved a third woman, whose girth precluded any notion of her being on the verge of famine, to exclaim, -

"Poor dear!"

The potato washer began to put me through an examination.

"What's your name?"

"Molly Boyes."

"Where d'ye live?"

"West Marden."

"You ain't come all the way from West Marden here?"

"I've come from Miss Pritchard's school."

The statement seemed to fill the man with illuminating light.

"Ah, that's just what I thought! D'rectly I see her that's just what I thought. Miss Pritchard's-that's the girls' school on the Brighton road, house is inside a wall. I went there to try to get them for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. First the lady said there wasn't to be no flogging, then that she couldn't possibly bring her pupils if there wasn't any chairs for them to sit up. I told Mr Biffin what she said. And he said, well there wasn't any chairs, and there was an end of it."

The woman with the baby interposed an observation.

"We should do better if there was chairs. It isn't likely that the front seat people will want to sit on boards."

The big woman proffered a reminder.

"On the front seats there's baize."

Which the woman with the baby spurned.

"What's baize?"

The man addressed himself to me. He was a thin man, with iron-grey hair, and there was something about his face which made me think that though he was untidy, and I wished he would not wear such a very greasy cap, I might induce myself in time to like him. Never once did he remove his pipe from his mouth, nor his hands from his trouser pockets.

"Well, Miss Boyes, it's a pity you should have come to act, seeing that there's a good many of us here that does that sort of thing already. The difficulty is to get people to come and see us do it. Do you think that many of your friends would come and see you act?"

"Well, not many of my friends."

"That, again, is unfortunate."

"But strangers would."

"It's that way with you, is it? With us it's different. We look to friends for our support. Strangers are sometimes disagreeable. What plays were you thinking of acting?"

"I don't know any plays as yet. But I soon could."

"Of course. That's easy enough. *Hamlet*, I suppose, and that kind of thing. And what sort of part were you thinking of playing?"

"I really haven't thought."

"No, you wouldn't, such a trifle being of no consequence. You weren't thinking of playing old women?"

"Well, I don't think I could act old women. But I might try. Young Betty acted an old man."

"Young Betty did. Is that so? And who might young Betty be? A friend of yours? That young lady over there, her name's Betty."

He jerked his elbow towards the woman with the baby. I was shocked, although, having already taken their ignorance for granted, I was able to conceal my feelings with comparative ease.

"He was a boy."

"A boy? With a name like Betty? What was his father and mother up to then?"

"His name was William Henry West Betty. He was the Infant Roscius."

"Was he?"

"He was The Wonderful Boy. I am going to be a Wonderful Girl."

"You're that already. Seeing that you are a Wonderful Girl, what might have put it into your head to come here?"

"You are very poor, aren't you?"

"Poor? That's what you might call a leading question. We're not rich. Who told you we were poor?"

"Didn't you only take one and ninepence at the door one night?"

By this time general interest was being roused in our conversation. As soon as the words were out of my mouth I was aware that they had been heard with more attention than anything I yet had said. Though why that should be the case was beyond my capacity of perception.

"Only took one and ninepence at the door one night, did we? Oh! Looks as if someone had been talking. From whom might you have heard that piece of news?"

"And one week weren't there less than two pounds to divide among seven? You could not live on that. No one could. It's not to be done. It simply means starvation."

I merely repeated, with all the earnestness of which I was capable, what I had heard the governesses saying. My remarks were followed by what even I felt was a significant silence. My interlocutor, bringing forward with his foot what looked like an empty egg-box, placed himself upon a corner. It creaked under his weight.

"It would seem as if somebody knows almost as much about this temple of the drama as it knows about itself. And it certainly is true that, regarded as a week's earnings, two pounds isn't much between seven. So you thought-?"

"I thought I'd come and help you."

"Come and help us? By acting?"

"If I'm going to be a Wonderful Girl-and I am going to be-it's quite time I was beginning. Young Betty was at the height of his fame when he was twelve. So I thought I would commence by making a lot of money for you here, which would keep you all from starving; and then, of course, I shall go on to London and make the rest of my fortune there."

"I see. Well, this bangs Banagher. Banagher it bangs."

What he meant I could not say. But he should have been a capital actor, because not a muscle of his face moved. A man behind him laughed-stinging me as with the lash of a whip.

The big woman delivered herself of her former ejaculation.

"Poor dear!"

The potato washer remarked, -

"Strikes me, my girl, that you've a good opinion of yourself."

The grey-headed man had his eyes upon what I had in my hand.

"What might you happen to have there?"

"It's some food which I have brought for you."

"For me in particular, or for all the lot of us?"

"It's for the seven."

"The seven? I see. The seven who divided those two sovereigns."

"Yes. It's some German sausage. I hope you like German sausage."

"It's my favourite joint."

I endeavoured to correct what I imagined to be a still further display of his ignorance.

"I don't think that German sausage is a joint. It's not generally looked upon as such. It's a long, round, cold thing, off which, you know, they cut it in slices."

I passed him the parcel, he removing-for the first time-one of his hands from his pockets for the purpose of taking it, balancing it on his open palm as if on a scale. It was a pretty grimy piece of newspaper, and was not of a size to suggest extensive contents. I became more and more conscious of

its wretched smallness as, with every outward appearance of care and gravity, he slowly unwrapped it. The others gathered closer round, as if agog with curiosity. Finally there were revealed three or four attenuated slices. He held them out at arm's length in front of them.

"For seven!"

"There isn't much," I managed to murmur, oppressed, all at once, by the discovery of what a dreadful little there really was. "But I had only twopence."

"You had only twopence, so you purchased two pennyworths of German sausage-for seven."

"Of course I'll earn a deal of money for you besides."

A girl came rushing into the tent behind me. The interruption was welcome, for I instinctively felt that matters had reached a point at which a diversion of any sort was to be desired. But I was far from being prepared for the proclamation which she instantly made.

"Here's the lady come! – I've been and fetched her!"

To my blank astonishment there appeared-Miss Pritchard. That intelligent young woman, having a shrewd eye for a possible reward, had availed herself of the information which had been extracted from me to rush off to the school to proclaim my whereabouts, receiving, as I afterwards learnt, a shilling for her pains. Never before had I seen Miss Pritchard in such a state of agitation; and no wonder, considering the pace at which she must have torn along the road.

"Molly! – Molly Boyes, what is the meaning of this?"

The sight of her had driven me speechless. I could not have told her for everything the world contained. My interlocutory friend explained instead-in a fashion of his own.

"It's all right, madam-everything's quite right! Having heard that things were in a bad way with us in this temple of the drama this young lady has brought us two pennyworths of German sausage to save us from actual starvation, and has expressed her intention-I don't quite follow that part, but so far as I can make out she's proposing to make our fortunes by beginning to be a Wonderful Girl; which it isn't necessary for her to begin to be, seeing as how I should say that she's been a Wonderful Girl ever since the moment she was born."

Of what immediately followed I have but a dim appreciation. I know that, on the instant, I was turned into a common butt-or I felt as if I was. The children pointed their fingers at me and jeered. The grown-ups were all talking at once. There was general confusion. The whole rickety tent was filled with a tumult of scorn and laughter.

Presently I was being escorted by Miss Pritchard back to school, the children standing in the middle of the road to point after me as I went. I was in an agony of shame. With that keenness of vision with which I have been dowered I perceived, as I was wont to do, too late, what an idiot I had been! What a simpleton! What a conceited, presumptuous, ignorant little wretch! How I had made of myself a mock and a show for the amusement of the company of Bradford's Royal Theatre! I felt as if the hideous fact was written on my face-on every line of me. All I wanted was to hide, to bury myself somewhere where none might witness my distress. Although my worthy schoolmistress was walking faster than I ever saw her walk before or afterwards, I kept tugging at her hand-she was not going fast enough for me.

So soon as we reached the school she took me into her little private sitting-room, and, without removing her hat, or giving me time to take off mine, required from me an immediate explanation of my conduct. Amid my blinding sobs I gave her as full and complete an explanation as she could possibly have desired. The bump of frankness was-and is-marked on my phrenological chart as developed to an even ridiculous extent. When I have been indulging in one of my usual escapades nothing contents me but an unrestrained declaration of all the motives which impelled me to do the thing or things which I ought to have left undone.

I told her about the article in the magazine, and about what I had heard of the pitiful state of things at Bradford's Royal Theatre, and my determination to assist them while starting on my meteoric career. And before I had gone very far, instead of scolding, she had her arm about me, and

was endeavouring to soothe my sobs. She must have been a very sensitive person for a schoolmistress-though I do not know why I should say that, because I have not the least idea why schoolmistresses should not be as sensitive as anybody else, since they are human-for when I began to tell her of how I had expended my capital on the purchase of what that grey-headed man had called his "favourite joint," she drew me quite close to her, and in the midst of my own anguish I actually felt the tears upon her cheeks. She took me on her knee, and instead of sending me to bed, or into the corner, or punishing me in any way whatever, she kissed and comforted me as if I had not been the most ridiculous child in the world. It might not have been the sort of treatment I deserved, but I loved her for it ever afterwards.

What was more, she promised not to betray me to the governesses, or to my schoolfellows, or to anyone. Though I think that she wrote and told my mother, though mother never breathed a hint of her having done anything of the sort to me. But I always thought so. It was weeks and weeks before I could bear the slightest allusion to anything "wonderful" without becoming conscious of an internal quiver. I fancy Miss Pritchard must have given instructions as to the direction our walks were to take. It was some little time before the governess led us past the site of Bradford's Royal Theatre. When next we went that way every vestige of the "temple of the drama" had disappeared. The dingy-and odious-tent had gone.

It was with a positive gasp of satisfaction that I recognised the fact. A weight seemed lifted off my bosom, and my heart grew lighter there and then. When, the walk being over, we returned, before anyone could stop me, or had an inkling of my intention, I dashed headlong into Miss Pritchard's private room. She was seated at the table writing.

"It's gone!" I cried.

She must have been very quick of understanding. She did not ask me what had gone. She just put her arm about me, as she had done before, and pushed my hair from off my brow, and, I think, she laughed.

## II

### CUPID'S MESSENGER

I do protest that it was not altogether my fault. At least-; but if I tell you exactly how it was you will understand what I mean.

I was fifteen. It was after I had left Miss Pritchard's. Not that I was much wiser than I was when I was at Miss Pritchard's. Though that was not my opinion at the time. In what I then called my judgment I was the wisest person the world had ever seen-perhaps it would be more correct to write that that was my estimate of myself as a rule. There were between-whiles when I knew better. I was at Mrs Sawyer's-Lingfield House School-at Brighton to be finished. And a nice finish they made of me.

It was the summer term and I was romantic, I had my phases. One term I was cynical; another philosophical; a third filled with a wild despair. That one I was all for sentiment. I had been reading all manner of stuff, prose and poetry; I had even written some poems myself. As I burned them years and years ago I do not mind owning it. I was convinced that there was nothing in the world worth living for except love. Given Love-it ought to have a capital L; in my poems it always had-you had everything a reasonable being could desire. Lacking it, wealth, fame, clothes, and even chocolate creams, were as dust and ashes.

There was, that term, a governess who must have been almost as great a goose I was. I am not sure that she was quite so right in the head as she might have been. She only stayed that term. Why Mrs Sawyer ever had her is more than I can say. Her name was Frazer-Mamie Frazer. Her autograph-suggestive of a fly slipping over the paper after a visit to the inkstand-stares at me out of my birthday book at this moment. She was the most speechless person I ever encountered. So to speak, you might carry on a conversation with her for hours and she would never say a word. As a listener she was immense. By degrees her attitude so got upon your nerves that I, for one, would feel like murder.

"Say something!" I would beseech of her. "Do please say something! Don't you know that I have been talking myself hoarse and you haven't uttered a single word."

She would only sigh. To a person who was fond of conversational give-and-take it was trying.

And the name of the girl who shared my bedroom was Travers-Hester-generally known as Hetty-Travers. She was, well, she is one of my dearest friends at this hour, and she may see this, so I don't want to say anything to hurt her feelings, but she certainly was a mischievous imp. Mischief brimmed out of her finger-tips. And the point was that she had such an excessively demure air that you never had the faintest notion that she was that kind of person till the truth was forced upon you. Even then you gave her the benefit of the doubt; or you tried to-at least I did-until it was obviously absurd to attempt to do so any longer since there was no doubt. Reverence! she did not know what it was. She had not a mite of respect for me, though I was a good three months her senior. She used to make fun of all the varying things I held most sacred-that is, while the mood was on me.

That inveterate habit of hers ought to have made me suspect her. But I was ever a Una for innocence. She was always taking me in. She had an insidious way about her which would take in anybody.

One night we were going to bed. I had one stocking off, and was wondering how the holes did get into the toes; I used to bribe other girls to do my darning. It cost me frightful sums. We were talking about other people's peculiarities, as was our agreeable custom.

"You know Miss Frazer told me to walk with her when she took us out to-night. I kept talking to her all the time, and yet the whole way there and back she never spoke a word. I believe she's going mad."

"I shouldn't wonder."

Hetty was doing her hair. I was wishing she would make haste, because she was using the only glass we had, and it seemed to me that she never would have done with it. What discussions we had about that looking-glass! We took it in turns to use it first, and whoever had first turn used to hang on to it as if it was the Koh-i-noor. Something struck me in her tone.

"Why shouldn't you wonder?"

"I shouldn't." This was cryptic. But I was aware that it was advisable to give her a little rope. So I held my peace and found another hole. And presently she added, "When a woman's heart is breaking she sometimes does go mad."

"Hetty!"

I had been giving utterance to my sentiments on the subject of the importance which love plays in human lives; I think I got them from Byron. Hetty had been scoffing. I suspected her of paraphrasing my words with mischievous intention. But it seemed that she was actually in earnest.

"You talk about love wrecking people's lives, as if you know anything at all about it; I saw that paper-covered Byron in your workbox-and you can't see what's taking place underneath your very eyes."

"Hetty, what do you mean?"

"Poor Miss Frazer!"

She sighed, actually. Or she emitted a sound which appeared to me to be a sigh. A light dawned on me.

"You don't mean-you don't mean that you think that she's in love?"

Miss Frazer was short, square, and squat. Sandy-haired, with not much of that. Short-sighted, her spectacles would not keep straight owing to the absence of a bridge on her abbreviated nose. Freckled, you might have been able to stick a pin between some of the freckles, but I doubt it. To me, then, she seemed ancient; but I suppose she was about forty. And, considering her general appearance and style of figure, she had a most unfortunate fondness for Scotch plaids. Up to that moment my sentimentalism had been all theory. I had not associated the tender passion with Miss Frazer. It was left for Hetty to direct my theoretical sympathy into a practical channel.

"Do I think? No, I do not think."

"Do you know that she's in love?"

"I know nothing. I want to know nothing. I will know nothing. But with you, who are always talking, it is different."

"Hetty, if you don't tell me what you mean, I-I-I'll throw my shoe at you."

"Throw away. You never hit anything you aimed at yet." She went on calmly brushing her hair, as if she had not made me all over pins and needles. Presently she gave utterance to an observation which was Sphinx-like in its mystery: "A Frenchman thinks no more of breaking an Englishwoman's heart than of eating his breakfast."

"Hetty! what do you mean?"

"Ask Monsieur Doumer."

Monsieur Doumer! Ask Monsieur Doumer! Why, M. Doumer was our French master, as unromantic-looking an example of the one sex as Miss Frazer was of the other. He was immensely stout, perfectly bald-headed, with cheeks and skin which looked as if they were covered with iron-mould, because he never shaved them. That anything feminine could regard with equanimity the prospect of being brought within measurable distance of that scrubby countenance did seem incredible. And yet here was Hetty hinting.

"Do you mean to say that Miss Frazer's in love with M. Doumer?"

"You say yourself that she seems to be going mad."

"Yes; but I don't quite see what that has to do with it."

"Not when a woman's being trampled on?"

"Trampled on? Really, Hetty, I do wish you would say straight out what it is you're driving at. You can't be suggesting that M. Doumer has been literally trampling on Miss Frazer, because, since he weighs about two tons, she'd have been killed upon the spot."

"There are more ways of killing a pig than one."

"You are mysterious. I daresay you think it's clever, but I think it's stupid."

"Are there not more ways of killing a pig than one?"

"I daresay there may be; but I don't see what that has to do with Miss Frazer."

"I don't say that it has anything to do with Miss Frazer. But, as I began by observing, when you consider how every Frenchman considers himself entitled to treat an Englishwoman exactly as he pleases, and perceive where Miss Frazer is plainly drifting, I should have thought you would have been able to see something for yourself." She seemed to me to be more mysterious than ever. "Perhaps," she added, as if by an afterthought, "if someone were to take him to task, and give him to understand that an Englishwoman is not a football for anyone to kick about, matters might be brought to wear a different aspect. But no doubt, as she is alone and unprotected, he knows that there is nothing of that kind to be feared. Because, of course, no one is going to play Don Quixote for a freckled Scotchwoman."

"I don't see why not. I should have thought that the fact of her being alone and-and not good-looking-would have made anyone with a grain of chivalry in them stand up for her all the more on that account."

"It looks like it! When you yourself just said that she is going mad because of the way she has been treated."

I had not said that or anything of the kind. I was trying to think of what I had said when the door opened and Miss Frazer herself came in. She had her watch in her hand, at which she was pointing an accusatory finger. I do not know what time it was-she did not give us a chance to see-but I expect it was later than we had supposed, because, taking the candle off the dressing-table, she marched straight out of the room with it without a word, and left us in total darkness.

"Well," I exclaimed, "this is pleasant. I'm not undressed, you've had the looking-glass all the time, and I haven't done a single thing to my hair, and I never can do anything to it in the dark."

"When a woman is in the state of mind in which she is, those who have to do with her have to put up with her. Don't blame her. Don't even think hard things of her. Try sometimes to practise, what you preach."

What Hetty Travers meant I again had not the faintest notion. She certainly had no right to hint such things of me. It seemed impossible that the mere contemplation of Miss Frazer's doleful plight could have moved her to tears; but while I fumbled with my hair in my indignant efforts to do it up in one decent plait in the darkness she did make some extraordinary noises, which might have been stifled sobs.

The following morning, during recreation, when I went into the schoolroom to get a book which I had left, I found Miss Frazer crouching over her desk, not only what I should call crying, but positively bellowing into her pocket-handkerchief. I stared at her in astonishment.

"Miss Frazer! What is the matter?" She bellowed on. A thought occurred to me. "Has-has anyone been treating you badly?"

Since she was so taciturn when calm, I expected her to be dumb when torn by her emotions. But I was mistaken. Taking her handkerchief from before her streaming eyes-her spectacles lay on the top of the desk, and I noticed how comical she looked without them-she spluttered out, -

"I'm the worst treated woman in the whole world!"

"Someone has been making you unhappy?"

"Cruelly, wickedly unhappy!"

"But have you no one to whom you can go for advice and assistance?"

"Not a single creature! Not a living soul! I am helpless! It is because I am helpless that I am trampled on."

Trampled on? I recalled Hetty's words. So she had been trampled on. Was being trampled on at that very moment. My blood, as usual, began to boil. Here was still another forlorn woman who had fallen a helpless victim to what Lord Byron called the "divine fever." And so a Frenchman did think that he could kick an Englishwoman about as if she were a football! I jumped at my conclusions with an ease and a rapidity which set all my pulses glowing.

"Do you think that it would make any difference if anyone spoke for you?"

"It must make a difference; it must! It is impossible that it should not make a difference! But who is there who would speak for me? Not one being on the earth!"

Was there not? There she was mistaken, as she should see. But I did not tell her so. Indeed, she must have thought me also lacking in that rare human sympathy, the absence of which she mourned in others, because I hurried out of the schoolroom without another word. To be entirely frank, I was more than half afraid. Unattractive enough in her normal condition, she was absolutely repulsive in her woe. Had I dared I would have advised her, strongly, never under any circumstances to cry. But had I done so I might have wounded her sensitive nature still more deeply. She might have started boohooing with still greater vehemence. Then what would she have looked like? And what would have happened to me?

Mrs Sawyer had instructed me to go into town to get a particular kind of drawing block for the drawing class which was to take place that afternoon. I knew where M. Doumer lived. When a newcomer appeared in his class it was his custom to present her-with an original article in bows which we irreverently described as the "Doumer twiddle" – with his card, in the corner of which was printed his address, so that the place of his habitation was known to all of us. It was close to the shop where they sold the drawing blocks. In returning one needed to go scarcely out of one's way at all to pass his house. I made it my business to pass his house. And when I reached it I marched straight up to the door, and I knocked.

The door was opened by a nondescript-looking person whom I took for the landlady. There was a card in the window-"Apartments To Let" – so I immediately concluded that M. Doumer lived in lodgings and that this was the person who kept them. She was a small, thin, hungry, acidulated female, who struck me as being an old maid of the most pronounced type. I have a fatal facility for drawing instant definite deductions from altogether insufficient premises which will one of these days land me goodness alone knows where.

"I wish to see M. Doumer."

She led me into the room on the left, in the window of which appeared the legend about apartments.

"M. Doumer is out. Is it anything which I can say to him?"

It struck me, even in the midst of the boiling-over state of mind in which I was, that she might have informed me that the man was out before taking me into the house. But I was in much too explosive a condition to allow a trifle of that sort to deter me from letting off some of my steam.

"Will you please ask him what he means by the way in which he has behaved to Miss Frazer?"

To judge from the way in which she looked at me I might have said something extraordinary. She had rather nut-cracker jaws, and all at once her mouth went in such a way that one felt sure there must have been a click. And she did look at me.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I don't understand either. That's why I want M. Doumer to explain. He has been trampling on Miss Frazer, and broken her heart, so that she's crying her eyes out."

The landlady person had not quite closed the door when showing me into the room, but had remained standing with her back to it, holding the handle in her hand. Now she turned right round,



carefully shut it fast, and moved two or three steps towards me. There was something in her behaviour which, in a person in her position, I thought odd.

"Who are you?"

She asked the question in an exceedingly inquisitorial sort of way. I held up my chin as high as I could in the air.

"I am Molly Boyes."

"Molly Boyes?" She seemed to be searching in her mind for something with which to associate the name. "I don't remember to have heard of you."

"Perhaps not. I shouldn't think it likely that you had. I don't suppose that M. Doumer talks to everyone about all of his pupils."

"Are you one of his pupils?"

"I am. I am at Lingfield House School, and I have been in his French class for now going on for four terms."

"And who's Miss- What's-her-name? Is she another of the pupils?"

"Miss Frazer is one of our governesses; and if he thinks that because she is an Englishwoman he can use her as if she were a football he's mistaken."

"Use her as if she were a football? What do you mean? What's he been doing to her?"

"He's broken her heart, that's what he's been doing to her. And when I came away just now she was crying so that if someone doesn't stop her soon I know she'll do herself an injury."

The landlady person made a noise with her nose which I should describe as a sniff. She straightened herself up as if she were trying to add another three or four inches to her stature, which would not have made her very tall even if she had succeeded.

"I thought as much. I have suspected it for months. But I am not one to speak unless I know. The man's a regular Bluebeard."

"A regular Bluebeard! – M. Doumer!"

"A complete Don Juan. I have long been convinced of it. He fascinates every woman he comes across. But he doesn't care."

The idea of calling that barrel-shaped monster, with his shining yellow head and scrubbing-brush physiognomy, a "complete Don Juan" so filled me with astonishment that for a second or two I could only look my feelings.

"M. Doumer is not like my idea of Don Juan in the very least."

"Indeed! And pray what do you know about Don Juan? A chit of your age! At my time of life I suppose I may be allowed to know something of what I'm talking about, and I tell you that I'm persuaded that he breaks hearts like walnuts."

"But-he's so ugly!"

"Ugly! Maximilian Doumer ugly! Misguided girl! But it's not becoming that I should discuss such subjects with a mere child like you. I know what I know. But it is none the less my duty on that account to see that he trifles with no woman's affections. And as his wife my duty shall be done."

When she said that I do believe the blood nearly froze in my veins. I am sure it turned cold, because I know I shivered from head to foot. His wife? She said his wife. And all the time I had been taking her for his landlady and an old maid, and had been calling M. Doumer ugly, and accusing him to her face of breaking Miss Frazer's heart. I do not know why, but I had never imagined for a single moment that he could be anything but a bachelor. We girls at Mrs Sawyer's had always taken it for granted that he was. At least, the general impression on my mind was that we had. The horror of the situation deprived me of the use of the tiny scrap of sense which I possessed. My own impulse was to run for it. But it was far from being Madame Doumer's intention that I should do anything of the kind. And though I think that she was in every respect smaller than I was, I am convinced that I never encountered a person of whom I all at once felt so much afraid. I stammered out something.

"I-I'm afraid I must go."

I made a faltering movement towards the door. She simply placed herself in my way and crushed me.

"You must what?"

"I-I shall be late for dinner."

"Then you will be late for dinner. You will not quit this apartment until M. Doumer returns. Not that that will necessitate your being detained long, because here he is."

I had been desirous of seeing M. Doumer, even anxious. In order to do so I had gone a good deal out of my way, and behaved in a characteristically considerate manner. But so far as I could judge, amid the rush of very curious sensations with which I was struggling, on a sudden, the entire situation had changed. It was far from being my wish to have an interview with him at that particular moment. Quite the contrary. I really do not know what I would not have given—certainly all the remainder of that term's pocket-money! — to have escaped such an encounter. Picture, therefore, my sensations when I heard the garden gate slam, the front door open, a heavy footstep enter the hall, and, on Madame Doumer opening the sitting-room door, perceived her husband standing without.

"Here is someone who wants to see you."

The lady's tone was sour as sour could be, and what she said was perfectly untrue. I could have wanted nothing less. I should have been only too glad to have been able to disappear up the chimney on a broomstick, or on nothing at all, if I could only have got out of that room. In came M. Doumer, all smiles and smirks, looking to me more shiny-headed and scrubbing-brush faced than ever.

"Ah! — it is Miss Boyes! — Sarah" — he addressed his wife as Sarah, and she looked it—"this is one of my charming pupils at Lingfield House School."

"So she's not an impostor. That's something." The insinuation made my cheeks flame. "You appear to have a number of charming pupils, M. Doumer. Is Miss Frazer one of them?"

"Miss Frazer? Who is Miss Frazer?" He turned to me. "Is that the young lady who joined the class a week or two ago? I have forgotten her name."

I was tongue-tied. A conviction was stealing over me that the whole thing was a hideous mistake, that I had been making a spectacle of myself on an unusually handsome scale. The tone in which he put his question was sincerity itself. It was impossible to suspect him of an intention to deceive. At least I should have thought so, though it pleased his wife, apparently, to think otherwise.

"It is odd that you should have forgotten the name of the woman whose heart you have broken."

"Whose heart I have broken?"

"Though perhaps that is because it has become such a frequent custom of yours to trample your victims under foot that one more or less is hardly worth your noticing."

"My dear, I do not understand."

He evidently did not. He looked from one to the other of us as if struck by a sudden foreboding that there was trouble in the air. Such a comical-looking distress came over his peculiar physiognomy that I positively began to feel sorry for him.

"Still, considering that a short time ago she was crying to such a degree that it was feared that she might do herself an injury—all because of you! — it does seem strange that you cannot even remember her name."

He held out his hands in front of him in the funny way we knew so well.

"My dear, of what are you talking? I wish that you would explain."

"It seems that that is what she wants you to do. She has sent this insignificant child to demand an explanation."

He turned to me.

"She has sent you? Who has sent you? Miss Frazer? — who is Miss Frazer?"

"She's one of the governesses."

"One of the governesses? — which of the governesses?"

"So there are several. It is to be hoped that you haven't broken the hearts of the entire staff. It is plain that you know them all."

"My dear, I have to meet these ladies in the performance of my duties."

I thrust in my oar.

"M. Doumer, I've made a mistake, I know I've made a mistake-I'm sure of it. I've been very silly. Madame Doumer, I'm quite sure I've made a mistake; please do let me go."

"So that's the tone you take on now. It was a different one at first. I can see as far through a brick wall as most people, and I rather fancy that there may be a brick wall here. Perhaps you expected to see M. Doumer alone."

"I did; I thought he was a bachelor."

"Oh-h! – now I begin to see. You thought he was a bachelor. I suppose, M. Doumer, that that is because you have always behaved as a bachelor. In your profession it is so easy. And with your natural advantages, so much more agreeable."

"I tell you, Madame Doumer, it's a mistake. It's all my fault. I have been silly. I am so sorry, I beg your pardon and M. Doumer's too. Please forgive me! – and let me go!"

"Oh, you shall go. And I'm as sure as you are that there's a mistake-somewhere. Exactly where I intend to ascertain. So M. Doumer and I will go with you. I will request to be introduced to this Miss Frazer, and M. Doumer shall make the explanation you require before her face. Then we shall know precisely where the mistake has lain."

The prospect of such a climax to my adventure as her words suggested appalled me into something approaching a fury. I made a little rush at her.

"You sha'n't keep me! – I will go!"

She looked me straight in the face. Then she moved towards me. As she advanced I retreated. I found the little woman very terrible. M. Doumer tried his hand at expostulation.

"My dear, you do not know what you talk about. If you do not take care you will do mischief-great mischief I do not know what silly tale Miss Boyes has been telling you, but there is not a word of truth in it, whatever it is." He seemed to have a way of taking certain things for granted which was nice for me! "You must not listen to the talk of silly girls-never! never!"

He waved his hand as if he were dismissing the matter finally as being unworthy anyone's consideration. His wife, however, regarded neither his words nor his gestures. She spoke to him as if it were hers to command and his to obey.

"Go upstairs and get my hat, my coat, my gloves and my umbrella; and be quick about it. I have no intention of quitting this apartment until this young person quits it with me. Nor do I propose to leave you two together to arrange an explanation of the mistake between you and to hatch plots behind my back. Did you hear what I told you to get me?"

He did hear; and he obeyed. Some faint attempt at remonstrance he ventured on. But he might as well have spoken to a wooden image. Though it certainly is true that a figure of that description would not have been quite so dictatorial. She opened the door, she pointed through it with her fingers. Shrugging his shoulders, with an air of piteous resignation he went in the direction in which the finger pointed. During his absence not a word was spoken, his wife contenting herself with looking me up and down in a way I never was looked at either before or since. I felt as if I were momentarily dwindling in size. She called out to him.

"How long are you going to be up there?"

"Coming, my dear, coming!"

And he came.

A delightful walk we had, three abreast. The lady was in the centre, her husband on the left, I on the right. She treated us as if we were prisoners. I am sure I felt like one. Every now and then M. Doumer endeavoured to induce his wife to listen to a word or two of what he considered reason. She snapped him into silence. In vain he tried to make her realise the indignity of the situation into

which she was thrusting both of us. Not a syllable would she have of it. Forced into speechlessness, he hinted at what was taking place within him by a variety of odd little gestures which, had I not been so conscious of my own ignominy, would have made me laugh outright in the street.

We reached Lingfield House. Madame made Monsieur knock at the door. But when it was opened it was she who inquired if Mrs Sawyer was in. It is my impression that he would have turned tail even at the last moment had she not insisted on his entering first, with me next, while she herself brought up the rear. We were shown into a sitting-room, where presently Mrs Sawyer appeared. M. Doumer, who had been fidgeting about like a cat on hot bricks, at once burst into speech.

"Mrs Sawyer, will you permit me to explain to you that I do not know-"

His wife cut short his flow of eloquence.

"M. Doumer, I will say all that is necessary. I am Madame Doumer, the wife of M. Doumer." Mrs Sawyer bowed. "Have you a person here of the name of Frazer?"

"Miss Frazer? Certainly, she is one of my governesses." Mrs Sawyer turned to me. "Molly, we have begun dinner without you. Where have you been?"

I essayed to explain, though I do not know what sort of explanation I should have offered. But Madame Doumer was acting as explainer-in-chief.

"She has been to visit M. Doumer. It is on that account that I am here; very much on that account. May I ask you to request Miss Frazer to favour us with her company? It is indispensable that what has to be said should be said in Miss Frazer's presence."

"I don't understand," began Mrs Sawyer.

She did look puzzled. And no wonder. M. Doumer interrupted.

"My dear, once more I beg of you to permit me to say-"

But his wife would not.

"Silence, sir! If you will be so good as to request Miss Frazer to come into this room I will endeavour to make myself as plain as the extremely peculiar circumstances will permit."

The end of it was that Miss Frazer was requested to come, and she came. She evidently had not a notion why she had been sent for. She gazed at us like a startled sheep. Mrs Sawyer introduced her.

"This is Miss Frazer. Miss Frazer, this is Madame Doumer. It appears that she has something which she wishes to say to you."

Miss Frazer looked more sheep-like than before; Madame Doumer could not have regarded her as a dangerous rival. But her manner could not have been more acid if Miss Frazer had been a queen of beauty.

"It is not my intention to give offence, therefore I trust that no offence will be taken. But it is my duty, as a woman, to invite you to state, publicly, what grounds you have for the assertion that M. Doumer has broken your heart."

"Broken my heart!"

Instantly Miss Frazer was all of a flutter, which was not surprising.

"And, also, why you charge him with trampling on you."

"Trampling on me? Why, I have never spoken to M. Doumer!"

M. Doumer was promptly in the breach.

"There, my dear-you hear! What did I say to you? What did I say? I have never spoken to this lady in my life-nor she to me! So far as I recollect I have not had the pleasure of seeing her before."

"Then what do you mean?" This question was addressed to me. I was beginning to ask myself what I could have meant. Oh, my feelings! "What do you mean by coming and telling me that this person was crying as if she would do herself an injury because of the way in which she had been treated by M. Doumer? And by saying that she had sent you to demand from him an explanation?"

"I did not say that she had sent me, I did not say it! And you were crying, Miss Frazer, you know you were!"

"Crying?"

"You know that I came and found you crying in the schoolroom."

She began to cry again then and there. As for me, I was swimming in tears already.

"I know that I was crying, but it wasn't because of that."

Mrs Sawyer interposed.

"Gently, Miss Frazer. Perhaps, if we keep cool, by degrees we shall begin to understand what this is all about. Can you tell us what you were crying about when this impulsive young lady intruded on your grief?"

"I was crying because of what you said to me."

"Because of what I said to you?"

It was Mrs Sawyer's turn to look bewildered.

"You said that you didn't wish me to wear plaids, not even my own plaid, and-I'm-a-Frazer!"

Exactly what happened afterwards I do not know. Mrs Sawyer bundled me out of the room and up to my bedroom. And well I deserved it. And more besides.

I threw myself on to the bed in a passion of sobs, though I could not pretend to emulate the boo-hooing I had left Miss Frazer indulging in downstairs. What an imbecile I was to suppose that she was bellowing like a bull calf because of the injury M. Doumer had wrought her virgin heart, when all the time it was because Mrs Sawyer had ventured to suggest that she did not think plaids were altogether suited to her style of figure, and that, in particular, the one to which she was partial was a trifle obvious. What a Frazer she must have been! And how devoted to the Frazer plaid!

I could have beaten myself. I was wild with everyone-with Madame Doumer, with Miss Frazer, and, last but not least, with Hetty Travers, that I should have allowed her to delude me into believing that unrequited love was driving Miss Frazer mad, and that it would be playing a chivalrous part to take that deceitful Frenchman to task. When, as soon as she had swallowed her dinner, Hetty stole up to learn what had become of me, I stormed at her like some wild thing. When she understood what I had been doing, instead of exhibiting penitence, or the least scrap of sympathy, she burst into peal after peal of laughter. I could have shaken her. But she had such a way about her, and could be so lovely when she chose, that, by degrees, I forgave her, though I never meant to. That tale was told. Everybody in the place had it off by heart within four-and-twenty hours. I believe that Miss Frazer blurted it out to one or two of them; it seemed that she could talk when she was not wanted to. And, of course, they told everybody else. I never heard the last of it while I was at Lingfield House. Mrs Sawyer merely remarked, with that dry smile which was peculiar to her, that she had always found young ladies difficult creatures to manage, but that I certainly did seem to be a curiosity even among girls.

And when I look back, and go hot all over-as I do when I recall that adventure to this hour-I really am disposed to think I must have been.

### III

## THE OGRE

Mother died while sitting in her chair writing to me. It was tea-time, and she did not come, so Con went to see what she was doing. She was leaning over her writing-table, and as she did not seem to have noticed his coming in-though I am sure that he made noise enough, because he always did-he called out to her.

"Mother! tea's on the table!"

Then, as she neither moved nor answered, he ran forward and put his hand upon her shoulder.

"Mother!"

When he found how still she was, and how unresponsive to his touch, he rushed off, frightened half out of his wits.

Then they all trooped into the room and found that she was dead. She had a pen in her hand, and a sheet of paper in front of her, and had begun the first line of a letter to me-"My dear Molly." Death must have come upon her as she was writing my name, for there is a blot at the end of it, as if her pen had jabbed into the paper. No one knew what she was going to say to me, or ever will. It was just her weekly letter-she wrote to me each Monday. And I expect she was just going to tell me the home news: what Nora had been doing, and what mischief the boys had been in, and beg me to be a good girl and think before I did things sometimes, and keep my stockings darned; those stockings were almost as great a trouble to her as they were to me. Not a creature had a notion that she was ailing. Indeed she was not. She was in good spirits-mother always was in good spirits! – and in perfect health half-an-hour before. It seemed that something extraordinary must have happened to her heart, which no one could have expected. Death must have come upon her in an instant. She must have gone before she had the least idea of what was going to happen. When she got to heaven how grieved she must have been to think that she had been compelled to leave us all without a word.

Never shall I forget receiving the telegram at Mrs Sawyer's. We were just going to bed, and the last train was nearly due to start. But I rushed off to catch it; and Mrs Sawyer went with me. She bought my ticket and sent a telegram to let them know that I was coming. At the other end I had a drive of nearly six miles. It seemed the middle of the night when I got home.

The state the house was in! And the children! They were in much more need of help than mother was. She was calm enough. When I first saw her I could not believe that she was dead. I thought that she was sleeping, and dreaming one of those happy dreams which, she used to tell us, she liked to dream. On her face was the smile with which she always greeted me. She always did look happy, mother did; but I never saw her look happier than when she was lying dead.

But the children! They were half beside themselves. It was dreadful; the boys especially. We could not get Con away from the bed on which mother lay. And Dick, great fellow though he was, was almost as bad. The whole house was topsy-turvy. Nobody knew what to do; everybody seemed to have lost their wits.

That is how it was the Ogre came on the scene. Of course his name was not the Ogre. It was Miller-Stephen Miller. But it was not very long before we only knew him as the Ogre among ourselves. He was not very tall, but he was big; at least, he seemed big to us. He had a loud voice, and a loud way about him generally. We liked neither his looks nor his manners-nor had mother liked them either. But at the beginning I do not know what we should have done without him. That is, I did not know then what we should have done. Though I am inclined to think now that if we had been left to ourselves, and been forced to act, we should have done as well, if not better. Yet one must confess that at the very beginning he was a help, though a comfort one never could have called him.

He was our nearest neighbour. His house was about half a mile down the lane. It was only a cottage. He inhabited it with a dreadful drunken old woman as his only servant. It was said that he could get no one else to stop in the house. He himself was not a teetotaller, and his general character was pretty bad. He seemed to have enough money to live on, because he did nothing except go about with a lot of dogs at his heels. In the charitable way which children have of talking we used to say that he was hiding from the law, and would speculate as to the nature of the crime of which he had been guilty. When he first came he tried to cultivate mamma's acquaintance, but she would have nothing to do with him, and would scarcely recognise him when she met him in the lane. I once heard Dick speak of him as an "unmannerly ruffian"; but I never knew why. And as Dick, like his sister Molly, sometimes said stronger things than the occasion warranted, I did not pay much heed.

The morning after mother's death he came marching into the house to ask if he could be of any assistance. No one, so far as I could ever gather, said either yes or no, which shows the condition we were in. He seems to have taken our consent for granted-to such an extent that he at once took into his hands the entire management of everything. He managed the inquest-for that I was grateful. Oh, that dreadful inquest! He also managed the funeral; for his services in that direction my gratitude assumed a mitigated form. Although the world was still upside down, and everything seemed happening in a land of topsy-turvydom, I yet was conscious that a good deal took place at mother's funeral which I would rather had not have taken place. For one thing I felt sure that a great quantity of money was being spent on it, much more than need have been. A number of people were invited who had not the slightest right to be present, so that we children were almost lost amid a crowd of strangers. In spite of the dreadful trouble I was in it made me burn when I saw them. Many of them were people whom mother would never have allowed to enter the house. Then there was an excessive amount of eating and drinking, especially drinking. Some time after we had returned from the grave I went into the hall and there were rows of bottles stacked against the wall. A lot of people seemed to be in the drawing and dining-rooms, who were talking at the top of their voices. I could not go in to see what it meant then-but I could guess.

But the trouble really began after the funeral was over.

We children were in such a strange position. So far as we knew, except mother we had not a relation in the world. There certainly were none with whom we were in communication. I had always fancied, from what mother said, that she and father were married without the approval of their relatives. I did not know if it was father's or mother's side which objected, but I felt sure it was one or the other. And I thought it was just possible that it was both. I believe that, when father died, mother was not nicely treated. This hurt her pride, because, though she was such a darling, and so sweet, and beautiful, and clever, and true, and tender, she was proud, as she had every right to be. And I think, because they were so unkind, she took us straight off to that Sussex village, miles and miles away from everyone, and bought The Chase. Con was a baby when father died, and now he was nearly eleven, so we must have been there quite nine years. And during all that time I do not think we ever had a visitor. This may sound incredible, but I do not remember one. Not that people were unfriendly. But then there were so few people thereabouts. And those who were there mother did not seem to care for. They were either country folk, villagers, farmers, and that sort of thing, or else they were very rich people, who were scattered here and there. I know they called; but I also know that mother did not encourage their advances. She used to tell us, laughingly, that she had six children, and that they were society enough for her.

But the consequence was that when she was gone we knew nothing about anything. We did not know who or where she got her money from, or what money she had. In two months I should be sixteen. That was to be my last term at school. And it is my belief that it was her intention, when I left school for good, to tell me everything, or at least as much as it was desirable that I should know. But if such was her intention she had gone before she had a chance of putting it into execution, or

of dropping a hint, or even saying a word. And there we were, as ignorant and as helpless a family as ever was seen upon this earth.

It was under these circumstances that the Ogre showed a disposition to take entire control as if everything about the place-we included-belonged to him. Already there had not been wanting signs that the entire establishment more than sufficiently appreciated the change which had taken place. One of the chief difficulties with which mother had had to contend had been servants. In that remote part of the world it was almost impossible to get them. And sometimes when they were got they were hardly worth house-room. At the time mother died there were five-cook and two housemaids, a coachman, who was also gardener because his duties as coachman did not occupy anything like the whole of his time, and an odd lad, who was supposed to do whatever he was asked to do. The cook was a new one-she had come since my last holidays. On the day of mother's funeral she was intoxicated; she had indulged too freely in the refreshments which Mr Miller had so liberally ordered. So it may be imagined what sort of character she must have been. The next morning the housemaid, who had been with us longest, came and told me that she could not continue in a house in which there was no mistress. When I mildly suggested that I was the mistress now she remarked, quite frankly, that she could not think of taking her orders from me. Mr Miller, who had been standing at the morning-room door, listening, called her in to him. The details of what took place between them I never learned. But that afternoon she took herself off without another word to me. When, after she had gone, I went into mother's room, I found that all sorts of things were missing. I feared that Mary Sharp had taken them, and that that was the real explanation of her anxiety to depart. It made me conscious of such an added sense of misery, the feeling that henceforward we were going to be taken advantage of by everyone.

But the Ogre was the thorn in our sides. The day after Mary left we held a council of war in Dick's bedroom.

"I'm not going to stand this sort of thing," Dick announced. "And the sooner that beggar downstairs is brought to understand as much the better. Why, he's messing about with mother's papers at this very moment."

"A punch on the nose would do him good," declared Jack. He is one of the twins.

"A sound licking wouldn't do him any harm," added Jim. He is the other twin.

"He'll get both if he doesn't take care."

Dick drew himself up as straight as a dart. Although he was only fifteen he was five feet eight inches high, and as strong as anything-and so good-looking.

"But surely mother must have left a will. There must be something to tell us what is going to happen."

That was what I said. Dick took up my words at once.

"That point shall soon be settled. We'll go down and tackle the beggar right away."

Off we trooped to interview the Ogre in a body. He was in the morning-room-mother's own particular apartment. Outside the door we might have hesitated, but it was only for a moment. In strode Dick, and in we all went after him. The Ogre seemed surprised and not too pleased to see us. A bottle and a glass were on the table; both of those articles seemed to be his inseparable companions. One of his horrid dogs, which had been lying on the hearth-rug, came and sniffed at us as if we were the intruders. The whole room was in confusion. It looked as if it had not been tidied for days, and I daresay it had not been. When I thought of how different it used to be when it was mother's very own room, a pang went right through my heart. I could not keep the tears out of my eyes; and it was only because I was so angry that I managed to choke them back again. Papers and things were everywhere. At the moment of our entrance he had both his hands full of what I was convinced were mother's private letters.

It did seem like sacrilege, that that disreputable-looking man, with his pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth, who was nothing and no one to us, should be handling mother's treasures as if they were so much rubbish. I am almost certain that if I had been a big strong giant I should have been



tempted to knock him down. It was not surprising that Dick spoke to him in the fiery way he did. When I looked at him I saw that he had gone red all over, and that his eyes were gleaming. He was not very polite in his manner, but more polite than the Ogre deserved.

"What are you doing with those things? What do you want here at all?"

The Ogre glanced up, then down again. I do not believe he could meet Dick's eyes. He smiled—a nasty smile, for which I could have pinched him. And he continued to turn over the things which he was holding.

"My dear boy, I'm putting these papers into something like order. I never saw anything like the state of confusion which everything is in."

"Don't call me your dear boy! And what business of yours is it what state they're in? Who asked you to put them in order? What right have you to touch them?"

The Ogre calmly went on with what he was doing as if Dick was a person of not the slightest consequence. And he continued to indulge in that extremely objectionable smile.

"You haven't a very nice way of asking questions. And some people might think that the questions themselves were a little suggestive of ingratitude."

"What have I to be grateful for? I never asked you to come here. You are not a friend of ours."

"That you most emphatically are not!"

It was I who came blazing out with that. He looked at me out of the corner of his bloodshot eyes, his smile more pronounced than ever.

"Now, Miss Molly, that's unkind of you."

I was in a rage.

"You appear to be oblivious of the fact that you were not even an acquaintance of my mother's; and as those persons she did not wish to know we do not care to know either, we shall be obliged by your leaving the house at your earliest possible convenience."

"Inside two seconds," added Dick.

"Perhaps you'd like a little assistance."

"It's always to be got."

These two remarks came from the twins. The Ogre laid down on the table what he had been holding. A very ugly look came on his face.

"This is an extraordinary world. I don't want to say anything offensive—"

"You can say what you like," cried Dick.

"I intend to, my lad."

"Don't call me your lad!"

The Ogre looked at Dick. And this time he gave him glance for glance. And I knew, from the expression which was on both their faces, that if we were not careful there was going to be trouble. I am not sure that my heart did not quail. The Ogre spoke as if my brother was unworthy even his contempt.

"Mr Dick Boyes, you appear to be under the impression that you are still at school, and can play the bully here, and treat me as I have no doubt you are in the habit of treating the smaller chaps there. You never made a greater mistake in the course of your short life. I am not the kind of man who will allow himself to be bullied by a hobbledehoy. I give you fair warning that if you treat me to any of your insolence the consequences will be on your own head—and other parts of you as well. Don't you flatter yourself that the presence of your little sisters will shield you from them."

"Throw something at him!"

"Down him with a pail of water!"

These suggestions proceeded from the twins. The Ogre turned his attention to them.

"If you two youngsters want a row you shall have it. And it will take the shape of the best licking you've ever had yet. You'll not be the first pair of unmannerly cubs I've had to take in hand."

I spoke; I wanted peace.

"There's not the slightest necessity for you to talk like that, Mr Miller. We're quite willing to believe that you're more than a match for any number of helpless children. But this is our house-"

"Indeed! Are you sure of that?"

"Of course I am sure. Do you mean to say that it is not?"

"At present I am saying nothing. I only advise you not to be too confident on a point on which some very disagreeable surprise may be in store for you."

"At anyrate, it is not your house. And all we ask-with all possible politeness-is that you should leave it."

"So that is all you ask. It seems to me to be a good deal."

"I don't know why it should. If you were a gentleman it would not be necessary to ask you twice."

"If I were a gentleman? I suppose if I came up to a school-girl's notion of what a gentleman ought to be-a sort of glorified schoolboy. I'm a good deal older than you, Miss Boyes-"

"You certainly are!"

"I certainly am, thank goodness!"

"I am glad you are thankful for something."

"I am glad that you are glad. As I was observing, when you interrupted me, I am older than you-for which I have every cause to be thankful-and my experience of the world has taught me not to pay much heed to a girl's display of temper. I undertook the management of affairs at your own request-"

"At my request? It's not true!"

A voice came from behind me. Looking round, there, in the doorway, was cook; and, on her heels, Betsy, the remaining housemaid. While-actually! – at the open window was Harris, the coachman, staring into the room as if what was taking place was the slightest concern of his. It was cook's voice which I heard, raised in accents of surprise, as if my point-blank denial of the Ogre's wicked falsehood had amazed her.

"Oh, Miss Molly, however can you say such a thing! When I heard you thanking Mr Miller with my own ears! And after all he has done for you. Well, I never did!"

"What did you hear?"

"I heard Mr Miller ask you in the hall if there was anything he could do for you, and you said you'd be very much obliged. Then he went on to say, I'm sure as kind as kind could be, that if you liked he'd take the whole trouble off your hands and manage everything; and you said, 'Thank you.' And now for you to stand there and declare you didn't, and to behave to him like this after all he's done for you, in one so young I shouldn't have believed that it was possible."

In the first frenzy of my grief and bewilderment I had scarcely understood what I was saying to anybody. I remembered Mr Miller coming, as cook said, but that anything which had been said on either side had been intended to bear the construction which was being put upon it was untrue.

"I was not in a state of mind to understand much of what Mr Miller was saying, but I supposed that he was offering to assist in the arrangements for mother's funeral, and that offer I accepted."

"You did so. And what you'd have done without him I can't think. He arranged everything-and beautifully too. He's made the family more thought of in this neighbourhood than it ever was before. If ever helpless orphans had a friend in need you've had one in him-you have that."

Betsy had her say.

"He got us our black. There wouldn't have been a word said about it by anyone if it hadn't been for him."

"And he bought me two suits of clothes-blacks."

That was Harris, at the window.

"Bought you two suits of clothes!"

"Yes, miss," said cook, "we've all of us had full mourning, as was only decent. And I happen to know that Mr Miller paid for it. Indeed, he paid for everything. And considering the handsome way in which it has all been done, nothing stinted, nothing mean, a pretty penny it must have cost."

I exchanged glances with Dick and perceived that we were both of opinion that we had had enough of cook. I told her so.

"I have heard what you have had to say. And now, please, will you leave the room?"

"Excuse me, miss, but that's exactly what I don't intend to do-not till I know how I stand."

"How you stand?"

"I'll soon tell you how you stand," declared Dick. "You'll be paid a month's wages and you'll take yourself off."

"Oh, shall I, sir? That's just the sort of thing I thought you would say after the way you've been trying to behave to Mr Miller. And in any case I shouldn't think of stopping in the house with a pack of rude, ungrateful children. But I should like more than one month's wages, if it's the same to you. There's three months nearly due. I've not had one penny since I've been inside this house."

"Not since you've been inside this house?"

"Not one penny; and it's getting on for three months now."

"But I thought mother always paid you every month regularly."

"Did she, miss? Then perhaps you'll prove it. She never paid me; nor more she didn't Betsy. There's three months owing to you, isn't there, Betsy?"

"That there is."

"And so there is to you, isn't there, Harris?"

"Well-I don't know that it's quite three months."

"Why, you told me yourself as how it was."

Harris tilted his hat on one side and scratched his head as if to jog his memory.

"Well-it might be."

At this Dick fired up.

"It's all a pack of lies! I'm sure that my mother paid you your wages as they fell due, and that you're trying to cheat us."

Then it was cook's turn.

"Don't you talk to me like that, not if you do call yourself a young gentleman. And I'll learn you to know that a woman of my age is not going to be called a cheat by a young lad like you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, that's what you ought to be, standing there disgracing of yourself."

The Ogre held up his hand, as if to play the part of peacemaker.

"Gently, cook, gently. You leave it to me and I will see that you have what is due to you. We must remember how ignorant these young people are of their position, and try to make allowances. Though I grant that under the circumstances it's a little difficult." He put his hands into his trouser pockets, tilted back the chair on which he was seated, and considered the ceiling. "What I intend to do is this. At Miss Molly's request I have, reluctantly, incurred certain liabilities and assumed certain responsibilities. To know exactly what those responsibilities are it is necessary that I should examine thoroughly the condition of affairs. When I have done so-it cannot, I am sorry to say, be done in a moment-I will lay the results before the more responsible members of the family-if there are any such-and without waiting for the thanks which I possibly shall not receive I will at once withdraw."

Such a prospect did not commend itself to me at all. That we were already being cheated all round I was sure. That we ran a great risk of being cheated to a much more serious extent if the Ogre was allowed to do as he suggested I felt equally convinced. And in any case I did not want his interference in our private affairs. It was dreadful to think of him peering and prying into mother's secrets, into the things which she held sacred. The way he was behaving now showed how much we could trust him and what use he would make of any knowledge he might acquire. Instead of being our friend he would be our bitterest enemy. And yet I did not see how we were going to get rid of him without a desperate struggle-of which, after all, we might get the worst.

But I was not going to let him see that I was afraid of him.

"Where is the money which was in mother's desk?"

"Money? What money?"

"Mother always kept a large sum of money in her desk. You have had access to her desk, though you'd no right to touch it. How much was there? and where is it now?"

"I've seen no money."

"Why, it is with mother's money that you have been paying for everything."

"I wish it had been. I've been paying for every blessed thing out of my own pocket."

"That's a lie!" shouted Dick. "I know there was money in her desk."

"Look here, my lad-if you'll excuse my calling you my lad-the next time you speak to me like that I'll make you smart for it. Now, don't you expect another warning."

"That's right," cried cook. "You give him a good sound thrashing, Mr Miller. He wants it. Accusing everyone of robbing him, when it's him who's trying to rob everybody!"

The Ogre brought down his clenched fist heavily on the table.

"Listen to me, you children. For all you know, and for all I know, you're nothing but a lot of paupers; and if you don't want to find yourself inside a workhouse you'll leave it to me to make the best of things. So now you've got it."

We had got it. I saw Dick's cheeks blanch. I was conscious that my own went pale. If the awful thing at which he hinted was true, then things were miles worse than I had ever supposed. But was it true? And how, with him sitting there, were we going to look for proof of either its truth or falsehood?

Just as I was beginning to fear that I should make a goose of myself and cry, I heard someone come up the front doorsteps and ask, -

"Is Miss Boyes at home? Miss Molly Boyes?"

I rushed out into the hall. There, standing at the hall door, which was wide open, was the handsomest man I had ever seen. He was very tall and sunburned. He had his cap in his hand, so that you could see that he had short curly hair. And his moustache was just beginning to come. I wondered if he was a harbinger of more trouble. He did not look as if he was; but he might be.

"I am Molly Boyes."

"My name is Sanford. I am afraid I ought to apologise for my intrusion, but I am a cousin of Hetty Travers, who tells me you are a friend of hers. I am staying a few miles from here, and she has written to say that she is afraid you are in trouble, and to ask me to run over and see if I can be of assistance."

Hetty's cousin! That did not sound like trouble. How sweet of her to think of me, and to send that great strong man! She might have guessed what was happening to us-the dear!

"I am in trouble. I have lost my mother. And now, there is Mr Miller."

"Mr Miller? Who is he?"

The children had already trooped into the hall. Then Dick appeared. I introduced him.

"This is my brother Dick. Dick, this is Mr Sanford, a cousin of Hetty Travers. You have heard me speak of Hetty. Mr Sanford has come to know if he can be of any assistance to us."

"If you really would like to do something to help us-"

There Dick stopped, as if in doubt.

"I should," said Mr Sanford.

I rather fancied from the way he smiled that he had taken a liking to Dick upon the spot. I did so hope he had.

"Then perhaps you'll lend me a hand in chucking this man Miller through the window. He's almost a size too large for me. Come inside here."

We all trooped back into the morning-room, Mr Sanford and Dick in front. Dick pointed to the Ogre.

"You see that individual. His name's Miller. He's taken possession of the place as though it belongs to him; he's made free with my mother's property and papers; and when I ask him to leave the house he talks about treating me to a good sound thrashing."

"He does, does he? Is he a relation of yours?"

"Relation! He's not even an acquaintance. He came here uninvited when my mother lay dead, took advantage of the state of mind we were in to gain a footing in the house, and now we can't get rid of him."

Mr Sanford turned to me.

"Is it your wish, Miss Boyes, that this person should leave the house?"

"It is very much my wish. He knows it is."

"You hear, sir. I hope it is not necessary to emphasise the wish which Miss Boyes has expressed so clearly."

Cook struck in.

"A pretty way of talking, upon my word. Perhaps, my fine gentleman, while you are putting your nose into other people's business you'll see that our wages are paid. Mr Miller's only trying to save us from being robbed, that's all he's doing. Three months' wages there is due to each of us servants, and over."

Mr Sanford paid no heed at all to cook. He continued to eye the Ogre.

"Well, sir?"

"Well, sir, to you."

"You heard what I said?"

"I did. And if you are wise you'll hear what I say, and not interfere in what is absolutely no concern of yours."

"Nothing in this house is any concern of yours," burst out Dick. "And well you know it!"

"Who's dog is this?" asked Mr Sanford.

The Ogre's dog-a horrid, savage-looking creature-was sniffing at Mr Sanford's ankles, showing his teeth and growling in a way that was anything but friendly. Its owner grinned, as if the animal's behaviour met with his approval.

"That's my dog. It objects to strangers-of a certain class."

Suddenly Mr Sanford stooped down, gripped the brute by the scruff of its neck and the root of its tail, swung it through the air and out of the window. Harris happened to be staring in at the time. The dog struck him as it passed. Over he went, and off tore the dog down the drive, yelping and howling as if it had had more than enough of our establishment. The Ogre sprang from his chair, and he used a very bad word.

"What do you mean by doing that?"

Harris, as he regained his feet, gave utterance to his woes.

"That's a nice thing to do, to throw a great dog like that right into a man's face! What next, I wonder?"

Mr Sanford was most civil.

"Hope it hasn't hurt you, but I'm afraid that your face must have been in the way." Then to the Ogre: "Well, sir, we are still waiting. By which route do you propose to follow your dog?"

There was something in Mr Sanford's looks and manner which, in view of the little adventure his dog had had, apparently caused the Ogre to suspect that the moment had arrived when discretion might be the better part of valour.

"Before we go any further, perhaps you'll let me know who's going to repay what I've advanced? Nearly two hundred pounds I'm out of pocket."

"You're nearly two hundred pounds out of pocket!" cried Dick. "What for?"

"Why, for seeing that your mother was buried like a respectable woman. It begins to strike me that you'd have liked to have had her buried by the parish."

The Ogre thrust his red face so very close to Dick's that I suppose the provocation and temptation together were more than Dick could stand. Anyhow, Dick gave him a tremendous slap on the cheek. In a moment Mr Sanford was between them.

"It serves you right," he declared. "It shows what sort of person you must be that you should permit yourself to use such language in this house of mourning."

"Harris," shouted the Ogre, "run round to Charlie Radford and Bill Perkins and tell 'em I want 'em, quick! And loose the dogs and bring 'em back with you!"

"Begging of your pardon, Mr Miller," replied Harris, possibly perceiving in which direction the wind was about to blow, "but if you want any more of your dirty work done you'll do it yourself."

Cook was horrified.

"Well, the likes of that! After all Mr Miller has done for you!"

"Done for me! He has made me do what I'm ashamed of, that's what he's done for me! I've had enough of him, and of you too, Mrs Boyes was as good a mistress as anyone need have. I know it if no one else does. And, Miss Molly, your mother always paid my wages regular to the moment; you don't owe me nothing. And you don't owe cook and Betsy nothing either."

"What do you know about what is and is not owing me?" screamed cook.

"I know you were paid each month; and, what's more, I know you gave a receipt for it. Why, you told me yourself that you took the wages' receipt book from the little cupboard in the corner."

Cook's virtuous indignation was beautiful to behold.

"It only shows how sensible Mary Sharp was to pack her box and take herself outside of such a place. And I'll do the same within the hour."

"So will I," said Betsy.

"Mr Sanford," I said, "all sorts of mother's things are missing, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if cook and Betsy have taken some of them."

"Me taken your mother's things!" screamed cook. I believe that if it had not been for Mr Sanford she would have scratched me.

"I think it not at all improbable," he agreed. "Is there a constable hereabouts?"

"There's one in the village." This was Harris, who seemed to have arrived at a sudden resolution to attack his late allies at every possible point, "Name of Parker."

"If you will be so good as to request Mr Parker's immediate attendance you shall have no reason to regret it, Mr Harris. Neither of you women will leave this house until the contents of your boxes have been examined in the presence of a policeman."

Cook looked uncomfortable as she met Mr Sanford's stern glance. And it was stern! Betsy began to cry.

"And what's more," added Harris, pointing at the Ogre, "I happen to know that there was money in Mrs Boyes's desk, and he knows it too."

With that parting shot Harris hurried off down the avenue.

"Things are beginning to wear rather an ugly aspect, Mr Miller."

"Ugly aspect! What do you mean? You needn't think I want to stop in this hugger-muggering hole! I am just as anxious to get out of it as anyone can be to get me out."

"I should hardly think that possible."

"I only regret that I ever set foot in it."

"Then the regret is general."

"As for these ungrateful little wretches, and especially you, my lad!" – this was Dick – "they shall hear of me very soon in quite another fashion, when they haven't got a bully to back them up."

Mr Sanford laughed.

"He's cramming mother's things into his pocket at this very moment!" cried Jim.

"Aren't you making a mistake, Mr Miller?"

Mr Sanford's politeness seemed to make the Ogre feel dreadful. He looked as if he would have liked to have killed him.

"I don't want the miserable rubbish!"

He banged the letters and things down on the table. Dick went on, -

"I believe that what Harris says about there having been money in mother's desk is true, and this man hasn't accounted for a penny. And it's my belief too that he's been taking what he likes out of the house. He lives just up the lane-I shouldn't be surprised to find plenty of mother's property at his own place."

The Ogre moved towards the door, but it was too late, Mr Sanford interposed.

"Excuse me, Mr Miller, but I think that now I would rather you waited till Mr Parker arrives. We will accompany you to your own establishment. There-together-we will make certain inquiries."

He blustered a little, but he was a coward at heart, and he had to give in. As it chanced, Harris met Parker in the lane, so that he came back with him almost at once.

All sorts of things which did not belong to them were found in cook's and Betsy's boxes; and actually the book of which Harris had spoken, in which they themselves had signed receipts for their wages. There was a tremendous scene. Parker badly wanted to lock them up, but we had had trouble enough already, so we let them go.

While we were examining the servants' boxes upstairs the Ogre was offering Mr Sanford what he called an explanation. When they went round with him to his own house he handed over quite a collection of miscellaneous articles which belonged to mother. Her cheque-book, all sorts of papers, some of them representing stocks and shares, even some of her jewellery. He said he had taken them home to examine. Which seemed a very curious thing to do. The next morning he had vanished. He had left no address, and nothing was seen or heard of him in that neighbourhood again. So we concluded that he had escaped with something much more valuable than anything which he had given up. But it was a long time before we suspected what it was.

What we should have done without Mr Sanford-if he had not come in the very nick of time-I do not dare to think. We might have been plundered of every single thing we had. It was very nice of Hetty Travers to have a big strong cousin, and it was perfectly lovely of her to send him to us.

## IV THE HANDWRITING

It was some time after mother's death before we knew if we were or were not penniless. And as, of course, it was our duty to be prepared for the very worst, we used to discuss among ourselves how, if we were left without a farthing, we should earn one. Though I am perfectly well aware that a single farthing would not have been of much service to us. But then I suppose everybody knows what I mean.

When there are six children, and the eldest is a girl, and she is only sixteen, and they have no relatives, and not one grown-up person to advise them, it does seem strange what a very few ways there are of making a fortune. That is, within a reasonable space of time. So far as I could make out, from what the others said, for every one of them you wanted money to start with. And if you had no money, it was not the slightest use your doing anything. Then the boys had such impracticable notions. Dick was full of South Africa. He declared that nothing was easier than to go to South Africa; find what he called a "claim," on which there were tons of gold, or so many pounds to the ton, I do not quite know which; turn it into a company, and there you were, a millionaire, in what he termed "a brace of shakes." But it appeared to me that that "brace of shakes" would be some time in coming. First, he would have to get to South Africa, then he would have to find his "claim," – and there was no proof that they were found by everyone; then he would have to get his company up, which might take weeks; and, in the meantime, were we supposed to starve? I seemed to have read somewhere that a human being could not be kept alive without food for more than seven days. I doubted if there would be much left of me after four-and-twenty hours. Jack wanted to be an engine-driver on the railway line, a profession which I feel sure is not too highly paid; while Jim actually yearned to be a fireman in the fire brigade, though how he imagined that he was going to earn a fortune that way was beyond my comprehension.

Nora and I were reluctantly compelled to admit that if our means of sustenance were to depend on the efforts of the masculine portion of the family we should apparently have to go very short indeed. And the field for girls did seem to be so circumscribed. As I said to her–

"There do seem to be such a few ways in which girls can get money."

"There aren't any."

We were in the kitchen, she and I alone together. We were supposed to be getting the tea ready. There was not a servant about the place. And the condition the house was getting into in consequence was beyond anything. She was sitting on the edge of the table, with a coal scoop in one hand and a toasting-fork in the other. Nora always was of a pessimistic description. She invariably looked on the blackest side of everything. So one got into the habit of allowing for the peculiarity of her outlook. Besides, I had in my head at that moment the glimmering of an idea of how to earn an immense amount.

"There are some ways. For instance, there's writing. There are girls who write for papers, and all kinds of things."

"Only those who can't write get paid anything."

I wondered if she had been trying her own hand. The statement did sound so sweeping.

"There's teaching. Look at the lots of governesses that must be wanted."

"Let 'em be wanted. I prefer prussic acid."

"There's drawing for the magazines."

"You might as well talk about drawing for the moon-unless you're a perfect idiot, then you might have a chance."

I felt sure that she had had experiences of her own. Her tone was so extremely bitter.



"And then there are prize competitions. There do seem to be a tremendous number of them about. And some of them for really large prizes."

"Prize competitions!" Nora seemed all at once to have wakened to life and vigour. "Promise you won't split if I tell you something?" I promised. "I believe that all prize competitions are frauds run by robbers. Do you know" – she brought the toasting-fork and coal scoop together with a bang – "that I've gone in for seventy-two of all sorts and kinds, and never won a single prize, not even a consolation. And some of them were hard enough to kill you. I've guessed how much money there was at the Bank of England; how many babies were born on a Tuesday; picked out twelve successful football teams; named three winners at a horse race –"

"Nora!"

"I have – or, at least, I've tried to. Much the largest prizes are offered for that. I've drawn things, written things, calculated things, prophesied things, made things, collected things, solved things, sold things, – once I tried to sell a lot of papers in the village for the sake of the coupons, but no one would buy a single copy. It was a frightful loss. I do believe I've tried my hand at every sort and kind of thing you can think of – and heaps you can't – and, as I say, I've never even won a consolation prize. No more prize competitions for me!"

That was not encouraging, especially as it was a prize competition which I had got in my mind's eye. After her disclosures I did not breathe a word of it to Nora, but when I got up to my bedroom I took out the paper in which I had seen all about it, and considered. The part which told you about the competition was headed "Delineation of Character by Handwriting." You had to write, on a sheet of paper, a sentence not exceeding twelve words in length. This you had to put into an envelope, which you had to seal and endorse with a pseudonym. This envelope you had to put into another envelope, together with your real name and address, and a postal order for a shilling, or twelve stamps, and send to the paper. The person whose caligraphy was considered to show that the writer was the possessor of the finest character was to receive one hundred pounds.

One hundred pounds! – for a shilling! Of course, I was perfectly well aware that hosts of people would go in, and that, as the chances of success were presumably equal, one's own individual chance was but a small one. But, on the other hand, what was a shilling? And, also, some people's writing was better than others. As a matter of fact, I rather fancied my own. It had been admired by several persons. It was large, bold, and, I was persuaded, distinctly characteristic. I perceived that the sentences had to be despatched to the office of the paper on the following day.

Why should not one of mine go with them? There really seemed no reason. I had twelve stamps. There were pens, ink, and paper. My non-success would merely add to the list of failures with which the family was already credited – making seventy-three. What was that? The question was, what sentence should I send. You were left to choose your own. But the presumption was that your chances of success would not be lessened if the one selected was a good one. I had it on the instant. My desk chanced to be open. There, staring at me on the top, was the very thing.

At Mrs Sawyer's school there had once been a governess named Winston-Sophia Winston. We all of us liked her. I adored her. She was one of the best and sweetest creatures that ever lived. But her health was not very good and she had to leave. Before she left I asked her to write a motto in my book of mottoes. Although she said she would, when I came to look for the book I could not find it anywhere. Somehow, in those days, my things always were playing games of hide-and-seek with me. So, instead, she wrote a motto on a sheet of paper. There lay the identical sheet of paper in front of me at that moment. I took it up; opened it; read it: –

**"Who goes slowly goes safely and goes far."**

The very thing! I more than fancied that it was with *malice prepense* that Miss Winston had referred me to that rendering of what I knew was an Italian proverb. It was not my custom to go

slowly, or safely, or-in the sense in which the word was there used-far. But, for the purpose of the present competition, that was not a matter of the slightest consequence. I made six copies of Miss Winston's sentence; picked out the one which I judged was the best; and, after destroying the other five, packed it up with the requisite twelve stamps, and sent it off to the office of the paper.

Of course I told no one of what I had done. I was not quite so silly as that. The boys would have laughed-especially Dick, who was once rude enough to ask me if I wrote with the end of a broom-stick. While Nora-after her revelations of the hollowness and deceitfulness of such things-would have concluded I was mad. I simply held my tongue. And I waited.

The paper to which I had sent was a weekly one-it came out every Wednesday. It appeared that the competition was a weekly one also. The sentences had to reach the office on the one Wednesday morning, and in the paper which came out on the following Wednesday the results were announced. Either not many sentences were sent in, or there must have been someone in the office who was uncommonly quick at reading character. There used to be a girl at Lingfield House who pretended to read character from handwriting. She wanted pages of it before she would attempt to say what kind of character you had. Then she would take days to form an opinion. And then it would be all wrong. I daresay that in the office of the paper they had had a deal of practice.

On the Thursday morning of the week following I was down first as, I am sorry to say, I generally had to be; sometimes I actually had to drag the others out of bed; and Nora was every bit as bad as the boys-and as I came into the hall I saw a letter lying on the floor. Smith the postman had pushed it through the slit in the door. I picked it up. It was addressed to "Miss Molly Boyes, The Chase, West Marden, Sussex." On the top of the envelope was printed "*Trifles*. The Paper For The Whole World." When I saw it something seemed to give a jump inside me, so that I trembled all over. I could hardly tear it open. There were three things inside. One-could I believe my eyes? at first I felt that they must be playing me a trick-but one really was a cheque-"Pay Molly Boyes or Order One Hundred Pounds." I believe that at the sight of it I very nearly fainted. I never have done quite; but I think that I very nearly did do then. It was a most odd sensation. I was positively glad to feel the wall at my back, and I went hot and cold all over. Of the other two enclosures the first was a letter-from the editor himself! though, as it had been done by a typewriter, it was not in his own writing-perhaps that was because he was afraid of having his character told-saying that he was glad to inform me that I had been adjudged the winner of that week's competition; that he had pleasure in handing me a cheque for one hundred pounds herewith; and that he would be obliged by my signing and returning the accompanying form of receipt. The second inclosure was the receipt.

As soon as I recovered my senses I tore up the stairs about three at a time. I rushed in to Nora. "Nora," I cried, "I've won a hundred pounds!"

She was lying reading in bed, and was so engrossed in her book that she did not catch what I said. She grumbled.

"I wish you wouldn't come interrupting me like that; especially as I've just got to where the hero is killing his second wife."

"Bother his second wife! and bother the hero too! Look at that!" I held out before her the editor's letter and the cheque. "Seventy-two times you've tried, at least, you said you had; and I've only tried once. And the very first time I've won!"

"What are you talking about?"

"If you'll come to Dick's room I'll tell you all about it."

Off I raced to Dick's room, calling out to Con and Jack and Jim as I passed. Presently the whole family were gathered about Dick's bed. Nora had put on a dressing-gown, but the three younger boys were just as they had got out of the sheets.

"Well," said Dick, when he had turned the cheque over and over and over, and held it up to the light to see if it was a forgery, "some rum things do happen, and those who deserve least get most."

"I always have thought," observed Nora, "that those prize competitions were frauds, and now I know it."

Jack was more sympathetic-or he meant to be.

"Never mind what they say; it's only their beastly jealousy. I'm jolly glad you have won, because now we can have new bicycles."

"About time too," declared Jim. "I've had mine tinkered so many times that there's none of the original machine left."

"I punctured my tyre again yesterday," groaned Con. "That's about the twentieth time this week. It's hardly anything but holes."

I had not contemplated providing the whole family with new bicycles. But they did seem a necessity. I knew that I wanted a new machine, and so did Nora. And in a little matter of that kind the boys were pretty sure not to be very far behind. Fortunately nowadays bicycles are so cheap; and then we could always give our old ones in exchange; so, supposing the worst came to the worst, and we were all penniless, even after buying six new bicycles, I ought to have a good deal of money left, to keep us in food and things. Because, of course, I had to remember that I could not expect to win a hundred pounds every time I tried.

The nearest place to us where they sold papers was the bookstall at the station, and that was six miles away. So after breakfast we all mounted the machines we had, and dashed off to get a copy of *Trifles*. On the road Con had another puncture. It would not be stopped. As he said, his tyres did seem to have all they wanted in the way of ventilation. So as Jim's handle-bar had come off, and could not be induced to remain where it ought to be, we left them to console each other. Of course Dick, who rides tremendously fast, got to the station first, and Jack next. Nora and I never got there at all. They came flying back to us when we were about two hundred yards away, each waving a paper above his head, and laughing like anything. I was half afraid that there was something wrong, and that although I had got the prize, I had not won it. But it was something else which was amusing them.

"If ever anyone ought to be sent to a lunatic asylum it's the man who runs this paper," shouted Dick. "Let's get to the stile, and I'll prove my words to your entire satisfaction."

At the stile we all four of us dismounted. Unfolding his paper Dick read aloud from it, Jack following him in his own particular copy.

"We have much pleasure in announcing that, this week, the possessor of the finest character, as revealed by her handwriting, is Molly Boyes, The Chase, West Marden, Sussex, to whom a cheque for one hundred pounds has accordingly been sent. Her character, as declared by her caligraphy, is as follows.-Now then, all you chappies, listen! attention, please, and mind you, the character 'declared' is supposed to be Molly's-'This writing shows a character of unusual nobility-'"

"Hear, hear!" from Jack.

"The motto chosen is singularly appropriate'-By the way, the motto chosen was 'Who goes slowly, goes safely and goes far,' so everyone who knows her will perceive its peculiar fitness. Now do just listen to this Johnny, and I ask the lady herself if he doesn't credit her with exactly those qualities which she hasn't got-'Patience and thoughtfulness, a high standard of honour, clear-sightedness, resolution combined with a sweet and tranquil temper,'-what ho! – 'are all clearly shown. The writer is strong on both the moral and the intellectual side. A large and beautiful faith is obvious. To a serene tranquillity of temperament is united a keen insight and a calm persistence in following to a successful issue well-considered purposes, instinct with a lofty rectitude.'-As an example of how not to delineate character from handwriting, I should say that takes the record."

I felt myself that here and there that expert was a trifle out. I certainly should not have called the sentence selected "singularly appropriate" to me. Nor should I have laid much stress upon my patience or my thoughtfulness. I had not been hitherto aware that I was the owner of "a sweet and tranquil temper," or of "a serene tranquillity of temperament," or of "calm persistence." Indeed, there were one or two little matters in which I more than suspected that that character reader was a trifle at

fault. But, after all, these were questions of opinion, and had nothing to do with the real point, which was, that I had won the hundred pounds.

When we returned home I went upstairs, fetched my desk, carried it down to the morning-room, and prepared to write and tell everyone of my good fortune. In the frame of mind in which I was, it was not a piece of news which I was disposed to keep to myself. I opened the desk, got out the note-paper, found the pen, and just as I had got as far as-"My darling Hetty, – I've won a fortune! You never will guess how!" – I thought of Miss Winston's sentence. It was that which had brought me luck. I was convinced of it. If it had not been for the motto which that curiosity in character readers had found so singularly appropriate, I seriously doubted if I should have won. The least I could do was to kiss it, in memory of the writer.

I had placed it-after making those six copies-in an envelope which I had endorsed "Miss Winston's Motto." I laid down my pen, raked out the envelope, took out the sheet of paper. On it was the sentence, not in Miss Winston's small, exquisite penmanship, but in my own great sprawling hand. For a moment or two I stared at it in bewildered surprise. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, I understood what had happened.

In my characteristic blundering fashion I had confused my copy with her original. My writing I had packed into the envelope I was holding, and hers I had put into the one which I had sent to the paper. It was her caligraphy which had been adjudicated on, her character which had been deduced therefrom. The thing was as plain as plain could be-the whole business had had nothing whatever to do with me. I re-perused the winning character as it appeared in the paper. The man was not such an idiot as we had all supposed. It was not a bit like me; but it exactly described Miss Winston. She was all the lovely things he said she was, while I-I was none of them-I was just an addle-headed donkey.

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