Meade L. T.

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Содержание

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BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

L. T. Meade (Mrs. Elizabeth Thomasina Smith), English novelist, was born at Bandon, County Cork, Ireland, 1854, the daughter of Rev. R. T. Meade, Rector of Novohal, County Cork, and married Toulmin Smith in 1879. She wrote her first book, *Lettie's Last Home*, at the age of seventeen and since then has been an unusually prolific writer, her stories attaining wide popularity on both sides of the Atlantic.

She worked in the British Museum, living in Bishopsgate Without, making special studies of East London life which she incorporated in her stories. She edited *Atlanta* for six years. Her pictures of girls, especially in the influence they exert on their elders, are drawn with intuitive fidelity; pathos, love, and humor, as in *Daddy's Girl*, flowing easily from her pen. She has traveled extensively, being devoted to motoring and other outdoor sports.

Among more than fifty novels she has written, dealing largely with questions of home life, are: *David's Little Lad; Great St. Benedict's; A Knight of To-day (1877); Miss Toosey's*

Mission; Bel-Marjory (1878); Laddie; Outcast Robbin: or, Your Brother and Mine; A Cry from the Great City; White Lillie and Other Tales; Scamp and I; The Floating Light of Ringfinnan; Dot and Her Treasures; The Children's Kingdom: the Story of Great Endeavor; The Water Gipsies; A Dweller in Tents; Andrew Harvey's Wife; Mou-setse: A Negro Hero (1880); Mother Herring's Chickens (1881); A London Baby: the Story of King Roy (1883); Hermie's Rose-Buds and Other Stories; How it all Came Round; Two Sisters (1884); Autocrat of the Nursery; Tip Cat; Scarlet Anemones; The Band of Three; A Little Silver Trumpet; Our Little Ann; The Angel of Love (1885); A World of Girls (1886); Beforehand; Daddy's Boy; The O'Donnells of Inchfawn; The Palace Beautiful; Sweet Nancy (1887); Deb and the Duchess (1888); Nobody's Neighbors; Pen (1888); A Girl from America (1907).

CHAPTER I
THE FASCINATING MAGGIE

Cicely Cardew and her sister Merry were twins. At the time when this story opens they were between fifteen and sixteen years of age. They were bright, amiable, pretty young girls, who had never wanted for any pleasure or luxury during their lives. Their home was a happy one. Their parents were affectionate and lived solely for them. They were the only children, and were treated – as only children often are – with a considerable amount of attention. They were surrounded by all the appliances of wealth. They had ponies to ride and carriages to drive in, and each had her own luxurious and beautifully furnished bedroom.

It was Mr. Cardew's wish that his daughters should be educated at home. In consequence they were not sent to any school, but had daily masters and governesses to instruct them in the usual curriculum of knowledge. It might be truly said that for them the sun always shone, and that they were carefully guarded from the east wind. They were naturally bright and amiable. They had their share of good looks, without being quite beautiful. They had not the slightest knowledge of what the world meant, of what sorrow meant, or pain. They were brought up in such a sheltered way that it seemed to them that there were no storms in life. They were not discontented, for no one ever breathed the word

in their presence. Their requests were reasonable, for they knew of no very big things to ask for. Even their books were carefully selected for them, and their amusements were of a mild and orderly character.

Such were the girls when this story opens on a bright day towards the end of a certain July. Their home was called Meredith Manor, and Merry was called after an old ancestor on their mother's side to whom the house had at one time belonged.

Mr. Cardew was a merchant-prince. Mrs. Cardew belonged to an old county family. If there was one thing in the world that Cicely and Merry thought nothing whatever about, it was money. They could understand neither poverty nor the absence of gold.

The little village near Meredith Manor was a model place, for Mr. Cardew, to whom it belonged, devoted himself absolutely to it. The houses were well drained and taken great care of. Prizes were offered for the best gardens; consequently each cottager vied with the other in producing the most lovely flowers and the most tempting fruits. The village consisted entirely of Mr. Cardew's laborers and the different servants on his estate. There were, therefore, no hardships for the girls to witness at Meredith village. They were fond of popping in and out of the cottages and talking to the young wives and mothers, and playing with the babies; and they particularly enjoyed that great annual day when Mr. Cardew threw open the grounds of Meredith to the entire neighborhood, and when games and fun and all sorts of amusements were the order of the hour.

Besides the people who lived in the village, there was, of course, the rector, who had a pretty, picturesque, old brown house, with a nice garden in one corner of the grounds. He had a good-natured, round-faced, happy wife, and a family of four stalwart sons and daughters. He was known as the Reverend William Tristram; and, as the living was in the gift of the Meredith family, he was a distant connection of Mrs. Cardew, and had been appointed by her husband to the living of Meredith at her request.

The only playfellows the girls had ever enjoyed were the young Tristrams. There were two boys and two girls. The boys were the younger, the girls the elder. The boys were not yet in their teens, but Molly and Isabel Tristram were about the same age as the young Cardews. Molly was, in fact, a year older, and was a very sympathetic, strong-minded, determined girl. She and her sister Isabel had not been educated at home, but had been sent to foreign schools both in France and Germany; and Molly, in her heart of hearts, rather looked down upon what she considered the meager attainments of the young Cardews and their want of knowledge of the world.

"It is ridiculous!" she was heard to say to Isabel on that very July morning when this story opens. "Of course they are nice girls, and would be splendid if they could do anything or knew what to do; but, as it is, they are nothing whatever but half-grown-up children, with no more idea of the world than has that baby-kitten disporting itself at the present moment on the lawn."

"Oh, they're right enough," said Isabel. "They will learn by-and-by. I don't suppose Mr. and Mrs. Cardew mean to keep them always shut up in a nutshell."

"I don't know," replied Molly. "Mr. and Mrs. Cardew are like no other people. I have heard father say that he thinks it a great pity that girls should be so terribly isolated."

"Well, as to that," replied Isabel, "I wouldn't be in their shoes for creation. I have so enjoyed my time at Hanover and in France; and now that we are to have two years at Aylmer House, in Kensington, I cannot tell you how I look forward to it."

"Yes, won't it be fine?" replied Molly. "But now we had better go up at once to Meredith Manor and ask the girls if we may bring Maggie Howland with us this afternoon. Father has sent the pony-trap to the station to meet her, and she may arrive any moment."

"All right," said Isabel; "but one of us had better stay at home to receive her. You, Molly, can run up to the Manor and ask the girls if we may bring our visitor."

"All right," replied Molly. Then she added "I wonder if Maggie is as fascinating as ever. Don't you remember, Belle, what a spell she cast over us at our school at Hanover? She was like no one else I ever met. She seems to do what she likes with people. I shall be deeply interested to know what she thinks of Cicely and Merry."

"Thinks of them!" replied Isabel. "It's my opinion she won't tolerate them for a minute; and we are bound to take her with us,

for of course they will give permission."

"Well," said Molly, "I'll be off at once and secure that permission. You' look after Maggie – won't you, Isabel? – and see that her bedroom is all right." As Molly spoke she waved her hand to her sister, then departed on her errand.

She was a bright, fairly good-looking girl, with exceedingly handsome eyes and curling dark-brown hair. She was somewhat square in build and athletic in all her movements. In short, she was as great a contrast to the twin Cardew girls as could be found. Nevertheless she liked them, and was interested in them; for were not the Cardews the great people of the place? There was nothing of the snob about Molly; but it is difficult even for the most independent English girl to spend the greater part of her life in a village where one family reigns as sovereign without being more or less under its influence.

Mr. Tristram, too, was a very great friend of Mr. Cardew's; and Molly's fat, round, good-natured mother, although a little afraid of Mrs. Cardew, who was a very stately lady in her way, nevertheless held her in the greatest respect and admiration. It was one of the rules of the house of Tristram that no invitation sent to them from Meredith Manor should be refused. They must accept that invitation as though it were the command of a king.

The girls, brought up mostly at foreign schools, had in some ways wider ideas of life than had their parents. But even they were more or less influenced by the fact that the Cardews were the great people of the place.

The day was a very hot one; rather oppressive too, with thunder-clouds in the distance. But Molly was very strong, and did not feel the heat in the least. The distance from the rectory to the Manor was a little over a mile. In addition, it was all uphill. But when you passed the village – so exquisitely neat, such a model in its way – you found yourself entering a road shaded by overhanging elm-trees. Here it was cool even on the hottest summer day. There were deep pine-woods at each side of the road, and the road itself had been cut right through a part of the forest, which belonged to the Meredith estate. After going uphill for nearly three-quarters of a mile you arrived at the handsome wrought-iron gates which led to the avenue that brought you to the great front door of Meredith Manor.

Molly often took this walk, but she generally did so in the company of her sister Isabel. Isabel's light chatter, her gay, infectious laughter, her merry manner, soothed the tedium of the road. To-day Molly was alone; but by no means on this account did she feel a sense of weariness; her mind was very busy. She was greatly excited at the thought of seeing Maggie Howland again. Maggie had made a remarkable impression on her. She made that impression on all her friends. Wherever she went she was a leader, and no one could quite discover where her special charm or magnetism lay; for she was decidedly plain, and not specially remarkable for cleverness – that is, she was not remarkable for what may be termed school-cleverness. She was indifferent to prizes, and was just as happy at the bottom of

her form as at the top; but wherever she appeared girls clustered round her, and consulted her, and hung on her words; and to be Maggie Howland's friend was considered the greatest honor possible among the girls themselves at any school where she spent her time.

Maggie was the daughter of a widow who lived in London. Her father had died when she was a very little girl. He was a man of remarkable character. He had great strength of will and immense determination; and Maggie, his only child, took after him. She resembled him in appearance also, for he was very plain of face and rather ungainly of figure. Maggie's mother, on the other hand, was a delicate, pretty, blue-eyed woman, who could as little manage her headstrong young daughter as a lamb could manage a young lion. Mrs. Howland was intensely amiable. Maggie was very good to her mother, as she expressed it; and when she got that same mother to yield to all her wishes the mother thought that she was doing the right thing. She had a passionate love for her daughter, although she deplored her plain looks, and often told the girl to her face that she wished she had taken after her in personal appearance. Maggie used to smile when this was said, and then would go away to her own room and look at her queer, dark face, and rather small eyes, and determined mouth, and somewhat heavy jaw, and shake her head solemnly. She did not agree with her mother; she preferred being what she was. She liked best to take after her father.

It was Maggie Howland who had persuaded Mr. Tristram,

during a brief visit which he had made to town at Christmas, to send his daughters to Aylmer House. Maggie was fond of Molly and Isabel. With all her oddities, she had real affection, and one of her good qualities was that she really loved those whom she influenced.

Mr. Tristram went to see Mrs. Ward, the head-mistress of that most select establishment for young ladies at Kensington. Mrs. Ward was all that was delightful. She was a noble-minded woman of high aspirations, and her twenty young boarders were happy and bright and contented under her influence.

Maggie joined the school at Easter, and spent one term there, and was now coming on a visit to the rectory.

"I wonder what she will have to tell us! I wonder if she is as fascinating as ever!" thought Molly Tristram as she hurried her steps.

She had now reached that point in the avenue which gave a good view of the old Manor, with its castellated walls and its square towers at each end. The gardens were laid out in terraces after an old-world fashion. There was one terrace devoted to croquet, another to tennis. As Molly approached she saw Cicely and Merry playing a game of croquet rather languidly. They wore simple white frocks which just came down above their ankles, and had white washing-hats on their heads. Their thick, rather fair hair was worn in a plait down each young back, and was tied with a bunch of pale-blue ribbon at the end.

"Hello!" shouted Molly.

The girls flung down their rackets and ran joyfully to meet her.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" said Cicely. "It's much too hot to play tennis, and even croquet is more than we can manage. Are you going to stay and have lunch with us, Molly?"

"No," replied Molly; "I must go back immediately."

"Oh dear! I wish you would stay," continued Merry. "We could go and sit in the arbor, and you could tell us another fascinating story about that school of yours at Hanover."

"Yes, yes," said Cicely; "do stay – do, Molly! We want to hear a lot more about that remarkable girl Maggie Howland."

"I can't stay," said Molly in a semi-whisper; "but I tell you what, girls." She seized a hand of both as she spoke. "I have come with news."

"What?" "What?" asked the twins eagerly.

"There's very seldom much news going on here," said Cicely. "Not that we mind – not a little bit; we're as happy as girls can be."

"Of course we are," said Merry. "We haven't a care in the world."

"All the same," said Cicely, "tell us your news, Molly, for you do look excited."

"Well," said Molly, who enjoyed the pleasure of giving her friends a piece of information which she knew would interest them intensely, "you know we are to come up here this afternoon to have tea and buns, aren't we?"

"Oh, don't talk in that way!" said Merry. "One would suppose

you were school children, when you are our darling, dear friends."

"Our only friends," said Cicely. "You are the only girls in the world father allows us to be the least bit intimate with."

"Oh, well," said Molly, "of course Belle and I are very fond of you both, naturally."

"Naturally!" echoed Cicely. But then she added, "How queer you look, Molly, as though you were keeping something back!"

"Well, yes, I am," said Molly; "but I'll have it out in a minute."

"Oh, please, be quick!" said Merry. "Anything a little bit out of the common is very interesting. – Isn't it, Cicely?"

"Very," said Cicely; "more particularly in the holidays. When we are busy with our lessons things don't so much matter, you know. – But do be quick, Molly; what is it?"

"Well," said Molly, "you've asked us to spend the afternoon with you."

"Of course, and you're both coming, surely?"

"We are – certainly we are – that is, if you will allow us to bring"–

"To bring"–interrupted Cicely. "Oh Molly, do speak!"

"Well, I will; only, don't jump, you two girls. To bring Maggie Howland!"

Cicely's face grew very pink. Merry, on the contrary, turned a little pale. They were both silent for a brief space. Then Merry said excitedly, "Maggie Howland —*the* Maggie Howland?"

"Yes, *the* Maggie Howland; the one who has got the power,

the charm, the fascination."

"Oh, oh!" said Cicely. "But why is she with you? How has it happened?"

"She is not absolutely with us yet; and as to how it happened I cannot exactly tell you. We had a telegram from her late last night asking if she might come to-day to spend a week or fortnight, and of course we wired back 'Yes.' We are delighted; but of course you may not like her, girls."

"Like her! like her!" said Cicely; "and after all you have said too! We shall be certain to more than like her."

"She's not a bit pretty, so don't expect it," said Molly.

"We were brought up," said Merry a little stiffly, "not to regard looks as anything at all."

"Nonsense!" replied Molly. "Looks mean a great deal. I'd give I don't know what to be beautiful; but as I am not I don't mean to fret about it. Well, Maggie's downright plain; in fact – in fact – almost ugly, I may say; and yet – and yet, she is just Maggie; and you are not five minutes in her society before you'd rather have her face than any other face in the world. But the immediate question is: may she come this afternoon, or may she not?"

"Of course – of course she may come," said Cicely; "we'll be delighted, we'll be charmed to see her. This *is* pleasant news!"

"I think, perhaps," said Merry, "we ought to go and ask mother. Don't you think so, Cis?"

"Of course we ought," said Cicely. "I forgot that. Just stay where you are, Molly, and I'll run to the house and find mother.

It's only to ask her, for of course she will give leave."

Cicely ran off at once, and Merry and Molly were left alone.

"I know you'll be delighted with her," said Molly.

"It will be very delightful to see her," replied Merry.

"You must expect to be disappointed at first, all the same," continued Molly.

"Oh, looks do not matter one scrap," said Merry.

"Isabel and I are going to her school; you know that, don't you, Merry?"

"Yes," said Merry with a sigh. "What fun you do have at your different schools! Don't you, Molly?"

"Well, yes," said Molly rather gravely; "but it isn't only the fun; we see a lot of the world, and we mix with other girls and make friends."

"Mother prefers a home education for us, and so does father," remarked Merry. "Ah! here comes Cicely. She is flying down the terrace. Of course mother is delighted."

This proved to be the case. Mrs. Cardew would welcome any girl introduced to her daughters through her dear friend Mr. Tristram. She sent a further invitation for the three young people to remain to an impromptu supper, which was pleasanter than late dinner in such hot weather, and asked if Mr. and Mrs. Tristram would join them at the meal.

"Hurrah!" cried Molly. "That will be fun! I must be off now, girls. We'll be with you, all three of us, between four and five o'clock."

CHAPTER II.
SPOT-EAR

Isabel took great pains arranging Maggie Rowland's bedroom. At the Castle (or Manor) there were always troops of servants for every imaginable thing; but at the rectory the servants were few, and the girls did a good many odds and ends of work themselves. They were expected to dust and keep in perfect order their exceedingly pretty bedrooms, they were further required to make their own beds, and if a young visitor arrived, they were obliged to wait on her and see to her comfort. For the Tristrams had just an income sufficient to cover their expenses, with nothing at all to put by. Mr. Tristram had his two little boys to think of as well as his two girls. His intention was to give his children the best education possible, believing that such a gift was far more valuable to them than mere money. By-and-by, when they were old enough, the girls might earn their own living if they felt so inclined, and each girl might become a specialist in her way.

Molly was exceedingly fond of music, and wished to excel in that particular. Isabel, on the contrary, was anxious to obtain a post as gymnasium teacher with the London County Council. But all these things were for the future. At present the girls were to study, were to acquire knowledge, were to be prepared for that three-fold battle which includes body, soul, and spirit, and which

needs triple armor in the fight.

Mr. Tristram was a man of high religious principles. He taught his children to love the good and refuse the evil. He wanted his girls to be useful women by-and-by in the world. He put usefulness before happiness, assuring his children that if they followed the one they would secure the other.

Belle, therefore, felt quite at home now as she took out pretty mats and laid them on little tables in the neat spare room which had been arranged for the reception of Maggie Howland. She saw that all the appointments of the room were as perfect as simplicity and cleanliness could effect, and then went out into the summer garden to pick some choice, sweet-smelling flowers. She selected roses and carnations, and, bringing them in, arranged them in vases in the room.

Hearing the sound of wheels, she flew eagerly downstairs and met her friend as she stepped out of the little governess-cart.

"Well, here I am!" said Maggie. "And how is Belle? How good-natured of you all to have me, and how delightful it is to smell the delicious country air! Mother and I find town so hot and stuffy. I haven't brought a great lot of luggage, and I am not a bit smart; but you won't mind that – will you, dear old Belle?"

"You always talk about not being smart, Maggie; but you manage to look smarter than anyone else," said Isabel, her eager brown eyes devouring her friend's appearance with much curiosity. For Maggie looked, to use a proverbial phrase, as if she had stepped out of a bandbox. If she was plain of face she had an

exceedingly neat figure, and there was a fashionable, trim look about her which is uncommon in a girl of her age; for Maggie was only just sixteen, and scarcely looked as much. In some ways she might almost have been a French girl, so exceedingly neat and *comme il faut* was her little person. She was built on a *petite* scale, and although her face was so plain, she had lovely hands and beautiful small feet. These feet were always shod in the most correct style, and she took care of her hands, never allowing them to get red or sunburnt.

"Where's Molly?" was her remark, as the two girls, with their arms twined round each other, entered the wide, low hall which was one of the special features of the old rectory.

"She has gone up to see the Cardews."

"Who are the Cardews?"

"Why, surely, Mags, you must have heard of them?"

"You don't mean," said Maggie with a laugh, and showing a gleam of strong white teeth, "the two little ladies who live in a bandbox?"

"Oh, you really must not laugh at them," said Isabel, immediately on the defensive for her friends; "but they do lead a somewhat exclusive life. Molly has gone up to the Castle, as we always call Meredith Manor, to announce your arrival, and to ask permission to bring you there to a tennis-party this afternoon; so you will soon see them for yourself. Now, come in and say good-morning to the mater; she is longing to see you."

"Hello, Peterkins!" called out Maggie at that moment, as a

small boy with a smut across his face suddenly peeped round a door.

"I'm not Peterkins!" he said angrily.

Maggie laughed again. "I am going to call you Peterkins," she said. "Is this one of the little brothers, Belle?"

"Yes. – Come here at once, Andrew, and speak to Miss Howland."

The boy approached shyly. Then his eyes looked up into the queer face of the girl who looked down at him. The sulkiness cleared away from his brow, and he said, in an eager, hurried, half-shy, half-confidential way, "I say, do you like rabbits?"

"Dote on 'em," said Maggie.

"Then I'm your man, and I don't mind being Peterkins to you; and will you – will you come and see mine? I've got Spot-ear, and Dove, and Angelus, and Clover. And Jack, he has five rabbits, but they're not near as nice as mine. You'll come and see my rabbits, won't you, Miss – Miss–"

"Oh, I am Maggie," said the girl. "I'll come and see your rabbits, Peterkins, in a minute; and I won't look at Jack's; but you must let me talk to your mother first."

"There you are, Maggie," said Belle when the boy had disappeared; "fascinating Andrew in your usual way; and Jack will be just furious, for he's the elder, you know, and he has a temper, and you mustn't set one of them against the other – promise you won't."

"Trust me," said Maggie. "Peterkins is a nice little fellow, and

I'll manage Jackdaw too."

"You don't mean to say you'll call them by those names?"

"Yes, yes. I always have my own way with people, as you know."

"Indeed I do. Oh, come along, you queer creature. Here's the darling mums. Mater dearest, here is Maggie Howland."

"Delighted to see you, my dear," said Mrs. Tristram. "I hope you are not tired after your journey from town."

"Not in the least, thank you, Mrs. Tristram," said Maggie, speaking in a voice of very peculiar quality; it was sweet and rich and full of many intonations. She had the power of putting a world of meaning into the most commonplace expressions.

Mrs. Tristram had not seen Maggie before, and it was Mr. Tristram who had been completely bowled over by the young lady just at Christmas-time.

"I bid you a hearty welcome to the rectory," said the good clergyman's wife, "and I hope you will have a pleasant time with my children."

"I'll have a fascinating time," said Maggie. "I'm just too delighted to come. It was sweet of you to have me; and may I, please, give you a kiss?"

"Of course you may, dear child," said Mrs. Tristram.

Maggie bestowed the kiss, and immediately afterward was conducted to her room by the worshiping Belle.

"I do hope you'll like it," said Belle in an almost timorous voice. "I prepared it for you myself."

"Why, it's sweet," said Maggie, "and so full of the country! Oh, I say, what roses! And those carnations – Malmaisons, aren't they? I must wear a couple in this brown holland frock; they'll tone with it perfectly. What a delicious smell!"

Maggie sniffed at the roses. Belle lounged on the window-seat.

"Molly will be jealous," she said. "Think of my having you these few moments all to myself!"

"I am delighted to come, as you know quite well," replied Maggie. "It's all right about school, isn't it, Belle?"

"Yes, quite, quite right. We are to join you there in September."

"It's a perfectly splendid place," said Maggie. "I will describe it to you later on."

"But can it be nicer," said Belle, "than our darling school at Hanover?"

"Nicer!" exclaimed Maggie. "You couldn't compare the two places. I tell you it's perfect. The girls – well, they're aristocratic; they're girls of the Upper Ten. It's the most select school. You are in luck to be admitted, I can tell you. You will learn a lot about society when you are a member of Mrs. Ward's school."

"But what possible good will that do us when we are never going into it?" said Belle.

Maggie slightly narrowed her already narrow eyes, took off her hat, and combed back her crisp, dark hair from her low, full, very broad forehead. Then she said, with a smile, "You are to stay two years at Mrs. Ward's, are you not?"

"Yes, I think that is the arrangement."

"And I am to stay there for two years," said Maggie; "I mean two more. I will ask you, Isabel Tristram, what good society is worth at the end of your two years. I expect you will tell me a very different story then."

At this moment there came a hurried, nervous, excited knock at the room door.

"Aren't you coming, Miss – Miss – Maggie? Clover and Dove and Spot-ear and Angelus are all waiting. Their hutch is beautiful and clean, and I have all their lettuces waiting for them just outside, so they sha'n't begin to nibble till you come. Do, do come, please, Miss Maggie."

"Of course I will, my darling Peterkins," replied Maggie in her joyful voice. "Oh, this is – this is – this *is* fun! – Come along, Belle; come along."

"But don't let poor Jack get into a temper," said Isabel in a half-frightened whisper.

Maggie took no notice of her. She opened the bedroom door and flew downstairs, holding the dirty, hot little hand of Andrew, *alias* Peterkins, while Isabel followed in their wake.

In a far-away part of the rectory garden, on a bit of waste land at the other side of the great vegetable garden, were two hutches which stood side by side, and these hutches contained those most adorable creatures, the pets, the darlings of the Tristram boys.

The Tristram boys were aged eleven and ten years respectively. Jack was eleven, Andrew ten. They were very

sturdy, healthy, fine little fellows. At present they went to a good day-school in the neighborhood, but were to be sent to a boarding-school about the same time as their sisters were to begin their education at Aylmer House in Kensington. Their passion above all things was for pets. They had tried every sort: white mice (these somehow or other were sacrificed to the reigning cat) and waltzing mice (that shared an equally luckless fate); these were followed by white rats, which got into the garden and did mischief, and were banished by order of the rector, who was a most determined master in his own house. Dogs were also forbidden, except one very intelligent Airedale, that belonged to the whole family and to no one in particular. But the boys must find vent for their passion in some way, and rabbits were allowed them. At the present moment Jack owned five, Andrew four.

In trembling triumph, Andrew brought his new friend to see his darlings. He greatly hoped that Jack would not appear on the scene just now. While Maggie was up in her bedroom taking off, her hat, he had, with herculean strength, managed to move an old wooden door and put it in such a position that Jack's hutch was completely hidden, while his hutch shone forth in all its glory, with those fascinating creatures Spot-ear, Angelus, Dove, and Clover looking through their prison-bars at the tempting meal that awaited them.

"Here they are! here they are!" said Andrew. "Beauties, all four; my own – my very own! Maggie, you may share one of them with me while you are here. He must live in his hutch, but

he shall be yours and mine. Would you like Spot-ear? He is a character. He's the finest old cove you ever came across in your life. Look at him now, pretending he doesn't care anything at all for his lettuce, and he's just dying for it. Clover is the greedy one. Clover would eat till he-burst if I let him. As to Angelus, she squeaks sometimes – you'll hear her if you listen hard – that's why I called her Angelus; and Dove – why, she's a dear pet; but the character of all is Spot-ear. You'd like to share him with me, wouldn't you, Maggie?"

"Yes, yes; he is so ugly; he is quite interesting," said Maggie. She flung herself on the ground by the side of the hutch, and gazed in at the occupants as though her only aim in life was to worship rabbits.

"You take that leaf of lettuce and give it to Spot-ear your very own self," said Peterkins. "He'll love you ever after; he's a most affectionate old fellow."

Maggie proceeded to feed the rabbit. Peterkins hopped about in a state of excitement which he had seldom experienced before. Maggie asked innumerable questions. Belle seated herself on the fallen trunk of an old oak-tree and looked on in wonder.

Maggie was a curious girl. She seemed to have a power over every one. There was Andrew – such a shy little fellow as a rule – simply pouring out his heart to her.

Suddenly Belle rose. "It's time for lunch," she said, "and you must be hungry. Andrew, go straight to the house and wash your face and hands. No lady would sit down to lunch with such a dirty

boy as you are."

"Oh, I say, am I?" said Andrew. "Do you think so, Maggie?"

"You are a most disreputable-looking little scamp," said Maggie.

"Then I won't be – I won't, most truly. I'll run off at once and get clean, and I'll get into my Sunday best if you wish it."

"Dear me, no!" said Maggie; "I don't wish it. But clean hands and face – well, they are essential to the ordinary British boy, if he's a gentleman."

"I am your gentleman – for evermore," said Andrew.

"I think you are, Peterkins."

"Then I'm off to clean up," said the small boy.

"I say, Andrew," cried his sister; "before you go take that door away from Jack's hutch. He'll be so furious at your keeping the light and air away from his rabbits."

"Not I. I can't be bothered," said Peterkins.

"Please take it away at once," said Maggie.

Andrew's brow puckered into a frown.

"But you'll see 'em, and he's got five!" he said in a most distressed voice.

"Honor bright," said Maggie, "I'll turn my back and shut my eyes. Jackdaw shall show me his rabbits himself."

Peterkins immediately removed the door, dragging it to its former place, where it leaned against a high wall. He then rushed up to Maggie.

"I've done it," he said. "Promise you won't like his bunnies."

"Can't," said Maggie, "for I'll love 'em."

"Well, at least promise you won't love him."

"Can't," said Maggie again, "for I shall."

"I'll die of raging jealousy," said Peterkins.

"No, you won't, you silly boy. Get off to the house and make yourself tidy. Come along, Belle."

"I say, Maggie," said Belle, "you mustn't set those two boys by the ears. They're fond enough of each other."

"Of course I'll do nothing of the kind," said Maggie. "That's a charming little chap, and Spot-ear is my rabbit as well as his. Jackdaw shall share two of his rabbits with me. Oh, it is such fun turning people round your little finger!"

Just then Molly, rather red in the face, ran up.

"Oh, you darling, darling Maggie!" she said. "So you've come!"

"Come!" cried Maggie. "I feel as if I'd been here for ever."

"I am delighted to see you," said Molly.

She kissed her friend rapturously. Maggie presented a cool, firm, round cheek.

"Oh, how sweet you look, Mags!"

"Don't talk nonsense, Molly; I'm not a bit sweet-looking."

"To me," said Molly with fervor, "You're the loveliest girl in all the wide world."

"I'm very ugly, and you know that perfectly well," said Maggie; "but now don't let's talk of looks."

"Whatever were you doing in this part of the garden?"

inquired Molly.

"Oh, she was making love to Andrew," remarked Belle. "She calls him Peterkins, and he allows it, and he has given her one-half of Spot-ear; and she means to make love to Jack, and he's to give her a couple of his rabbits – I mean, to share them with her. She's more extraordinary than ever, more altogether out of the common."

"As if I didn't know that," said Molly. "It's all right about this afternoon, Maggie. Oh, what do you think? We're to stay to supper, and I have a special invitation for father and mother to come and join us then. Won't it be fun! I do wonder, Maggie, if you will like the Cardew girls."

"Probably not," replied Maggie in a very calm voice; "but at least I can promise you one thing: they'll both like me."

"No doubt whatever on that point," replied Belle with fervor.

They entered the house, and soon found themselves seated round the table. Mr. Tristram greeted Maggie with his usual gentle dignity. Molly delivered herself of her message from the Castle. Mr. and Mrs. Tristram said that they would be delighted to join the Cardews at supper.

The meal was proceeding cheerfully, and Maggie was entertaining her host and hostess by just those pleasant little pieces of information which an exceedingly well-bred girl can impart without apparently intending to do so, when a shy and very clean little figure glided into the room, a pair of bright-brown eyes looked fixedly at Maggie, and then glared defiance

at Belle, who happened to be seated near that adorable young person.

Peterkins was making up his mind that in future that coveted seat should be his – for he and Maggie could talk in whispers during the meal about Spot-ear, Angelus, and the rest – when his father said, "Sit down, my boy; take your place at once. You are rather late."

The boy slipped into his seat.

"I am glad to see you looking so tidy, Andrew," said his mother approvingly.

Andrew looked across at Maggie. Maggie did not once glance at him. She was talking in her gentle, lady-like tone to the rector.

Presently another boy came in, bigger and broader than Andrew.

Andrew said in a raised voice, "Here's Jack, and his hands aren't a bit clean."

"Hush!" said the rector.

Jack flushed and looked defiantly at Maggie.

Maggie raised her eyes and gave him a sweet glance. "Are you really Jack?" she said. "I am so glad to know you. I have been making friends with your brother Andrew, whom I call Peterkins. I want to call you Jackdaw. May I?"

Jack felt a great lump in his throat. His face was scarlet. He felt unable to speak, but he nodded.

"I have been looking at Peterkins's rabbits," continued Maggie. "I want to see yours after lunch."

“They’re beauties!” burst from Jack. “They’re ever so many times better than Andrew’s. I’ve got a cream-colored Angora. His name is Fanciful, and I’ve got–”

“Hush, my boy, hush!” said the rector. “Not so much talking during meals. Well, Maggie, my dear – we must, of course, call you by your Christian name–”

“Of course, Mr. Tristram; I should indeed feel strange if you didn’t.”

“We are delighted to see you,” continued the rector, “and you must tell the girls all about your new school.”

“And you too, sir,” said Maggie, in her soft, rich voice. “Oh! you’ll be delighted – delighted; there never was such a woman as Mrs. Ward.”

“I took a very great liking to her,” said the rector. “I think my girls fortunate to be placed under her care. She has been good, very good and kind, to me and mine.”

“I wonder what he means by that,” thought Maggie; but she made no remark aloud.

CHAPTER III.
LADY LYSLE

At about a quarter to four that same afternoon three girls prepared to walk over to Meredith Manor. It was for such golden opportunities that Molly and Isabel kept their best frocks; it was for just such occasions that they arrayed themselves most neatly and becomingly. Their dress, it must be owned, was limited in quantity and also in quality; but on the present occasion, in their pretty white spotted muslins, with pale-blue sashes round their waists and white muslin hats to match, they looked as charming a young pair of English girls as could be found in the length and breadth of the land. It is true their feet were not nearly as perfectly shod as Maggie's, nor were their gloves quite so immaculate; but then they were going to play tennis, and shoes and gloves did not greatly matter in the country. Maggie thought otherwise. Her tan tennis-shoes exactly toned with her neatly fitting brown holland dress. The little hat she wore on her head was made of brown straw trimmed very simply with ribbon; it was an ugly hat, but on Maggie's head it seemed to complete her dress, to be a part of her, so that no one noticed in the least what she wore except that she looked all right.

Two boys with worshiping eyes watched the trio as they stepped down the rectory avenue and disappeared from view.

Two boys fought a little afterward, but made it up again, and then lay on the grass side by side and discussed Maggie, pulling her to pieces in one sense, but adoring her all the same.

Meanwhile the girls themselves chatted as girls will when the heart is light and there is no care anywhere. It was very hot, even hotter than it had been in the morning; but when they reached the road shaded so beautifully by the elm-trees they found a delicious breeze which fanned their faces. Somehow, Maggie never seemed to suffer from weather at all. She was never too cold; she was never too hot; she was never ill; no one had ever heard her complain of ache or pain. She was always joyous, except when she was sympathizing with somebody else's sorrow, and then her sympathy was detached – that is, it did not make her personally sad, although it affected and helped the person who was the recipient of it to a most remarkable extent. One of Maggie's great attractions was her absolute health, her undiminished strength, the fact that she could endure almost any exertion without showing a trace of fatigue.

Molly and Isabel were also strong, hearty, well-made girls, and the excitement of this expedition caused them to chatter more volubly than usual. Maggie had a good deal to tell them with regard to the new school, and they had a great deal to tell her with regard to the Cardews.

Just as they were entering the avenue Maggie turned and faced her two companions. "May I say something?" she asked eagerly.

"Why, of course, Mags," said Molly.

"Well, it's this: from what you told me of your friends, they must be the most profoundly uninteresting girls."

"Oh no, indeed they are not!" said Isabel stanchly. "Merry has a great deal in her, and Cicely is so nice-looking! We think she will be beautiful by-and-by; but Merry undoubtedly has the most character. Then there is something dignified and aristocratic about them, and yet they are not really proud, although they might be, for they are so rich, and Meredith Manor is such a wonderful old house."

"Didn't you tell me," said Maggie, "that Meredith Manor belonged to Mrs. Cardew?"

"Did I?" said Isabel, coloring in some confusion. "I am sure I don't know; I don't remember saying it. I don't think Mrs. Cardew is the sort of woman who would call anything hers apart from her husband. She is devoted to him, and no wonder, for he is quite charming. He is nearly as charming as father, and that's saying a great deal."

"Do let's come on. We'll be late!" said Molly impatiently.

"No, not quite yet, please," said Maggie. "I want to understand the position. Mrs. Cardew was a Miss Meredith?"

"Yes, dear Maggie; but what does that matter?"

"And," continued Maggie, "she was the heiress of Meredith Manor?"

"I suppose so. Father can tell you exactly."

"Oh, I don't want to question him, but I want to get my bearings. On the mother's side, the Cardew girls belong to the

country. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Do come on."

"But their father," continued Maggie, "he is in trade, isn't he?"

"He's a perfect gentleman," said Isabel stoutly; "no one looks down on trade in these days."

"Of course not. I adore trade myself," said Maggie. She now proceeded to walk very slowly up the avenue. She was evidently thinking hard. After a time she said, "I mean to get those girls to come to school with you, Molly, and with you, Isabel, in September."

Both the Tristrams burst into a peal of merry laughter. "Oh Mags!" they cried, "we never did think before that you were conceited. You certainly overrate even your powers when you imagine that you will get Mr. Cardew to change his mind."

"What do you mean by his changing his mind?"

"Why, this," said Belle. "He has set his face from the very first against his girls leaving home. He wishes them to have a home education, and that alone."

"Oh, that is all right," said Maggie cheerfully. "Well, what will you bet, girls, that I have my way?"

"We don't want you to lose, Maggie; but you certainly will not get your way in this particular."

"Well, now, I am going to be generous. I am not rich; but I have got two gold bracelets at home, and I will give one to each of you for your very own if I succeed in bringing Cicely and Merry Cardew to Mrs. Ward's school."

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed both the Tristram girls.

"You'll get your bracelets," said Maggie in a most confident tone, "and I can assure you they are beauties; my darling father brought them from India years and years ago. He brought a lot of jewels for mother and me, and I will get the bracelets for you – one each – if I succeed; but you must allow me to manage things my own way."

"But you won't do anything – anything – to upset the Cardews?" said Isabel.

"Upset them!" said Maggie. "Well, yes, I do mean to upset them. I mean to alter their lives; I mean to turn things topsyturvy for them; but I'll manage it in such a fashion that neither you, nor Molly, nor your father, nor your mother, nor anyone will suspect how I have got my way, but get it I will. I thought I'd tell you, that's all. You'd like to have them at school with you, wouldn't you?"

"Oh yes, very much indeed," said Molly.

"I am not so sure," said Isabel. "It's rather fun coming back to the rectory in the holidays and telling the Cardew girls all about what we do and how we spend our time. There'll be nothing to tell them if we all go to the same school."

"Well," said Maggie, "I don't agree with you. I expect, on the contrary, you'll find a vast lot more to talk about. But come, let's hurry now; I want to be introduced to them, for I have no time to lose."

Neither Isabel nor Molly could quite make out why they felt

a certain depression after Maggie Howland had explained her views. The thought of the possible possession of the bracelets did not greatly elate them. Besides, there was not the most remote chance of even such a fascinating young person as Maggie succeeding in her project. She would meet her match, if not in Mrs. Cardew, then in Mr. Cardew. There was no doubt whatever on that point. But they greatly wished she would not try. They did not want her to upset the placid existence of their young friends. The girls who lived at the Castle, the girls who pursued their sheltered, happy, refined life, were in a manner mysterious and remote to the young Tristrams, and they thought that they would not love them any more if they were brought into closer contact with them.

A turn in the avenue now brought the old manor-house into view. Some friends of Mrs. Cardew's had arrived, but there were no other young people to be seen. Cicely and Merry were standing talking to a lady of middle age who had come to pay an afternoon call, when Cicely found herself changing color and glancing eagerly at Merry.

"Oh, will you excuse me?" she said in her pretty, refined voice. "Our special friends the Tristrams, the rector's daughters, and a friend of theirs, a Miss Howland, are coming up the avenue."

"Certainly, my dear," said Lady Lysle; and Cicely and Merry were off down the avenue like arrows from the bow to meet their friends.

Lady Lysle watched the two girls, and then turned to speak

to Mrs. Cardew.

"What name was that I heard Cicely say?" was her remark. "Of course I know the Tristrams, but who was the girl who was with them?"

"A special friend of theirs, a Miss Howland. She has been their school companion abroad. She is staying with them at the rectory. Why, what is the matter, Lady Lysle? Do you know anything about her?"

"I don't know her," said Lady Lysle, "but I know a little bit about her mother. I should not have supposed the Tristram girls and Miss Howland were in the same set."

"Why, what is wrong?" said Mrs. Cardew, who was exceedingly particular as regarded the people whom her daughters knew.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said Lady Lysle. "I happen not particularly to like Mrs. Howland; but doubtless I am prejudiced."

She turned to talk to a neighbor, and by this time the five girls had met. There was an eager interchange of greetings, and then Maggie found herself walking up the avenue by Merry's side, while Cicely found a place between the two Tristram girls.

"I am so glad you've come!" said Merry in her gentle, polite voice.

"It is kind of you to ask me," replied Maggie. "Do you know," she added, turning and fixing her curious eyes on her companion's face, "that I am one of those poor girls who have

never seen a beautiful house like yours before."

"I am so glad you like our house," said Merry; "but you haven't seen it yet."

"I am looking at it now. So this is what I am accustomed to hear spoken of as one of the 'Homes of England'?"

"It certainly is a home," said Merry, "and an old one, too. Parts of the Manor have been centuries in existence, but some parts, of course, are comparatively new."

"Will you take me all over it, Miss Cardew?" asked Maggie.

"Indeed, I shall be delighted; but you must come another day for that, for we want to make up some sets of tennis without any delay. We have all our afternoon planned out. There are three or four young people who may arrive any moment, so that we shall be able to make two good sets."

"How wonderful it all is!" said Maggie, who kept on looking at the house with ever-increasing admiration, and did not seem particularly keen about tennis.

"Don't you like tennis, Miss – Miss Howland?" said Merry.

"Oh yes," replied Maggie after a pause; "but then I think," she added, after yet another pause, "that I like every nice thing in all the world."

"How delightful that must be!" said Merry, becoming more and more attracted by Maggie each moment. "And you know a lot, too, don't you? For you have seen so much of the world."

"I know very little," replied Maggie; "and as to having seen the world, that is to come. I am quite young, you know – only

just sixteen."

"But Isabel and Molly told me that you knew more than any other girl of their acquaintance."

Maggie gave a cheerful laugh, and said, "You mustn't mind what they say, poor darlings! The fact is, they're fond of me, and they magnify my knowledge; but in reality it doesn't exist. Only, I must tell you, Miss Cardew, I mean to see everything, and to know everything. I mean to have a glorious future."

The enthusiasm in the charming voice was also seen, to shine through those queer, narrow eyes. Merry felt her heart beat. "I am going to tell you something in return," she said, speaking, for a wonder, without diffidence, for she was naturally very shy and retiring. "I wish with all my heart that I could live a glorious life such as you describe."

"And surely you can?" said Maggie.

"No, I must be satisfied with a very quiet life. But we won't talk of it now. I am really very happy. I should consider myself a most wicked, discontented girl were I anything else. And, please, may I take you to see mother?"

Merry brought up her new friend to introduce her to Mrs. Cardew, who for the first moment, remembering what Lady Lysle had said, was a trifle stiff to Maggie Howland, but two minutes afterward was chatting to her in a pleasant and very friendly manner. She even went the length of personally introducing Maggie to Lady Lysle, excusing herself for the act by saying that Lady Lysle knew her mother.

Maggie also succeeded in charming Lady Lysle, who said to Mrs. Cardew afterward, "I am glad you have introduced the girl to me. She is not in the least like her commonplace, affected mother. She seems a very good sort, and I like plain girls."

"But is she plain?" said Mrs. Cardew in some astonishment. "Do you know, I never noticed it."

Lady Lysle laughed. "You never noticed how remarkably plain that girl is, my dear friend?" she said.

"To be frank with you," said Mrs. Cardew, "I didn't think of her face at all. She has a pretty manner and a nice, sensible, agreeable way of talking. I do not think my girls can suffer injury from her."

"They seem to like her, at any rate," said Lady Lysle, looking significantly as she spoke at the distant part of the grounds, where Maggie, with Cicely at one side of her and Merry at the other, was talking eagerly. "Oh yes, she seems a nice child," continued the great lady, "and it would be unfair to judge a girl because her mother is not to one's taste."

"But is there anything really objectionable in the mother?" asked Mrs. Cardew.

"Nothing whatsoever, except that she is pushing, vulgar, and shallow. I am under the impression that the Howlands are exceedingly poor. Of course they are not to be blamed for that, but how the mother can manage to send the girl to expensive schools puzzles me."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Gardew in her gentle voice, "the child is

evidently very different from her mother, and I must respect the mother for doing her best to get her girl well educated."

"Your girls are not going to school, are they, Sylvia?" asked Lady Lysle.

"Mine? Of course not. Their father wouldn't hear of it."

"On the whole, I think he is right," said Lady Lysle, "though there are advantages in schools. Now, that school at Kensington, Aylmer House, which my dear friend Mrs. Ward conducts with such skill and marvelous dexterity, is a place where any girl might receive advantages."

"Is it possible," said Mrs. Cardew, "that Mrs. Ward is your friend?"

"My very great friend, dear. I have known her all my life. Aylmer House is particularly select. My niece Aneta is at the school, and her mother is charmed with it."

"But that is very strange," said Mrs. Gardew after a pause. "You must talk to-night to our rector when he comes. Oh yes, of course you'll stay to supper."

"I cannot, I regret to say."

"Well, then, if you won't, there's no use in pressing you. But I have something curious to say. The rector's two little girls are going to Aylmer House in September, and that little Miss Howland whom I just introduced to you is also one of the girls under Mrs. Ward's care."

"Then she will do well," said Lady Lysle alter a pause, during which her face looked very thoughtful.

“I wonder if she knows your niece,” said Mrs. Cardew.

Lady Lysle laughed. “I presume she does. The school only contains twenty boarders – never any more. I happen to know that there are two vacancies at the present moment. Really, if I were you, Sylvia, I would give your girls a couple of years there. It would do them a world of good, and they would acquire some slight knowledge of the world before they enter it.”

“Impossible! quite impossible!” said Mrs. Cardew; “their father would never consent.”

CHAPTER IV.
POWER WAS EVERYTHING TO MAGGIE

Meanwhile the young people enjoyed themselves vastly. Maggie was very modest with regard to her tennis, but she quickly proved that she could play better than any one else at the Manor that day. The visitors walking about the grounds paused to remark on her excellent play and to inquire who she was. She took her little triumph very modestly, saying that she was rather surprised at herself, and supposed that it was the fresh and delicious air of the country which had put her into such good form.

"She is ridiculously overmodest," said Isabel Tristram to Merry, "for she always did play every sort of game better than the rest of us. She is not quite so good at her books; except, indeed, at certain things, such as recitation. I wish you could see and hear her then. She is almost a genius. She looks like one inspired."

"I think her quite delightful," said Merry; "and as to being plain–"

"I told you, didn't I?" said Belle, "that you'd never notice her looks after you had seen her for a minute or two."

By-and-by it was time for the family to go into the house for supper at Meredith Manor. The three girls from the rectory were

taken upstairs, to a spacious bedroom to wash their hands and brush their hair. Molly and Isabel were both most anxious to know what Maggie thought of Cicely and Merry.

"What I think of them?" said Maggie. "Oh, they're first-rate, and not really dull at all; and the whole place is lovely, and all the people I met to-day were so nice, except, indeed, that Lady Lysle."

"Lady Lysle!" exclaimed Molly in a tone of astonishment. "Why, she is Mrs. Cardew's greatest friend. Do you mean to say you were introduced to her?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cardew was kind enough to do so, though I am sure I didn't want it at all."

"But I can't imagine why she did it," said Molly in a tone of astonishment. "Mrs. Cardew never introduces either of us to the grown-up people."

"Well, her ostensible reason," said Maggie, "was that Lady Lysle knows my mother."

"Does she, indeed?" said Isabel in a tone of great respect.

"But that doesn't make me like her any the better," said Maggie. "And now I will tell you why, girls, only you must faithfully promise you won't repeat it to any one."

"Of course not," said the girls eagerly, who were accustomed to receive secrets from their schoolfellows, though Maggie, as a rule, never gave her secrets to anyone.

"Well, I will tell you," said Maggie, the color flushing into her face and then leaving it pale again. "Aneta Lysle is one of the

girls at Aylmer House. She is Lady Lysle's niece; and – well – you know I am tolerant enough, but I can't bear Aneta Lysle."

Molly and Isabel were silent for a minute.

"If *you* can't bear her," said Isabel, "then I don't suppose we'll like her either when we go to the school."

"Oh yes, you will; you'll adore her – sure to. Now promise once again that you will never repeat this."

"We certainly will not," said Molly.

Isabel nodded emphatically. "We don't tell secrets," she said. Then she added, "We had best go downstairs now, if you're quite tidy, Mags."

During supper that night Mrs. Cardew, who found herself seated near her favorite rector, began to ply him with questions with regard to Aylmer House. How had he heard of it, and why had he specially fixed on that establishment for his daughters?

The rector smiled. He had twinkling dark eyes, and they now looked down the long table until they rested for a brief moment on Maggie's young figure. She was talking to Mr. Cardew, who, stately and reserved as he was, took her remarks with good-natured tolerance.

"A nice, unaffected child," he kept saying to himself, and neither did he remark how plain she was.

"That young person yonder," said Mr. Tristram to Mrs. Cardew, "is the influence that has induced me to make arrangements for my girls at Aylmer House."

"Miss Howland! You don't mean to say that you are influenced

by a schoolgirl?"

Mr. Tristram looked grave. "In this case I may as well confess at once that I have been influenced," he said. "I have heard a great deal of the child from Molly and Isabel, for they were all three at the same excellent school in Hanover. I met little Miss Howland when I was in London at Christmas. Being such a great friend of my children's, I naturally talked to her. She told me of Mrs. Ward and of the new delightful school to which she was going. She certainly never once pressed me to send my girls there, but it occurred to me that I would visit Mrs. Ward and see if it could be arranged. My girls are quite proficient for their ages in foreign languages; but I want them now thoroughly to learn literature and English history, and also those numerous small accomplishments which are so necessary for a gentlewoman. There is also no place in the world like London, in my opinion, for hearing good music and seeing good art. I saw Mrs. Ward. A short interview with her was all-sufficient. I could not desire to put my girls in safer hands."

Mrs. Cardew listened very attentively.

"Then you think, Mr. Tristram," she said after a pause, "that school-life is really good for girls?"

"In my humble opinion, Mrs. Cardew, it is essential. A girl must find her level. She can only find it at school."

"Then what about my dear girls?" said Mrs. Cardew.

The rector bowed in a very courteous manner. "School-life may not be really necessary for them," he said; "although you

know my opinion – in short you know what I would do with them did they belong to me."

Mrs. Cardew was silent for a minute or two. Then she continued the conversation by saying, "It is really a curious fact that Lady Lysle, my great friend, who was here this afternoon, spoke to me in terms of the warmest approbation with regard to Mrs. Ward and Aylmer House. She says that her own niece Aneta is a member of the school. She further said that there were two vacancies at present, and she urged me to send my girls there. But, alas I cannot do that, for their father would not hear of it."

"I do wish he would hear of it," said Mr. Tristram with some feeling. "You will never have your girls properly taught unless they go to school. It is impossible at this distance from London to command the services of the best masters and governesses. You will not have a resident governess in the house – forgive me if I speak freely, dear lady, but I love your children as though they were my own – and if you could persuade Mr. Cardew to seize this opportunity and let them go to school with Molly and Isabel I am certain you would never regret it."

"I wish I could persuade him," said Mrs. Cardew; "more particularly as that excellent music master, Mr. Bennett, has just written to say he must discontinue giving his music-lessons, as the distance from Warwick is too far for his health, and Miss Beverley, their daily governess, has also broken down. But there, I know my husband never will agree to part with the girls."

"Then the next best thing," said Mr. Tristram, speaking in a

cheerful tone, "is for you to take up your abode in your London house, and give the girls the advantages of masters and mistresses straight from the Metropolis. Why, you will be bringing them out in a couple of years, Mrs. Cardew, and you would like them to have all possible advantages first."

"Something must be done, certainly," said Mrs. Cardew; "and I like that girl, Miss Howland, although Lady Lysle seemed prejudiced against her at first."

"Oh, she is a girl in a thousand," said Mr. Tristram; "so matter-of-fact and amiable and agreeable. See how she is talking to your husband at this very moment! I never saw a nicer or more modest young creature, but she is so exceedingly clever that she will push her own way anywhere. She has bowled over my two young urchins already, although she has been only a few hours at the rectory. What could Lady Lysle have to say against Maggie Howland?"

"Oh, nothing – nothing at all, and I ought not to have spoken; but it seems she does not much care for Mrs. Howland."

"I think I can explain that," said Mr. Tristram. "Mrs. Howland means well, but is a rather silly sort of woman. The girl manages her in the sweetest way. The girl herself takes after her father, poor Howland the African explorer, who lost his life in his country's cause. He had, I am told, a most remarkable personality."

When Molly and Isabel Tristram, accompanied by Maggie Howland, the rector, and his wife, walked back to the rectory

that evening, Maggie was in excellent spirits. It was natural that the three young people should start on in front. Maggie talked on various subjects; but although the Tristrams were most anxious to get opinions from her with regard to the Cardews, she could not be led to talk of them until they were approaching the house.

It was now nearly eleven o'clock, and a perfect summer night. The boys, Jack and Andrew, had gone to bed, but a few lights were twinkling here and there in the dear old rectory.

"Oh, I am not a scrap sleepy", said Maggie. "This air stimulates one; it is splendid. By the way, girls," she added, suddenly turning and facing her companions, "would you like your bracelets to have rubies in them or sapphires?"

"Nonsense!" said Molly, turning crimson.

Belle laughed. "You don't suppose you are accomplishing that?" she said.

Maggie spoke rather slowly. "Mother has one dozen bracelets in her jewelry-case. Father brought them to her in the course of his travels. Some he got in India and some in Africa. They are very valuable and exceedingly quaint, and I recall now to my memory, and can-see clearly in my mind's eye one lovely gold bracelet fashioned like a snake and with eyes of ruby, and another (which I think he must have got at Colombo) that consists of a broad gold band studded here and there with sapphires. How pretty those bracelets would look on your dear little arms, Molly and Isabel; and how glad – how very, very glad – your Maggie will be to give them to you!"

"And, of course, when you do give them to us we'll be delighted to have them," said Molly and Isabel.

Then Isabel laughed and said, "But what is the good of counting your chickens before they're hatched?"

"I consider my chickens hatched," was Maggie's remark, "What fun we shall all have together next winter! Aneta won't have much chance against us. Yes, girls, of course I like your friends Cicely and Merry; but they'll be twice three times – the girls they are when they have been for a short time at Mrs. Ward's school."

"Aren't you tired, Maggie?" was Molly's remark. "Wouldn't you like to go to bed?"

"I am not a scrap tired, and I don't want to go to bed at all; but I suppose that means that you would?"

"Well, I must own to feeling a little sleepy," said Molly.

"And so am I," said Belle.

"Girls, girls, come in; your father wants to lock up," called Mrs. Tristram at that moment.

The girls all entered the house, lit their candles, and went upstairs to their rooms.

As Maggie was wishing her two dear friends good-night she said quietly, "I hope you won't mind; but Merry Cardew – or, as I ought to call her, Miss Cardew – has asked me to go over to the Manor to-morrow morning in order to show me the old house. I said I'd be there at ten o'clock, and could then get back to you in time for lunch. I do trust you don't mind."

"Of course we don't," said Molly in a hearty tone. "Now, good-night, Mags."

"But if you think, Maggie," said Isabel, "that you will succeed in that scheme of yours you will find yourself vastly mistaken."

Maggie smiled gently, and the next moment she found herself alone. She went and stood by the open window. There was a glorious full moon in the sky, and the garden, with its deep shadows and brilliant avenues of light, looked lovely. But Maggie was not thinking of the scenery. Her thoughts were busy with those ideas which were always running riot in her busy little head. She was not unamiable; she was in reality a good-hearted girl, but she was very ambitious, and she sighed, above all things for power and popularity.

When she came to visit Molly and Isabel she had not the faintest idea of inducing Cicely and Merry to join that select group who were taught by Mrs. Ward at Aylmer House. But when once the idea had entered her brain, she determined, with her accustomed quickness, to carry it into execution. She had never yet, in the whole course of her life, met with defeat. At the various schools where she had been taught she had always been popular and had won friends and never created an enemy-but at Aylmer House, extraordinary and delightful as the life was, there was one girl who excited her enmity – who, in short, roused the worst that was in her. That girl's name was Aneta Lysle. No sophistries on the part of Maggie, no clever speeches, no well-timed and courteous acts, could win the approval of Aneta; and

just because she was impossible to get at, because she carried her young head high, because she had that which Maggie could never have – a stately and wonderful beauty – Maggie was jealous of her, and was determined, if she could not win Aneta over to be her friend, to use her own considerable powers against the girl. She had not for a single moment, however, thought that she could be helped by Cicely and Merry in this direction, and had intended to get them to come to the school simply because they were aristocratic and rich, in the first instance. But when she saw Lady Lysle – Lady Lysle, who hated her mother and before whom her mother trembled and shrank; Lady Lysle, who was Aneta's aunt – she knew that Cicely and Merry might be most valuable aids to her in carrying out her campaign against Aneta, and would help her to establish herself once and for all as the most powerful and important person in Mrs. Ward's school.

Power was everything to Maggie. By power she meant to rule her small school-world, and eventually by the aid of that same gift to take her position in the greater world that lies beyond school. In her heart of hearts she considered Cicely and Merry tiresome, silly, ignorant little girls; but they could be made to play into her hands. They must come to Aylmer House – oh yes! and already she felt certain she had put the thin end of the wedge beneath that opposition which she knew she must expect from Mr. Cardew. She would see him again on the morrow. Indeed, greater schemes than hers could be carried into effect within a fortnight.

Maggie was the soul of common-sense, however, and had no

idea of wearing herself out thinking when she ought to be asleep. She accordingly soon turned from the window, and, getting into bed, dropped at once into healthy slumber.

When she awoke she felt remarkably light-hearted and cheerful. She got up early, and went with Andrew and Jack to see the adorable rabbits. So judicious was she on this occasion that both boys returned with her to breakfast in the highest good-humor.

"Mother, mother," cried Jackdaw, "she loves Fanciful because he's so beautiful."

"And she adores Spot-ear because he's so ugly," said Peterkins.

The boys were exceedingly happy at being allowed to sit at breakfast one on each side of Maggie, who, when she did not speak to them – for she wanted to ingratiate herself with every one present, and not with them alone – contrived to pat their hands from time to time, and so keep them in a subdued state of exceeding good-humor.

Soon after breakfast she flew up to her room, put on that strangely becoming brown hat, which would have suited no other girl but herself, and went off to the Manor. She was met at the gate by Merry, who was anxiously waiting for her appearance.

"I am so sorry that Cicely isn't here too," said Merry; "but mother wanted Cicely to drive into Warwick with her this morning. We're going for a long motor-ride this afternoon. Don't you love motors?"

"I have never been in one in my life," replied Maggie.

"Oh dear!" said Merry; "then you shall come with us, although I know I can't ask you to-day, but perhaps to-morrow we could manage."

"I must not be too much away from Molly and Isabel, for it would not be kind – would it, Miss Cardew?"

"Do call me Merry. 'Miss Cardew' sounds so stiff, and you know I feel that I have known you all my life, for Molly and Isabel have always been talking about you. Mother was so pleased when she heard that you wanted to see the old house; and, do you know, Maggie–You don't mind my saying Maggie?"

"Of course not, Merry – dear Merry."

"Well – would you believe it? – father is going to show you the manuscript-room himself. I can tell you that is an honor."

"I am so delighted!" said Maggie. "Your father is a most charming man."

"Indeed, that he is," said Merry; "but I never saw him get on so well with a young girl before."

"Oh," said Maggie in her modest way, "it was just that I wanted to listen to him; what he said was so very interesting."

The girls were now walking up the avenue.

"Please," said Merry suddenly, "tell me more about your school – I mean that new, wonderful school you are at in London."

"Aylmer House?" said Maggie.

"Yes, Aylmer House. Mother was talking about it this

morning. She was quite interested in it."

"Your mother was talking about it?"

"Yes. It seems Mr. Tristram had been praising it to her like anything last night."

"Well, he can't say too much in its favor," said Maggie. "Any girl who didn't get good from it ought to be ashamed of herself."

"What is that you are saying, Miss Howland?" said the voice of Mr. Cardew at that moment.

"Oh father! I never saw you," cried Merry.

Mr. Cardew came up and shook hands with Maggie. "I was walking just behind you on the grass," he said, "and I heard your enthusiastic remarks with regard to the school that the young Tristrams are going to. I am heartily pleased; I take a great interest in the Tristrams."

"Oh sir," said Maggie suddenly, "I only wish – oh! I hardly dare to say it – but I only do wish that your girls were coming too!"

Merry turned crimson and then grew pale. "Father doesn't approve of schools," she said in a faint voice.

"As a rule, I do not," said Mr. Cardew decidedly; "but of course I am bound to say there are schools and schools. You shall tell me all about your school presently, Miss Howland. And now, I will allow my daughter to entertain you."

"But, father darling, you promised to show Maggie the manuscript-room yourself."

"Are you interested in black-letter?" said Mr. Cardew.

"I am interested in everything old," replied Maggie.

"Well, then, I will show you the manuscript-room with pleasure; but if you want to go over the Manor you have a heavy morning's work before you, and Merry is an excellent guide. However, let me see. I will meet you in the library at a quarter to twelve. Until then, adieu."

CHAPTER V.
"WHAT DID YOU TALK ABOUT?"

Maggie and Merry had now reached the great porch which overshadowed the entrance to the old house. The next instant they found themselves in the hall. This, supported by graceful pillars, was open up to the roof of the house. It was a magnificent hall, and Merry began enthusiastically to explain its perfections. Maggie showed not a pretended but a real interest. She asked innumerable and sensible questions. Her queer, calm, narrow eyes grew very bright. She smiled now and then, and her face seemed the personification of intelligence. With that smile, and those gleaming white teeth, who could have thought of Maggie Howland as plain?

They went from the hall into the older part of the house, and there Merry continued her duties as guide. Never before had she been in the company of so absolutely charming a companion. Maggie was the best listener in the world. She never interrupted with tiresome or irrelevant questions. When she did speak it was with the utmost intelligence, showing clearly that she understood what she was being told.

By-and-by they found themselves in the picture-gallery. There Merry insisted on their sitting down for a time and taking a rest. She touched a bell as she spoke, and then motioned Maggie to

recline in a deep arm-chair which faced the picture of a beautiful lady who was the grandmother of the present Mrs. Cardew.

"That lady's name," said Merry, "was Cicely Meredith, and she was the wife of the last Meredith but one who owned the Manor. It was little supposed in those days that my darling mother would inherit the place, and that Cardews should live at Meredith Manor after all. Ah, here comes Dixon! – Dixon, will you put our lunch on that small table? Thank you very much."

One of the servants in the Cardew livery had appeared. He was bearing a small tray of tempting drinks, fruit, and cake.

"Now, Maggie, eat; do eat," said Merry.

"I declare I am as hungry as a hawk," said Maggie, and she munched cake and ate fruit and felt that she was, as she expressed it to herself – although she would not have used the words aloud – in clover.

Nevertheless, she was not going to lose sight of that mission which she had set herself. She turned and looked thoughtfully at Merry. Merry had a pretty profile, with the short upper-lip and the graceful appearance of a very high-bred girl.

"Do you," said Maggie after a pause, "happen to know Aneta Lysle?"

"Why, of course," said Merry. "Do you mean Lady Lysle's niece?"

"Yes," replied Maggie.

"I don't know her well, but she has stayed here once or twice. Is she a friend of yours, Maggie?"

"Oh no; scarcely a friend, although we are schoolfellows."

"How stupid of me!" said Merry, speaking with some warmth. "Of course, I quite forgot that she is at Mrs. Ward's school. She is older than you, isn't she, Maggie?"

"Yes, a year older, as days are counted; but she appears even more than her age, which is just seventeen. Don't you think her very beautiful, Merry?"

"Now that I recall her, I do; but she never made a special impression on me. She never stayed here long enough."

"Nevertheless, she is a sort of cousin of yours?"

"Yes, Lady Lysle is mother's cousin; but then one doesn't love all one's relations," said Merry carelessly. "Have another piece of cake, Maggie."

"Thanks," said Maggie, helping herself. "How delicious it is!"

"And put some more cream over your raspberries. The raspberries at Meredith Manor are celebrated."

Maggie helped herself to some more cream. "I do wish" she said suddenly.

"That I would go on telling you about the pictures?" said Merry. "But you must be tired. I never knew any one take in interesting things so quickly."

"I am glad you think I do; but it so happens that I do not want to hear about the pictures this morning. I think perhaps I am, after all, a bit tired. It is the pleasure, the delight of knowing you and your sister, and of being with those sweet girls Molly and Isabel."

"Yes, aren't they darlings'?" said Merry.

"I want you to tell me a lot about yourself," said Maggie.

"We have half-an-hour yet before I am to meet your father in the manuscript-room. Begin at the beginning, and tell me just everything. You are not schoolgirls?"

"Oh, no," said Merry, speaking slowly. "We are taught at home."

"But have you a resident governess?"

"No; father objects. This is holiday-time of course; but as a rule we have a daily governess and masters."

"It must be dull," said Maggie, speaking in a low tone – so low that Merry had to strain her ears to hear it.

She replied at once, "'Tisn't nearly so interesting as school; but we – we are – quite —*quite* satisfied."

"I wonder you don't go to school," said Maggie.

"Father doesn't wish it, Maggie."

"But you'd like it, wouldn't you?"

"Like it!" said Merry, her eyes distended a little. "Like to see the world and to know other girls? Well, yes, I should like it."

"There'd be discipline, you know," said Maggie. "It wouldn't be all fun."

"Of course not," said Merry. "How could one expect education to be all fun?"

"And you would naturally like to be very well educated, wouldn't you?" said Maggie.

"Certainly; but I suppose we are – that is, after a fashion."

"Yes," said Maggie, "after a fashion, doubtless; but you will go into society by-and-by, and you'll find – well, that home education leaves out a great many points of knowledge which cannot possibly be attained except by mixing with other girls."

"I suppose so," said Merry, speaking with a slight degree of impatience; "but then Cicely and I can't help it. We have to do what father and mother wish."

"Yes, exactly, Merry; and it's so awfully sweet and amiable of you! Now, may I describe to you a little bit of school-life?"

"If you like, Maggie. Molly and Isabel have often told me of what you did in Hanover."

"Oh, Hanover?" said Maggie with a tone of slight contempt. "We don't think of Hanover now in our ideas of school-life. We had a fairly good time, for a German school; but to compare it with Mrs. Ward's house! Oh, I cannot tell you what a dream of a life I have lived during the last term! It is only to see Mrs. Ward to love her; and all the other mistresses are so nice, and the girls are so very select and lady-like. Then we take a keen interest in our lessons. You're the musical one, aren't you, Merry?"

"Yes. How ever did you find that out?"

"Well," said Maggie, "I looked at you, and I guessed it. Besides, I heard you hum an air under your breath yesterday, and I knew at once that you had a lovely voice."

"I am sure I haven't; and I'm too young to begin singing-lessons."

"Not a bit of it. That's quite an exploded idea. If, for instance–

Oh, of course I know you won't be there; but if you were so lucky as to be a pupil at Mrs. Ward's you would be taught to sing, and, what is more valuable, you would hear good, wonderful, beautiful singing, and wonderful, beautiful music of all sorts. Once a week we all go to a concert at Queen's Hall. Have you ever been there?"

"No! I don't know London at all."

"Well, then, another day in the week," continued Maggie, "we go to the different museums and picture-galleries, and we get accustomed to good art, and we are taught to discern good from bad. We learn architecture at St. Paul's and the Abbey and some of the other churches. You see, Mrs. Ward's idea is to teach us everything first-hand, and during the summer term she takes us on long expeditions up the river to Kew and Hampton Court and all those dear old places. Then, in addition, she has what she calls reunions in the evenings. We all wear evening-dress, and she invites two or three friends, and we sing and play among ourselves, and we are taught the little observances essential to good society; and, besides all the things that Mrs. Ward does, we have our own private club and our own debating society, and – oh, it is a full life! – and it teaches one, it helps one."

Merry's soft brown eyes were very bright, and her cheeks had a carnation glow on them, and her pretty red lips were slightly parted. "You do all these things at school – at school?" she said.

"Why, of course; and many, many more things that you can't even imagine, for it's the whole influence of the place that is so delightful. Then you make friends – great friends – and you get to

understand character, and you get to understand the value of real discipline, and you are taught also that you are not meant to live a worldly and selfish life, for Mrs. Ward is very philanthropic. Each girl in her school has to help a poor girl in East London, and the poor girl becomes in a sort of manner her property. I have got a dear little lame girl. Her name is Susie Style. I am allowed to see her once or twice a year, and I write her a letter every week, and she writes back to me, and I collect enough money to keep her in a cripples' home. I haven't enough of my own, for I am perhaps the poorest girl in the school; but that makes no difference, for Mrs. Ward doesn't allow the word money or rank to be spoken of – she lives above all that. She says that money is a great talent, and that people who are merely purse-proud are detestable. Oh, but I've told you enough, haven't I?"

"Yes, oh yes!" said Merry. "Thanks very, very much. And so Aneta is there; and as Molly and Isabel will be there, they will tell me more at Christmas. Perhaps we ought to go down now to meet father in the manuscript-room."

Maggie rose with alacrity. She followed her companion quite cheerfully. She felt assured within herself that the thin end of the wedge had been well inserted by now.

Mr. Cardew was exceedingly courteous and pleasant, and Maggie charmed him by her intelligence and her marvellous gift of assimilating knowledge. Not a word was said with regard to the London school, and at ten minutes to one Maggie bade good-bye to Mr. Cardew and Merry, and went back to the rectory in

considerable spirits.

Molly and Isabel were all impatience for her return.

"Well, what did you do?" said Molly. "Who was there to meet you?"

"Only Merry. Cicely had gone with Mrs. Cardew to Warwick."

"Oh, well, Merry is the jollier of the two, although they are both perfectly sweet," said Molly. "And did she show you all the house, Maggie?"

"No," said Maggie; "I really couldn't take it all in; but she took me round the armory and into the old tower, and then we went into the picture-gallery."

"Oh, she took you into the picture-gallery! There are Romneys and Gainsboroughs and Sir Joshua Reynoldses, and all sorts of magnificent treasures there."

"Doubtless," said Maggie. "But when I tell you what we did you will laugh."

"What did you do? Do tell us, Mags."

"We sat in easy-chairs. I faced the portrait of a very beautiful lady after whom Cicely Cardew is called."

"Of course I know her well – I mean her picture," said Isabel. "That is a Gainsborough. Didn't you admire it?"

"Yes; but I want to look at it again; I'm going to do the gallery another day, and on that occasion I think I shall ask Cicely to accompany me."

"Why, what do you mean? Don't you like our sweet little

Merry?"

"Like her? I quite love her," said Maggie; "but the fact is, girls, I did my duty by her this morning, and now I want to do my duty by Cicely."

"Oh Mags, you are so mysterious!" said Molly; "but come upstairs and take off your hat, for the gong will sound for lunch in a moment."

Maggie went upstairs, Molly and Isabel following her. "Come into my room, girls," she said. Then she added, dropping her voice, "I think those bracelets are pretty secure."

Molly colored. Isabel looked down.

"You will never succeed," said Molly.

Then Isabel said, "Even if you do, I don't think we ought, perhaps, to – to take them, for it would seem as though they were a sort of – sort of – bribe."

"Oh, you old goose!" said Maggie, kissing her. "How could they be a bribe when I don't ask you to do anything at all? But now, listen. We were tired when we got to the gallery; therefore that sweet little Merry of yours ordered fruit and milk and cake, and we ate and talked."

"What did you talk about?"

"School, dear."

"What was the good of your talking about school to Merry when she can't go?"

"Can't go?" said Maggie. "Why, she is going; only, it was my bounden duty to make her want to go. Well, I succeeded in doing

that this morning. There's the gong, and, notwithstanding my lunch, I am quite hungry."

"Well, Andrew and Jack are perfectly mad to see you; you'll have to devote a bit of your time to them. Dear me, Mags!" said Molly, "it must be tiresome to be a sort of universal favorite, as you are."

"Tiresome!" said Maggie, glancing round with her queer, expressive eyes, "when I love it like anything? Let's get up a sort of play between ourselves this afternoon, and let the boys join in; and, oh! couldn't we – don't you think we might – get your two friends Cicely and Merry to join us, just for an impromptu thing that we could act beautifully in the hay-field? Wouldn't their father consent?"

"Why, of course he would. I'll run round the minute lunch is over and get them," said Isabel. "You are a girl for planning things, Mags! It'll be quite glorious."

"We might have tea in the hay-field too," continued Maggie. "I am sure Peterkins and Jackdaw will help us."

"Capital! capital! and we'll get David" – David was the gardener's boy – "to pick lots of fruit for the occasion."

CHAPTER VI.
FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Meanwhile a little girl stood all alone on one of the terrace walks at Meredith Manor. Mrs. Cardew and Cicely would not arrive until rather late for lunch, and Merry and her father were to partake of it alone. Merry paced up and down very slowly. What a lovely day it was, and how beautiful the place looked with its long lines of stately trees, and its background of woods, and its terraces of bright flowers and green, green grass!

As far as the eye could reach the land belonged to the Cardews, and yet Merry Cardew, the joint-heiress with Cicely of all this wealth, did not feel either happy or contented at that moment. A girl had come into her life who had suddenly turned her gold to gray, her sunshine to shadow. She was a very nice girl, too – exceedingly nice. There was something about her which Merry found impossible to define, for Merry had no acquaintances just then in her sheltered life who possessed the all-important and marvelous power of charm. Merry knew quite well that Maggie Howland was neither rich nor beautiful. She was just a little schoolgirl, and yet she could not get Maggie out of her head. She sighed for the girl's companionship, and she sighed yet more for the forbidden fruit which Maggie had placed so enticingly before her mental vision: the school-life, the good life, the energetic,

purposeful life. Music – oh, how passionately Merry loved the very little music she had ever heard! And art – Merry and Cicely had learned a little bit of art in their own picture-gallery; but of all there was outside they knew nothing. Then that delightful, wonderful scheme of having an East End girl for your very own to train, and help, and write to, and support; and the companionship, and all the magical things which the Tristrams had more or less enjoyed in foreign schools, but which seemed to have reached a delicacy of perfection at Aylmer House!

Yes, doubtless these were forbidden fruits; but she could not help, as she paced alone on the terrace, contrasting her mode of education with that which was put within the reach of her friends Molly and Isabel, and of Maggie herself. How dull, after all, were her lessons! The daily governess, who was always tired when she arrived, taught her out of books which even Molly and Isabel declared to be out of date; who yawned a good deal; who was always quite, quite kind, but at the same time had no enthusiasm; who said, "Yes, my dears; very nicely done," but never even punished; and who only uttered just that mild phrase which was monotonous by reason of its repetition. Where was the good of reading Racine aloud to Miss Beverley day after day, and not being able to talk French properly at all? And where was the use of struggling through German with the same instructress?

Then the drawing-master who came from Warwick: he was better than Miss Beverley; but, after all, he taught what Molly and Isabel said was now quite exploded – namely, freehand –

and he only came once a week. Merry's passion was for music more than for drawing; it was Cicely who pleased Mr. Vaughan, the drawing-master, best. Then there was the music-master, Mr. Bennett; but he never would allow her to sing a note, and he taught very dull, old-fashioned pieces. How sick she was of pieces, and of playing them religiously before her father at least once a week! Her dancing was better, for she had to go to Warwick to a dancing-class, and there were other girls, and they made it exciting. But compared to school, and in especial Mrs. Ward's school, Merry's mode of instruction was very dull. After all, Molly and Isabel, although they would be quite poor girls, had a better time than she and Cicely with all their wealth.

"A penny for your thoughts, my love," said her father at that moment, and Merry turned her charming little face towards him.

"I ought not to tell them to you, dad," she said, "for they are – I'm ever so sorry – they are discontented thoughts."

"You discontented, my dear child! I did feel that I had two little girls unacquainted with the meaning of the word."

"Well, I'll just tell you, and get it over, dad. I'll be perfectly all right once I have told you."

"Then talk away my child; you know I have your very best interests at heart."

"Indeed I know that, my darling father. The fact is this," said Merry; "I"–She stopped; she glanced at her father. He was a most determined and yet a most absolutely kind man. Merry adored him; nevertheless, she was a tiny little bit in awe of him.

"What is the matter?" he said, looking round at her. "Has your companion, that nice little Miss Howland, been putting silly thoughts into your head? If so, she mustn't come here again."

"Oh father, don't say that! You'll make me quite miserable. And indeed she has not been putting silly thoughts into my head."

"Well, then, what are you so melancholy about?"

"The fact is – there, I will have it out," said Merry – "I'd give anything in the world to go to school."

"What?" said Mr. Cardew.

"Yes," said Merry, gaining courage as she spoke; "Molly and Isabel are going, and Aneta Lysle is there, and Maggie Howland is there, and I'd like to go, too, and I'm sure Cicely would; and, oh, father! I know it *can't* be; but you asked me what was the matter. Well, that's the matter. I do want most awfully to go to school!"

"Has that girl Miss Howland been telling you that you ought to go to school?"

"Indeed no, she has not breathed such a word. But I am always interested, as you know – or as perhaps you don't know – in schools; and I have always asked – and so has Cicely – Molly and Isabel to tell us all about their lives at school."

"I did not know it, my little Merry."

"Well, yes, father, Cicely and I have been curious; for, you see, the life is so very different from ours. And so to-day, when Maggie and I were in the picture-gallery, I asked her to tell me about Aylmer House, and she – she did."

"She made a glowing picture, evidently," said Mr. Cardew.

"Oh father, it must be so lovely! Think of it, father – to get the best music and the best art, and to be under the influence of a woman like Mrs. Ward. Oh, it must be good! Do you know, father, that every girl in her school has an East End girl to look after and help; so that some of the riches of the West should be felt and appreciated by those who live in the East. Oh father! I could not help feeling a little jealous."

"Yes, darling, I quite understand. And you find your life with Miss Beverley and Mr. Vaughan and Mr. Bennett a little monotonous compared to the variety which a school-life affords?"

"That is it, father darling."

"I don't blame you in the least, Merry – not in the very least; but the fact is, I have my own reasons for not approving of school-life. I prefer girls who are trained at home. If, indeed, you had to earn your living it would be a different matter. But you will be rich, dear, some day, and–Well, I am glad you've spoken to me. Don't think anything more about it. Come in to lunch now."

"I'll try not to think of it, father; and you're not really angry?"

"Angry!" said Mr. Gardew. "I'll never be angry with you, Merry, when you tell me all the thoughts of your heart."

"And you won't – you won't," said Merry in an anxious tone – "vex darling mother by talking to her about this?"

"I make no promises whatsoever You have trusted me; you must continue to trust me."

"I do; indeed I do! You are not angry with dear, nice Miss Howland, are you, father?"

"Angry with her! Why should I be? Most certainly not. Now, come in to lunch, love."

At that meal Mr. Cardew did his very utmost to be pleasant to Merry; and as there could be no man more charming when he pleased, soon the little girl was completely under his influence, and forgot that fascinating picture of school-life which Maggie had so delicately painted for her edification.

Soon after lunch Mrs. Cardew and Cicely returned; and Merry, the moment she was with her sister, felt her sudden fit of the blues departing, and ran out gaily with Cicely into the garden. They were seated comfortably in a little arbor, when Isabel's voice was heard calling them. She was hot and panting. She had come up to tell them of the proposed arrangements for the afternoon, and to beg of them both to come immediately to the rectory.

"How more than delightful!" said Merry. – "Cicely, you stay still, for you're a little tired. I'll run up to the house at once and ask father and mother if we may go."

"Yes, please do," said Isabel; "and I'll rest here for a little, for really the walk up to your house is somewhat fatiguing." She mopped her hot forehead as she spoke. "You might as well come back with me, both of you girls," she added. But she only spoke to Cicely, for Merry had already vanished.

"Father! mother!" said the young girl, bursting abruptly into

their presence. “Belle Tristram has just come up to ask us to spend the afternoon at the rectory. Tea in the hay-field, and all kinds of fun! May we go?”

“Of course you may, dears,” said Mrs. Cardew at once. “We intended motoring, but we can do that another day.”

Mr. Cardew looked dubious for a moment. Then he said, “All right, only you must not be out too late. I’ll send the pony-trap down to the rectory for you at half-past eight o’clock.”

“Oh, but, father,” said Merry, “we can walk home.”

“No dear; I will send the little carriage. Now, go and enjoy yourself, my child.”

He looked at her with great affection, and she felt herself reddening. Had she hurt that most dear father after all? Oh! no school that ever existed was worth that.

CHAPTER VII.
DISCONTENT

On that special afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Cardew happened to be alone. The girls had gone down to the rectory. This was not Mrs. Cardew's At Home day, and she therefore did not expect any visitors. She was a little tired after her long drive to Warwick, and was glad when her husband suggested that they should go out and have tea all alone together under one of the wide-spreading elm-trees.

Mrs. Cardew said to herself that this was almost like the old, old times of very long ago. She and her husband had enjoyed an almost ideal married life. They had never quarreled; they had never even had a small disagreement. They were blessed abundantly with this world's good things, for when Sylvia Meredith of Meredith Manor had accepted the hand of Cyril Cardew she had also given her heart to him.

He and she were one in all particulars. Their thoughts were almost identical. She was by no means a weak-minded woman – she had plenty of character and firmness; but she deferred to the wishes of her husband, as a good wife should, and was glad! to feel that he was slightly her master. Never, under any circumstances, did he make her feel the yoke. Nevertheless, she obeyed him, and delighted in doing so.

The arrival of their little twin-daughters was the crown of their bliss. They never regretted the fact that no son was born to them to inherit the stately acres of Meredith Manor; they were the last sort of people to grumble. Mrs. Cardew inherited the Meredith property in her own right, and eventually it would be divided between her two daughters.

Meanwhile the children themselves absorbed the most loving care of their parents. Mr. Cardew was, as has already been said, a great merchant-prince. He often went to London to attend to his business affairs, but he spent most of his time in the exquisite country home. It was quite true that discontent seemed far, very far away from so lovely a spot as Meredith Manor. Nevertheless, Mr. Cardew had seen it to-day on the face of his best-loved child, his little Merry. The look had hurt him; and while he was having lunch with her, and joking with her, and talking, in his usually bright and intelligent way, her words, and still more the expression of her face and the longing look in her sweet brown eyes, returned to him again and again.

He was, therefore, more thoughtful than usual as he sat by his wife's side now under the elm-tree. He had a pile of newspapers and magazines on the grass at his feet, and his favorite fox-terrier Jim lay close to his master. Mrs. Cardew had her invariable knitting and a couple of novels waiting to occupy her attention when Mr. Cardew took up one of the newspapers. But for a time the pair were silent. Mrs. Cardew was thinking of something which she wanted to say, and Mr. Cardew was thinking of Merry.

It was, as is invariably the case, the woman who first broke the silence.

"Well, Cyril," said his wife, "to find ourselves seated here all alone, without the children's voices to listen to reminds me of the old times, the good times, the beautiful times when we were first married."

"My dear," he answered, starting slightly as she spoke, "those were certainly good and beautiful times, but surely not more good and beautiful than now, when our two dear little girls are growing up and giving us such great happiness."

"That is true. Please don't misunderstand me, love; but you come even before the children."

He felt touched as she said this, and glancing at her, said to himself that he was indeed in luck to have secured so priceless a woman as his wife.

"We have had happy times together, Cyril," she said, returning his glance.

"Yes, Sylvia," he answered, and once again he thought of Merry's face.

"Nothing can alter that," she continued.

"Nothing, my love," he said.

Then he looked at her again, and saw that she was a little troubled about something; and, as was his custom, he determined to take the bull by the horns.

"You have something on your mind, Sylvia. What is it?"

"I have," she said at once; "and something of very great

importance. I have a sort of fear that to talk of it with you may possibly trouble you a little. Shall we defer it, dear? The day is so peaceful, and we are so happy."

"No, no," he replied at once. "We will take the opportunity of the children being perfectly happy at the rectory to discuss the thing that worries you. But what can it be?" he continued. "That is more than I can imagine. I have never seen you worried before."

Again he thought of Merry, but it was impossible to connect his wife's trouble with his child's discontent.

"Well, I will tell you just out, Cyril," said his wife. "I urge nothing, but I feel bound to make a suggestion. I know your views with regard to the girls."

"My views, dear! What do you mean?"

"With regard to their education, Cyril."

"Yes, yes, Sylvia; we have done our very best. Have you any reason to find fault with Miss Beverley or with Vaughan or Bennett?"

"Unfortunately," said Mrs. Cardew, "Miss Beverley, who, you know, is an admirable governess, and whom we can most thoroughly trust, wrote to me yesterday morning saying that she was obliged to resign her post as daily governess to our girls. She finds the distance from Warwick too far; in fact, she has her physician's orders to take work nearer home. She regrets it immensely, but feels that she has no alternative."

"Provoking!" said Mr. Cardew; "but really, Sylvia, I wouldn't

allow it to upset me if I were you. Surely there are plenty of other Miss Beverleys in the world; and" – again he thought of Merry – "we might perhaps find some one a little less old-fashioned."

"I am afraid, dear, that is impossible, for you will not allow a resident governess in the house."

"I will not," said Mr. Cardew with decision. "Such an arrangement would break in on our family life. You know my views."

"Yes, dear; and I must say I approve of them."

"You must find some one else in Warwick who is not too tired to take the train journey. Doubtless it would be quite easy," said Mr. Cardew.

"I went to Warwick this morning in order to make inquiries," said Mrs. Cardew in her gentle voice, "and I grieve to say there is no one who can in the least take the post which dear Miss Beverley has so worthily filled. But I have further bad news to give you. Mr. Bennett is leaving Warwick for a better post in London, and we shall be at our wits' end to get the girls good music-lessons for next term."

"How provoking! how annoying!" said Mr. Cardew, and his irritation was plainly shown in his face. "It does seem hard," he said after a moment's pause, "that we, with all our wealth, should be unable to give our girls the thorough education they require."

"The fact is this, dear," said Mrs. Cardew, "and I must speak out plainly even at the risk of displeasing you – Cicely and Merry are exceedingly clever girls, but at the present moment

they are very far behind other girls of their age. Their knowledge of foreign languages is most deficient. I have no doubt Miss Beverley has grounded them well in English subjects; but as to accomplishments, they are not getting the advantages their rank in life and their talent demand. Dear Cyril, we ought to forget ourselves and our interests for the children."

"What has put all this into your head?" said Mr. Cardew. "As, for instance – " He paused. "It seemed impossible–"

"What, dear?" asked his wife very earnestly.

"Well, I may as well say it. Has Merry been talking to you?"

"Our little Merry!" said Mrs. Cardew in astonishment. "Of course not. What in the world do you mean?"

"I will not explain just at present, dear. You have some idea in your head, or you wouldn't speak to me as you do."

"Well, the fact is, when my cousin, Lucia Lysle, was here yesterday she spoke very strongly to me on the subject of the girls' education, and urged me to do what I knew you would never for a moment consent to."

"And what is that?" asked Mr. Gardew. "I seem to be an awful bugbear in this business."

"No, dear, no. I quite understand your scruples, and – and – respect them. But Lucia naturally wanted us to seize the opportunity of two vacancies at Aylmer House, Mrs. Ward's school."

"I shall soon begin to hate the name of Mrs. Ward," said Cardew with some asperity.

"My cousin spoke most highly of the school," continued Mrs. Cardew. "She said that two years there, or perhaps a little longer, would give the girls that knowledge of life which will be all-essential to them in the future."

"Home education is best; I know it is best," said Mr. Cardew. "I hate girls' schools."

"I gave her to understand, dear, that those were your views; but I have something else to tell you. You know how attached we both are to the dear Tristrams."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Cardew with impatience.

"Well, at supper yesterday evening Mr. Tristram began to talk to me on the very same subject as my cousin, Lady Lysle, had spoken of earlier in the day."

"Very interfering of Tristram," replied Mr. Cardew.

"He didn't mean it in that way, I assure you, my love; nothing could be nicer than the way he spoke. I was telling him – for I had not mentioned the fact to you, and it was troubling me a little – about Miss Beverley and Mr. Bennett, and asking his advice, as I often do. He immediately urged Aylmer House as the best possible substitute for Miss Beverley and Mr. Bennett. I repeated almost the same words I had used to Lucia Lysle – namely, that you were dead-set against girls' schools."

"That was scarcely polite, my love, seeing that he sends his own daughters to school."

"Well, yes," said Mrs. Cardew; "but of course their circumstances are very different."

"I would be sorry if he should feel that difference, Sylvia. Tristram is a most excellent fellow."

"He is – indeed he is!" said Mrs. Cardew. "Feeling for him, therefore, as you do, dear, you may perhaps be more inclined to listen to an alternative which he proposed to me."

"And what is that, my dear?"

"Well, he thinks we might occupy our house in London during the school terms of each year–"

"During the school terms of each year!" echoed Mr. Cardew in a voice of dismay. "But I hate living in London."

"Yes, dearest; but you see we must think of our girls. If you and I took the children to town they could have governesses and masters – the very best – and would thus be sufficiently educated to take their place in society."

Mr. Cardew was quite silent for a full minute after his wife had made this suggestion. To tell the truth, she had done a somewhat extraordinary thing. Amongst this great lady's many rich possessions was a splendid mansion in Grosvenor Street; but, as she hated what is called London society, it had long been let to different tenants, for nothing would induce the Cardews to leave their delightful home, with its fresh air and country pursuits, for the dingy old house in town. They knew that when the girls came out – a far-distant date as yet – they would have to occupy the house in Grosvenor Street for the season; but Mrs. Cardew's suggestion that they should go there almost immediately for the sake of their daughters' education was more annoying to her

husband than he could possibly endure.

"I consider the rector very officious," he said. "Nothing would induce me to live in town."

"I thought you would feel like that, dear. I was certain of it."

"You surely would not wish it yourself, Sylvia?"

"I should detest it beyond words," she replied.

"Besides, the house is occupied," said Mr. Cardew, catching at any excuse not to carry out this abominable plan, as he termed it.

"Well, dear, at the present moment it is not. I had a letter a week ago from our agent to ask if he should relet it for the winter and next season, and I have not yet replied to him."

"Nonsense, nonsense, Sylvia! We cannot go to live there."

"I don't wish it, my love."

The pair sat quite silent after Mrs. Cardew had made this last remark.

After a time her husband said, "We're really placed in a very cruel dilemma; but doubtless there are schools and schools. Now, I feel that the time has arrived when I ought to tell you about Merry."

"What about the dear child?" asked her mother. "Isn't she well?"

"Absolutely and perfectly well, but our dear little girl is consumed by the fever of discontent."

"My dear, you must be mistaken."

"I am not. Listen, and I will tell you what has happened."

Mr. Cardew then related his brief interview with Merry, and

Merry's passionate desire to go to Aylmer House.

"And what did you say to her, love?" asked his wife.

"I told her it was impossible, of course."

"But it really isn't, dear, you know," said Mrs. Cardew in a low tone; "and as you cannot make up your mind to live in London, those two vacancies at Aylmer House seem providential."

At these words Mr. Cardew sprang to his feet. "Nothing will ever shake my opinion with regard to school-life," he said.

"And yet the life in town–"

"That is impossible. Look me straight in the face, Sylvia. If by any chance – don't, please, imagine that I'm giving way – but if, by any possible chance, I were to yield, could you, my darling, live without your girls?"

"With you – I could," she answered, and she held out her hand to him, which he raised to his lips and kissed.

"Well, I am upset," he said. "If only Miss Beverley and Bennett were not so silly, we should not be in this awkward fix. I'll go for a ride, if you don't mind, Sylvia, and be back with you in an hour's time."

During that ride Mr. Cardew felt as a strong man does when his most cherished wishes are opposed, and when circumstance, with its overpowering weight, bears down every objection. Beyond doubt the girls must be educated. Beyond doubt the scheme of living in London could not be entertained. Country life was essential. Meredith Manor must not be deserted for the greater part of the year. He might visit the girls whenever he

went to London; but, after all, he was now more or less a sleeping partner in his great firm. There was no necessity for him to go to London more than four or five times a year. Oh! school was hateful, but little Merry had longed for it. How troublesome education was! Surely the girls knew enough.

He was riding home, his thoughts still in a most perturbed condition, when he suddenly drew up just in front of a little figure who stood by the roadside, attired as a gipsy, with a scarlet bandana handkerchief twisted round her head, a short skirt reaching not quite to her ankles made also of scarlet, and a little gay blue shawl across her shoulders. She was carrying a tambourine in one hand and in the other a great bunch of many-colored ribbons.

This little, unexpected figure was seen close to the rectory grounds, and Mr. Cardew was so startled by it, and so also was his horse, that he drew up abruptly and looked imperiously at the small suppliant for his favor.

"If you please, sir," said Maggie Howland, speaking in her most enticing voice, and knowing well that her dress magnified her charms, "will you, kind sir, allow me to cross your hand with silver and let me tell your fortune?"

Mr. Cardew now burst into a merry laugh.

"Why, Miss Howland," he said, "I beg your pardon; I did not recognize you."

Maggie dropped a low curtsy. "I'm the gipsy girl Caranina, and I should like to tell your fortune, kind and generous sir."

Just then the pretty face of Cicely was seen peeping over the rectory grounds. She was dressed as a flower-girl, and looked more lovely than he had ever seen her before.

"Why, dad, dad," she cried, "oh! you must come in and join our fun. Mustn't he, Maggie?"

"I am Caranina, the gipsy girl," said Maggie, dropping another low curtsy, and holding her little tambourine in the most beseeching attitude; "and you are Flora, queen of the flowers."

"Well, really, this is entertaining," said Mr. Cardew. "What queer little minxes you all are! And may I really come in and see the fun?"

"Indeed you may, dad," said the flower-girl. "Oh, and please we want you to look at Merry. Merry's a fairy, with wings. We're going to have what we call an evening revel presently, and we are all in our dress for the occasion. But Maggie – I mean Caranina – is telling our fortunes – that is, until the real fun begins."

"Do please come in, Mr. Cardew. This is the height of good luck," said Mrs. Tristram, coming forward herself at this moment. "Won't you join my husband and me under the shadow of the tent yonder? The young people are having such a good time."

"I will come for a minute or two," said Cardew, dismounting as he spoke. "Can some one hold Hector for me?"

David was quickly summoned, and Mr. Cardew walked across the hay-field to where the hastily improvised tent was placed.

"No one can enter here who doesn't submit to the will of the

gipsy," remarked Caranina in her clear and beautiful voice. "This is my tent, and I tell the fortunes of all those kind ladies and gentlemen who will permit me to do so."

"Then you shall tell mine, with pleasure, little maid," said Mr. Cardew, who felt wonderfully cheered and entertained at this *al fresco* amusement.

Quick as thought Maggie had been presented with a silver coin. With this she crossed the good gentleman's palm, and murmured a few words with regard to his future. There was nothing whatever remarkable in her utterance, for Maggie knew nothing of palmistry, and was only a very pretense gipsy fortune-teller. But she was quick – quicker than most – in reading character; and as she glanced now into Mr. Cardew's face an inspiration seized her.

"He is troubled about something," thought the girl. "It's the thin end of the wedge; I'll push it in a little farther."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.