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A Bevy of Girls

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Содержание

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Chapter One
The Departure

The girls stood in a cluster round Miss Aldworth. They surrounded her to right and left, both before and behind. She was a tall, dark-eyed, grave looking girl herself; her age was about twenty. The girls were schoolgirls; they were none of them more than fifteen years of age. They adored Marcia Aldworth; she was the favourite teacher in the school. She was going away to England suddenly, her mother was very ill, and she might not return. The girls all spoke to her in her native tongue. They belonged to several nationalities; some German, some French, some Dutch, some Hungarian; there was a sprinkling of Spanish girls and a good many English. The school was supposed to be conducted on English principles, and the head teacher was an Englishwoman.

There was a distant sound of music in the concert room not far away, but the girls, the principal girls of the school, took no notice of it.

"You will write to us, dear, dear Marcia," said Gunda Lehman. "I'll forget all my English and I'll make all sorts of mistakes. You'll write to me, and if I send you an English letter you'll correct it, won't you, dear, dear Miss?"

Miss Aldworth made the necessary promise, which was echoed from one to another amongst the girls. There was an American girl with a head of tousled hair, very bright china-blue eyes, and a sort of mocking face. She had not spoken at all up to the present, but now she came forward, took Miss Aldworth's hand, and said:

"I'll never forget you, and if ever you come to my country be sure you ask for me, Marie M. Belloc. I won't forget you, and you won't forget me, will you?"

"No, I won't forget you, Marie. I'll ask for you if ever I come to your country."

Miss Aldworth moved off into the hall. Here the head mistress began to speak to her.

"Move aside, girls," she said, "move aside. You have said your good-byes. Oh, here are your flowers – "

A porter appeared with a huge basket of flowers. These were tied up with different coloured ribbons. They were presented by each girl in succession to her favourite English teacher.

"How am I to carry them away with me?" thought poor Miss Aldworth, as she received them; but her eyes filled with tears all the same, and she thanked each loving young personality in the way she knew best.

A few minutes later she found herself alone in the cab which was to bear her to the railway station. Mrs Silchester's school at Frankfort was left behind; the now silenced voices began to echo in her ears. When she found herself virtually alone in the railway carriage, she arranged her flowers in order, then seated herself in a corner of the carriage and burst into uncontrollable crying. She was going home! Her bright life at the school was over. Her stepmother wanted her; her stepmother was ill. She knew exactly what it all meant. She had resisted several letters which she had received from home lately. They had come from her younger sisters, they had come from her brother; they had come from her father. Still she had rebelled and had struggled to keep away. She sent them half her salary, but it was no use. Her mother wanted her; she must come back.

At last there arrived a more alarming message, a more indignant remonstrance. She could not help herself any longer. It was not as though it were her own mother; it was only her stepmother who

wanted her, and she had never been specially good to Marcia, who had always been something of a drudge in the family. Her salary was not half as important as her services. She must come back.

She consulted Mrs Silchester; she even gave her a hint of the truth. Mrs Silchester had hesitated, had longed to advise the girl to remain with them.

"You are the making of the school," she said. "You keep all those unruly girls in order. They adore you; you teach them English most beautifully, and you are my right hand. Why should you leave me?"

"I suppose it is my duty," said Marcia. She paused for a minute and looked straight before her. She and Mrs Silchester were in a private sitting room belonging to the latter lady, who glanced firmly at the tall, fine, handsome girl.

"Duty," she said, "it is a sorry bugbear sometimes, isn't it?"

"To me it is," said Marcia. "I have sacrificed all my life to my sense of duty; but perhaps I am mistaken."

"I do not think so; it seems the only thing to do."

"Then in that case I will write and say that I will go back at once."

"I tell you what, my dear, if your mother is better when you return, and you can so arrange matters, I will keep this place open for you. I will get a lady in as a substitute for a short time; I won't have a permanent teacher, but I will have you back. When you return to England, write to me and tell me if there is any use my pursuing this idea."

Marcia said firmly:

"I know I shall never be able to return; once I am back I shall have to stay. There is no use in thinking of anything else."

Now the whole thing was over; the girls had cried and had clung to her, had lavished their love upon her, and the other teachers were sorry, and Mrs Silchester had almost shed tears – she who never cried. But it was over; the wrench had been made, the parting was at an end. Their bright lives would go on; they would still enjoy their fun and their lessons; they could go to the opera, to the theatre; they would still have their little tea parties, and their friends would take them about, and they would have a better time than English girls of their class usually have. They would talk privately to each other just the same as ever, about their future homes, and their probable *dots*, and of the sort of husbands that had been arranged for them to marry, and how much linen their good mothers were putting away into great linen chests for them to carry away with them. They would talk to each other of all these things, and she, who had been part and parcel of the life, would be out of it. She always would be out of it in the future.

Nevertheless, her sense of duty carried her forward. She felt that under no possibility could she do otherwise. She had a long and rather tiresome journey, and arrived at her destination on the following evening.

Her home was in the North of England, in an outlying suburb of the great bustling town of Newcastle-on-Tyne. Marcia arrived first at the general station; she then took a local train and in about a quarter of an hour she arrived at the suburb where her family resided. There a tall gaunt figure in a long overcoat was pacing up and down the platform. Several other people got out of the train; they were mostly business men, returning from their day's work. The tall figure did not notice them, but when the girl sprang out of the train the man in the overcoat pulled himself together and came forward with a quickened movement and took both her hands.

"Thank God you have come, Marcia," he said. "Molly and Ethel and Nesta were all in terror that you would send a wire at the last moment. Horace said he thought you had spunk enough to do your duty, but the rest of us were afraid. You have come, thank God. That's all right."

"Yes, father," she said in a lifeless sort of voice, "I have come. Am I wanted so very badly!"

"Wanted?" he said. "Now let's see to your luggage; I'll tell you about that afterwards as we are walking home."

Marcia produced her ticket, and after a short delay her two modest trunks were secured from the luggage van. A porter was desired to bring them to Number 7 Alison Road as quickly as possible, and the father and daughter left the railway station and turned their steps homeward.

Marcia opened her eyes and shut them again. Then she opened them wide. Was it a dream after all? Had she really been at delightful Frankfort, at the gay school with its gay life not two days ago? And was she now – what she had been doing the greater part of her life – walking by her father's side, down the well-known road, turning round by the well-known corner, seeing the row of neat, dull, semi-detached houses, the little gardens in front, the little gates that most of them never kept shut, but which clapped and clapped with the wind; the little hall doors, made half of glass, to look artistic, and to let in a little more cold than they would otherwise have done, a picture of the little nail, the dingy linoleum on the floor; the look of the whole place?

By-and-by they reached their own gate; of course it needed mending.

"Oh, father," Marcia could not help saying, "you ought to see to that."

"Yes, but Molly has put it off week after week. She said you'd do it when you came home."

"I'll manage it. But how is mother? Is she very bad?"

"She is worse than usual; she requires more care, constant attention. There was no one else who would suit," he added. "Come along now, I'll tell you all presently."

"You don't want me to see her to-night, do you?"

"Not unless you wish to. She is upstairs."

"Does she know I have come?"

"Yes, she knows; at least she hopes with the rest of us that you have come. You had better run in and see her for a few minutes; you needn't begin your duties until to-morrow."

"Thank God for that reprieve," thought Marcia.

The next instant there was a loud clamour in the hall, and three exceedingly pretty girls, varying in age from fourteen to eighteen, bustled out and surrounded Marcia.

"You have come! What an old dear you are! Now you'll tell us all about Germany. Oh, isn't it fun!"

Nesta's voice was the most ringing. She was the youngest of the girls, and her hair was not yet put up. She was wearing it in a long plait down her back. It curled gracefully round her pretty temples. She had sweet blue eyes and a caressing manner; she was rather untidy in her dress, but there was a little attempt at finery about her. The other two sisters were more commonplace. Molly was very round and fat, with rosy cheeks, small, dark eyes and a good-humoured mouth, a gay laugh and a somewhat tiresome habit of giggling on the smallest provocation.

Ethel was the exact counterpart of Molly, but not quite so good-looking. These three girls were Marcia's step-sisters.

In the distance there appeared the towering form of a young man with very broad shoulders, and a resolute face. He was Marcia's own brother. She gave one really glad cry when she saw him, and flung herself into his arms.

"Good old girl! I said you'd have the spunk to do your duty," he whispered in her ear, and he patted her on the shoulder.

She felt a strange sense of comfort; she had hardly thought of him during the journey; once he had been all in all to her, but circumstances had divided them. He had been angry with her, and she had felt his anger very much. He had preached duty to her until she was sick of the word and hated the subject. She had rejected his advice. Now he was here, and he approved of her, so things would not be quite so bad. His love was worth that of a hundred schoolgirls.

"Oh, yes, yes," she whispered back, and he saw the pent-up emotion in her at once.

"Marcia, come upstairs," said Nesta. "I want to see you. You needn't go to Mummy yet. She said you weren't to be worried. Mummy is too delighted for anything. We have put a new dressing gown on her, and she looks so smart, and we've tidied up the room."

"Of course," said Ethel, "we've, tidied up the room."

"We have," said Molly, "and we've put a white coverlet over the bed, and Mummy looks ever so pleased. She says you'll read to her for hours and hours."

"Of course you will, Marcia," said Nesta. "It does so tire my throat when I read aloud for a long time."

"And mine!" said Molly.

"And mine!" said Ethel.

"You know Ethel and Molly are out now," said Nesta. "They're asked a good deal to tea parties and dances."

"Yes, we are," said Molly; "we're going to a dance to-morrow night."

"Yes, yes!" said Ethel, skipping about. "I want to show you our dresses."

"They made them themselves," said Nesta.

"We did; we did, wasn't it clever of us?" said the other two, speaking almost in a breath.

"They're awfully fashionable looking," went on Nesta – "the dresses I mean."

Molly giggled in her commonplace way. Ethel did not giggle, but she laughed. Nesta squeezed Marcia's arm.

"You dear darling, what a tower of strength you are," she said. "We thought of course you wouldn't come."

"We thought you'd be much too selfish," said Molly.

"Yes, we did truly," said Ethel.

"We were certain you wouldn't do it," said Nesta. "We said: 'She'll have to give up, and why should she give up?' That's what we said; but Horace said you'd do it, if it was put to you strongly."

"Put to me strongly?" said Marcia. "Oh, girls, I have had a long, tiring journey, and my head aches. Is this my room? Would you think me frightfully unkind if I asked you for a jug of hot water, and to let me be alone for ten minutes?"

"Oh dear, dear, but don't you want us three in the room with you? We have such a lot to tell you."

"Darlings, you shall come in afterwards. I just want ten minutes to rest and to be quiet."

"Girls, come downstairs at once," said Horace from below.

The girls hurried off, glancing behind them, nodding to Marcia, kissing their hands to her, giggling, bubbling over with irrepressible mirth. Oh, it did not matter to them; their prison doors were open wide.

"So," thought Marcia, "they are going to put it all on me in the future, even Horace. Oh, how can I bear it?"

Chapter Two
Share and Share Alike

The next morning Marcia commenced her duties. She had said to herself the night before that the prison doors were closing on her. They were firmly closed the next morning. She saw her stepmother for a few minutes on the night of her arrival. She was a tall, very lanky, tired-looking woman, who was the victim of nerves; her irritability was well-known and dreaded. Marcia had lived with it for some years of her life; the younger girls had been brought up with it, and now, when they were pretty and young, and "coming out," as Molly expressed it, they were tired of it. The invalid was not dangerously ill. If she would only exert herself she might even get quite well; but Mrs Aldworth had not the least intention of exerting herself. She liked to make the worst of her ailments. As a matter of fact she lived on them; she pondered them over in the dead of night, and in the morning she told whoever her faithful companion might happen to be, what had occurred. She spoke of fresh symptoms during the day, and often sobbed and bemoaned herself, and she rated her companion and made her life a terrible burden. Marcia knew all about it. She thought of it as she lay in bed that first night, and firmly determined to make a strong line.

"I have given up Frankfort," she thought, "and the pleasures of my school life, and the chance of earning money, and some distinction – for they own that I am the best English mistress they have ever had; I have given up the friendship of those dear girls, and the opera, and the music, and all that I most delight in; but I will not – I vow it – give up all my liberty. It is right, of course, that I, who am not so young as my sisters, should have some of the burden; but they must share it."

She went downstairs, therefore, to breakfast, resolved to speak her mind. The girls were there, looking very pretty and merry. Nesta said eagerly:

"Molly, you will be able to go to the Chattertons to-day."

"I mean to," said Molly. "Ethel, you mustn't be jealous, but I am coming with you."

"And she's got a charming new hat," said Nesta.

"I know," said Ethel. "She trimmed it yesterday with some of the ribbon left over from my new ball dress."

"She'll wear it," said Nesta, "and she'll look as pretty as you, Ethel."

Ethel shook herself somewhat disdainfully.

"And I'm going to play tennis with Matilda Fortescue," continued Nesta. "Oh, hurrah! hurrah! Isn't it nice to have a day of freedom?"

"What do you mean, girls?" said Marcia at that moment.

Her voice had a new quality in it; the girls were arrested in their idle talk.

"What do we mean?" said Nesta, who was far and away the most pert of the sisters. "Why, this is what we mean: Dear old Marcia, the old darling, has come back, and we're free."

"I wish to tell you," said Marcia, "that this is a mistake."

"What do you mean?" said Molly. "Do you mean to insinuate that you are not our sister, our dear old sister?"

"I mean to assure you," said Marcia, "that I am your sister, and I have come back to *share* your work and to help you, but not to take your duties from you."

"Our duties!" cried Molly, with a laugh. "Why, of course we have heaps of duties – more than we can attend to. We make our own clothes, don't we, Nesta?"

"And beautifully we do it," said Nesta. "And don't we trim our own hats?"

"Yes, I'm not talking about those things. Those are pleasures."

"Pleasures? But we must be clothed?"

"Yes, dears; but you will understand me when I speak quite plainly. Part of your duty is to try to make your poor mother's life as happy as you can."

"But you will do that, darling," said Nesta, coming close up to her sister and putting her arms round her neck.

Nesta had a very pretty and confiding way, and at another time Marcia would have done what the little girl expected, clasped her to her heart and said that she would do all, and leave her dear little young sister to her gay pleasures. But Marcia on this occasion said nothing of the sort.

"I wish to be absolutely candid," she said. "I will look after mother every second morning, and every second afternoon. There are four of us altogether, and I will have every day either my morning or my afternoon to myself. I will take her one day from after breakfast until after early dinner, and afterwards on the day that I do that, I shall be quite at liberty to pursue my own way until the following morning. On alternate days, I will go to her after early dinner, and stay with her until she is settled for the night. More I will not do; for I will go out – I will have time to write letters, and to study, and to pursue some of those things which mean the whole of life to me. If you don't approve of this arrangement, girls, I will go back to Frankfort."

Marcia's determined speech, the firm stand she took, the resolute look on her face, absolutely frightened the girls.

"You will go back to Frankfort?" said Nesta, tears trembling in her eyes.

Just at that instant Mr Aldworth and Horace came into the room.

"My dear girls, how nice to see you all four together," said the father.

"Marcia, I trust you are rested," said Horace.

"Oh, Horace," said Nesta, "she has been saying such cruel things."

"Not at all," said Marcia. "I am very glad you have come in, father, and I am glad you have come in, Horace. You must listen to me, all of you. I am twenty, and I am my own mistress. My stepmother does not stand in quite the same relation to me as my own mother would have done. She is not as near to me as she is to Ethel, and Molly, and Nesta; but I love her, and am willing, abundantly willing, to take more than my share of nursing her."

"That's right, Marcia," said her father.

"Listen, father. I haven't said all I mean to say. I will not give the girls absolute liberty at the expense of deserting their mother. I refuse to do so; I have told them that I will look after my stepmother for half of every day, sometimes in the morning, and sometimes in the afternoon; but I will not do more, so Molly or Ethel or Nesta, who is no baby, must share the looking after her with me. You can take this proposal of mine, girls, or leave it. If you take it, well and good; if you leave it I return to Frankfort to-morrow."

Had a bombshell burst in the midst of that eager, animated group, it could not have caused greater consternation. Marcia, the eldest sister, who had always been somewhat downtrodden, who had always worked very, very hard, who always spared others and toiled herself, had suddenly turned round and dared them to take all her liberty from her.

But even as she spoke her heart sank. It was one thing to resolve and to tell her family so; but quite another thing to get that family to carry out her wishes. Nesta flung herself into her father's arms and sobbed. Molly and Ethel frowned, and tears rolled down Ethel's cheeks. But Horace went up to Marcia, and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I do think you are right," he said. "It is fair enough. The only thing is that you must train them a bit, Marcia, just a bit, for they have not your orderly or sweet and gracious ways."

"Then you take her part, do you?" cried the younger sisters in tones of different degrees of emotion.

"Yes, I do, and, father, you ought to."

"It doesn't matter," said Marcia, who somehow seemed not even to feel Horace's approval of much moment just then. "I do what I said; I stay here for a month if you accede to my proposal. At

the end of a month, if you have broken my wishes, and not taken your proper share of the nursing of your mother, I go back to Frankfort. Mrs Silchester has promised to keep my situation open for me for that time. Now I think you understand."

Marcia went out of the room: she had obtained at least a moral victory, but how battered, how tired, how worn out she felt.

Chapter Three
Taking Mother

"Now, my dear," said Mrs Aldworth, when Marcia entered her room, "I really expect to have some comfort. You have such a nice understanding way, Marcia. Oh, my dear, don't let so much light into the room. How stupid. Do you see how that ray of sunlight will creep up my bed in a few moments and fall on my face. I assure you, Marcia, my nerves are so sensitive that if the sun were even to touch my cheek for an instant, I should have a sort of sunstroke. I endured agonies from Nesta's carelessness in that way a few days ago."

"Well, it will be all right now, mother," said Marcia in a cheerful tone.

She was brave enough; she would take up her burden, what burden she thought it right to carry, with all the strength of her sweet, gracious womanhood.

Mrs Aldworth required a great deal of looking after, and Marcia spent a very busy morning. First of all there was the untidy room to put straight; then there was the invalid to wash and comfort and coddle. Presently she induced Mrs Aldworth to rise from her bed and lie on the sofa.

"It is a great exertion, and I shall suffer terribly afterwards," said the good woman. "But you always were masterful, Marcia."

"Well, you see," said Marcia gently, "if I nurse you at all, I must do it according to my own lights. You are not feverish. The day is lovely, and there is no earthly reason why you should stay in bed."

"But the exertion, with my weak heart."

"Oh, mother, let me feel your pulse. Your heart is beating quite steadily."

"Marcia, I do hope you are not learning to be unfeeling."

"No," replied the girl, "I am learning to be sensible."

"You look so nice. Do sit opposite to me where I can watch your face, and tell me about your school, exactly what you did, what the girls were like; what the head mistress was like, and what the town of Frankfort is like."

(Four pages missing here.)

"I am sorry, dear."

"How could we go? Whoever is with mother this afternoon will be too fagged to go. We simply couldn't go. And to think that this is to go on for ever. It's more than we can stand."

"I am waiting to know, not what you can stand, or what you cannot, but which of you will look after mother this afternoon? You won't have a very hard time; her room is in perfect order, and her meals for the entire day are arranged. You have but to sit with her and chat, and amuse her."

"We're none of us fit to go near her, you know that perfectly well," said Molly.

"Very well," replied Marcia in a resolute tone. "You all know my firm resolve. You have got to face this thing, girls, and the more cheerfully you do it the better."

In the end it was Molly who was induced to undertake the unwelcome task. She shrugged her shoulders and prepared to leave the room, her head drooping.

"Come, Molly," said Marcia, following her. "You mustn't go to mother in that spirit."

She took Molly's hand when they got into the hall.

"Can you not remember, dear, that she is your mother?"

"Oh, don't I remember it. Isn't it dinned into me morning, noon, and night? I often wish – "

"Don't say the dreadful words, Molly, even if you have the thought. Don't utter the words, for she is your mother. She tended you when you could not help yourself. She brought you into the world in pain and sorrow. She is your mother. No one else could ever take her place."

"If you would only take her to-day, Marcia, we would try to behave to-morrow. If you would only take her this one day; it is such a blow to us all, you know," said Molly.

Marcia almost longed to yield; but no, it would not do. If the girls saw any trace of weakness about her now, she would never be able to uphold her position in the future.

"I tell you what I will do," she said, "I will go with you into mother's room, and see you comfortably settled, and perhaps – I am not promising – but perhaps I'll have tea with you in mother's room presently; but you must do the work, Molly; until mother is in bed to-night she is in your charge. Now, come along."

Marcia took her sister to her own room.

"Let me brush your hair," she said.

"But you'll disarrange it."

"Now, Molly, did not I always improve your style of hair dressing? Your hair looks a show now, and I could make it look quite pretty."

In another moment Molly found herself under Marcia's controlling fingers. Her soft, abundant hair was arranged in a new style which suited her, so that she was quite delighted, and began to laugh and show her pretty white teeth.

"Here is some blue ribbon which I have brought you as a little present," said Marcia. – "You might tie it in a knot round the neck of your white blouse. There, you look quite sweet; now put some smiles on your face and come along, dear, for mother must be tired of waiting."

Mrs Aldworth was amazed when she saw the two girls enter the room hand in hand.

"Oh, Molly," she said. "Good-morning, dear, you haven't been to see your old mother yet to-day, but I'll excuse you, my love. How very nice you look, quite pretty. I must say, Marcia dear, that my children are the beauties of the family."

Marcia smiled. She went straight up to the open window. Molly fidgeted about near her mother.

"Sit down, Molly, won't you?" said Marcia.

"But why should she?" said Mrs Aldworth. "The poor child is longing to go out for a bit of fun, and I'm sure I don't wonder. Run along, Molly, my love. Marcia and I are going to have such a busy afternoon."

"No," said Marcia suddenly. She turned round and faced Mrs Aldworth. "I must tell you," she continued, "I am really sorry for you and the girls, but they must take their share in looking after you. I will come to you at this time to-morrow, and spend the rest of the day with you. Molly, you can explain the rest of the situation. Do your duty, love, and, dear mother, believe that I love you. But there are four of us in the house and it must be our pleasure, and our duty, and it ought to be our high privilege, to devote part of our time to nursing you."

Chapter Four
A Refreshing Tea

The door closed behind Marcia. Mrs Aldworth was so astonished that she had not time to find her breath before the daring culprit had disappeared. She looked now at Molly. Molly, who had quite forgotten her rôle, turned to her mother for sympathy.

"Oh, mother, could you have believed it of her? She is just the meanest old cat in existence."

"But what is it, Molly? Do you mean to say that Marcia – Marcia – won't be with me, her mother, this afternoon?"

"Catch her, indeed," said the angry Molly. "Didn't you say, mother, and didn't you hear father say that when Marcia came home, we three girls would have a fine time of freedom? It was always, always like that – 'Wait till Marcia comes back.' Now she is back, and she – oh, mother, I couldn't believe it of her, I couldn't! I couldn't!"

Molly sobbed and sobbed. At another moment Mrs Aldworth would have sent Molly from her room, but now she was so thoroughly angry with Marcia that she was inclined to sympathise with her.

"I will tell you everything, mother. It really is too marvellous. It is almost past belief."

"Sit down, Molly, and try to stop crying. It is so disfiguring to your face. You are wonderfully like what I used to be when I was a girl. That is, before my poor health gave way, and my poor dear nerves failed me. If you cry like that you will suffer in the end, as I am suffering. You will be a helpless, neglected, disliked invalid."

"Oh, mother," said Molly, "I should not be at all surprised, and I only eighteen. You know Marcia is two years older, quite old, you know, out of her teens. When a girl gets out of her teens you expect her to be a little bit steady, don't you, mother?"

"Of course, dear, of course. But stop crying. I can't hear you when you sob between each word."

"It's enough to make anybody sob. We were so happy yesterday, we three. Ethel and I had everything planned – we were going to the Carters' dance to-night. You know Edward was to be there, and – and – Rob, who is so taken with Ethel, and our dresses were ready and everything."

"But why cannot you go, my dear child? You must go."

"It is impossible, mother, and it is all Marcia's doing. Our only fear was that perhaps Marcia would not come; but when she did enter the house we did feel ourselves safe. Nesta, poor pet, was going to play tennis with the Fortescues, but everything is knocked on the head now."

"There's an unpleasant draught over my feet," said Mrs Aldworth. "Please, Molly, get me a light shawl to throw over them. No, not that one, the light one, the light one with the grey border. Just put it over my feet and tuck it in a little round the edge – not *too* much. You are not very skilful. Now, Marcia – "

"Oh, mother, you'll have to do without much of your precious Marcia. It was an awful mistake to let her go to Frankfort; it has ruined her. She has come back most terribly conceited and most, *most* selfish."

"I never did greatly admire her," said Mrs Aldworth. "As a child she was exceedingly obstinate."

"Like a mule, I've no doubt," said Molly. "Oh, dear, dear! I know I've got a quick temper, but as to being mulish – I wouldn't make others unhappy, and she has made three girls so wretched."

"Well, out with it, Molly."

Mrs Aldworth was so much interested and so much amazed, that now that her feet had just the right degree of heat provided for them by the shawl with the grey border, she was inclined to listen with curiosity.

"It was at breakfast, mother; we had planned our day, and then all of a sudden Marcia turned round and faced us. She said that she was going to look after you one day in the morning and the

next day in the afternoon, and that we three girls were to look after you during the alternate times, and she said – "

"She surely didn't say anything so monstrous and inhuman in the presence of your father?"

"That's the worst of it, mother, you wouldn't believe for a single moment that she could, but she did."

"I don't believe you, Molly."

"Well, mother, I'll call her back, she will tell you, she has practically said so already before you, now, hasn't she? She said she didn't want to leave Frankfort, but that she had come, and she would stay and do her duty; but that we were to do our duty too, and if we refused, she'd go back to Frankfort. She will be of age almost immediately, and father says she cannot be coerced, and the fact is she will go unless we do it. And oh, Mothery, Horace too is on her side. There's no hope at all, and we are three miserable girls! What is to be done? What is to be done?"

Molly flung herself on her knees by her mother's side and sobbed against her mother's thin white hand, and Mrs Aldworth never recognised the selfish nature or perceived the shallow heart of her eldest child. After a time, however, Number One rose paramount in the good lady's heart.

"Now get up, my dear. Of course this little matter will be put right. You had better stay with me this afternoon, but Marcia must come in and we can talk things, over."

"She half promised to come in to tea. I don't believe she will; she'll be too much afraid."

"Oh, my dear, she won't defy me long. She'll do what I wish; you leave it in my hands. I don't say for a single moment that you may not have to give up this one dance, but that is all. Marcia has returned to look after me, to be with me morning, noon, and night, to read to me, and amuse me, and alter my dresses and do everything that I require, and you, my three little girls, are to have your pleasure. But you must come to visit your poor old mother daily, won't you, Molly?"

"Oh, darling, of course we will. We just love to come."

"And you must tell me all about your parties and your fun generally, won't you, Molly?"

"Oh, yes, yes, mother."

"And whisper, Molly. Marcia has very good taste; she is an exceedingly clever girl."

"Hardly a girl, mother; she will be twenty-one, soon."

"Anyhow, dear, she is young, I must admit that, and she has very good taste, and perhaps she'll help me to make some little extra finery for you. Now, dear child, get up and go on with that novel. I am so anxious to hear if Miss Melville really did accept Lord Dorchester or not."

Mrs Aldworth's taste in reading had degenerated very much since the days when she had won a first prize for literature at the second-rate school which had had the honour of educating her. She now preferred stories which appeared in penny papers to any others, and was deeply interested in the fate of Miss Melville at that moment.

Molly read badly, in a most slovenly style. Mrs Aldworth snapped her up every minute or two.

"Don't drop your voice so, Molly; I didn't hear what you said. Sit nearer, and don't fidget. Oh, don't you know how you torture my poor nerves?"

This sort of thing went on for a couple of hours. Molly grew sleepier and sleepier, and her face crosser and crosser. The room was no longer comfortable; the sun was pouring hotly in, the blinds were up, and neither Mrs Aldworth nor her daughter had the least idea how to mend matters.

But by-and-by – oh, welcome sound – there came a step in the corridor, and Marcia entered, bearing a beautifully arranged tea tray. She carried it herself, and there was a smile on her sweet face. She was all in white, and she looked most charming.

"I thought I'd give you both a surprise," she said, "Shall I make tea for you this afternoon?"

Molly glanced at her mother. Was the culprit to be received with the coldness she deserved, or on the other hand, was this most welcome interruption to be hailed with delight. Molly flung down her paper and Mrs Aldworth roused herself.

"This room is too hot," said Marcia. "Molly, allow me. Another day, dear, when you are taking charge of mother, draw this Venetian blind down at this hour, and move mother's sofa a little into the shade. See how hot her cheeks are. Please run for a little warm water, Molly, I want to bathe your mother's face and hands. You will feel so refreshed, dear, before you take your tea." Molly skipped out of the room.

"Oh, if only I might run away and not go back," she thought; but she did not dare.

When she brought the water Mrs Aldworth was lying with cool, freshly arranged pillows under her head, her hair combed smoothly back from her discontented fare, and Marcia now having mixed a little aromatic vinegar with the warm water, proceeded to bathe her hot cheeks and to cool her white hands.

The tea itself was a surprise and a delight. There were hot cakes which Marcia had made in the kitchen; fragrant tea, real cream, thin bread and butter. Mrs Aldworth admitted that it was a treat.

"You're a wonderful girl, Marcia," she said, "and notwithstanding the fact that you have behaved in a very cruel and unnatural way, I forgive you. Yes, I forgive you, and I shall thoroughly forgive you and let bygones be bygones if you will give Molly her freedom for the rest of this afternoon, and sit with me yourself. I can explain a few little things to you then, which will cause the hearts of my three dear girls to leap for joy."

"Oh, mother, can you?"

Molly's blue eyes danced. She looked with a sense of triumph, half amusement and half daring, from her mother to Marcia. But, alas, Marcia's face showed not the slightest sign of yielding.

"I think, mother," she said, "that you and I must wait for our conversation until to-morrow afternoon. I am exceedingly busy just now, and Molly knows our compact. Have you finished your tea, Molly? If so, I will take away the tray. Good-bye, mother, for the present. Good-bye, Molly."

As quickly as she had come so did the angel of order and comfort retire. Mrs Aldworth was now in a fury.

"Really, Molly," she said, "this is *insufferable*. I would much rather she went altogether. To think of her daring to go against my wishes in my own house." But bad as things were at present, Molly knew that if Marcia went they would be worse. A certain amount of freedom could now be safely claimed, but if Marcia went things would go on in their slovenly, slipshod, good-for-nothing style; the invalid's bell always ringing, the girls never at liberty, the house always in disorder.

"Oh, mother," said Molly, "don't rouse her; she is capable of anything, I assure you. She has given us just a month to be on our trial, and she says that if we don't do our part in that time she will return to Frankfort. That horrid Miss Silchester has turned her head, and that's a fact. She has praised her and petted her and made much of her, and would you believe it, mother, she has absolutely offered to keep the post open for Marcia for a whole month. Mother, dear, do be careful what you say to her, for, I assure you, she has no heart. She would actually allow us three girls – " Molly stopped to gulp down a sob – "to wear ourselves to death, rather than to do one little thing to help us. It's awfully cruel, I call it. Oh, mother, it is cruel."

Now all this was from Molly's point of view, and so it happened that Mrs Aldworth, for the time being, took her child's part; she did not think of herself. Besides, Marcia had dared to defy her authority, and a sensation of fury visited her.

"You had better call the others," she said. "We must have a conclave over this. We really must. I will not submit to insurrection in my house. We must arrange with the girls what we shall do, and then call your father in. His must be the casting vote."

Molly flew out of the room. She found Nesta presently, enjoying herself in the swing. She jumped lightly from it when she saw Molly.

"Well," she said, "what has happened! Whatever did mother say?"

"Mother is in the most awful rage. Marcia has openly defied her. I wouldn't be in Marcia's shoes for a good deal. Mother thoroughly sympathises with us; she feels that we are most badly used, and she wants you, Nesta, you and Ethel. Wherever is Ethel?"

"Ethel has gone over to the Carters' to explain about to-night. Poor Ethel, her head was banging; I expect the heat of the sun will give her sunstroke. But Marcia wouldn't care. Not she."

"Well, you had better come along, Nesta," said Molly. "Mother will be awfully annoyed at Ethel being out. What a pity she went. It's very important for our future."

The two sisters went up together to their mother's room, arm in arm. As a rule they often quarrelled, but on this occasion they were unanimous against their common fate. Mrs Aldworth, however, had changed her mood during Molly's absence. She had begun to think what all this was about, and what all the agony of Molly's tears really represented. The great trial in the minds of her daughters, was having to nurse her. She was their mother.

"Am I such a nuisance, so terribly in every one's way?" she thought, and she began to sob feebly. She wished herself, as she was fond of saying, out of the way. "If only I might die!" she moaned. "They would be very sorry then. They would think a great deal of what their poor mother was to them in life. But they're all selfish, every one of them."

It was in this changed mood that the two girls, Molly and Nesta, entered Mrs Aldworth's room. She greeted them when they appeared in the doorway.

"Don't walk arm in arm in that ridiculous fashion. You know you are always quarrelling, you two. You are just in league against poor Marcia."

"Poor Marcia!" cried Molly.

"Yes, poor Marcia. But where's Ethel; why doesn't she come when her mother sends for her? Am I indeed openly defied in my own house?"

"Oh, mother," said Molly, in some trepidation, "it isn't us, it is Marcia."

"It's much more you, you are my children – Marcia isn't. I am your mother. Live as long as you may you will never be able to get a second mother."

Here Mrs Aldworth burst into sobs herself. But Nesta was an adept at knowing how to manage the invalid when such scenes came on.

"As though we wanted to," she said. "Darling little mother; sweet, pretty little mother."

She knelt by the sofa, she put her soft arms round her mother's poor tired neck, she laid her soft, cool cheek against the hot one, she looked with her blue eyes into the eyes from which tears were streaming.

"You know, mother, that we just worship you."

"But, of course, mother, it's only natural," said Molly, "that we should *sometimes* want to have a little fresh air."

"It is just as true," continued Nesta, "that one cannot be young twice, as that one cannot have a real ownest mother over again."

"Of course it is," said Mrs Aldworth, whose emotions were like the weathercock, and changed instant by instant. "I quite sympathise with you, my darlings. You adore me, don't you?"

"We live for you," said Molly. "You are our first thought morning, noon, and night."

"Then where is Ethel? Why doesn't she come?"

"She has gone to the Carters to explain that we cannot possibly be present at the dance this evening."

"Poor darling," said Nesta, "she'll have sunstroke on the way, her head was so bad."

"Sunstroke?" said Mrs Aldworth, who was now seriously alarmed, "and the afternoon is so very hot. Why did you let her go out with a bad headache?"

"She had to go, mother," said Nesta. "The Carters would be so offended."

"Of course they would," said Molly. "She simply had to go. But for Marcia it would have been all right."

"Certainly that girl does bring discord and misery into the house," said Mrs Aldworth.

"But she won't long, mother; not when you manage her."

"You can manage anybody, you know, mother," said Nesta.

Mrs Aldworth allowed herself to smile. She mopped the tears from her eyes and sat up a little higher on her sofa.

"Now, darling," she said, "draw up that blind. Marcia has made the room too dark."

"Catch her doing anything right!" said Nesta.

She pulled up the Venetian blind with a bang. Alas, one of the cords snapped. Immediately the rods of wood became crooked, and the light darted on to Mrs Aldworth's face.

"You tiresome, clumsy child," said the mother. "Now what is to be done?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I'm very sorry," said Nesta. "I'm all thumbs – I have always said so. I suppose it's because I'm so ridiculously young."

Mrs Aldworth scolded in the fretful way in which she could scold; the girls between them managed to move the sofa, and after a time peace was restored; but the room was disorderly, and the crooked blind wobbling in a most disreputable manner against the partly opened window, did not improve its appearance.

"What will you do, mother?" said Nesta. "Do tell us what you will do?"

"Well," said Mrs Aldworth, "I shall insist firmly on obedience."

"There's no use coercing her too roughly, mother; there really isn't," said Molly. "She will simply do what she said."

"You leave her to me, dears. When does her so-called duty recommence?"

"To-morrow afternoon, mother, Ethel will look after you to-morrow morning," said Nesta, in some terror for fear the unwelcome task should devolve on herself.

"Yes, of course, Ethel will take her turn," said Molly, then she added, glancing at Nesta, "and it will be your turn on the following afternoon."

"Oh, but I cannot possibly come then, for I have promised to go for a walk with Flossie Griffiths. It has been such a looked-forward-to treat. Mother, you couldn't deprive me of the pleasure."

"I tell you it will be all right by then," said Mrs Aldworth. "Now, go away, Nesta, your voice is much too loud, and remember, that after all it is a great privilege for you to have a mother to attend to when she is so devoted to you."

"Yes, yes, darling; yes, yes," said Nesta.

She kissed the hot cheek again and went slowly out of the room. In the passage, however, she uttered a low whoop of rejoicing at her recovered liberty, and a minute later she flew down the garden path to enjoy herself in the swing.

Chapter Five
Seeking Sympathy

The Carters were a numerous family. They lived about a mile away from the Aldworths. The Aldworths lived in a small house in the town and the Carters in a large country place with spacious grounds and every imaginable luxury. Mr Carter had suddenly made a great pile of money in iron, had retired to private life, and had given his six children everything that money could buy. The Carters conducted themselves always according to their special will; they had no mother to look after them, their mother having died when Penelope, the youngest girl, was a baby. There were two sons in the family and four daughters. The sons were called Jim and Harry, the girls were Clara, Mabel, Annie, and Penelope. They were ordinary, good-natured, good-humoured sort of girls; they took life easily. Clara, the eldest, believed herself to be the mistress of the house, and a very sorry mistress she would have made but for the fact that there was an invaluable old nurse, a servant, who had lived with Mrs Carter before she died, and who really held the household reins. This kind-hearted, motherly body kept the young people in check, although she never appeared to cross them. They consulted her without knowing that they did so. She superintended the servants; she saw to the linen press; she arranged the food; she kept all the supplies with a liberal hand, and gave Clara and the other girls *carte blanche* with regard to what they might do with their time, and when they might entertain their friends.

The old house, Court Prospect by name, on account of its extensive view, was very suitable for entertainments. Once it had been the property of a gracious and noble family; but hard times had come upon them and Sir John St. Just had been glad to receive the money which the rich Mr Carter was prepared to offer. In consequence, the St. Justs had disappeared from the neighbourhood. Beautiful Angela St. Just no longer delighted the people when she walked down the aisle of the little village church. She no longer sang with a voice which seemed to the parishioners like that of an angel, in the choir. She went away with her father, and the Carters, it must be owned, had a bad time of it during the first year of their residence at Court Prospect.

But money can effect wonders. The place was according to the Carters' ideas completely renovated. The hideous, ugly out-of-date furniture was replaced by maple with plush and gilt and modern taste. The gardens were laid out according to the ideas of a landscape gardener who had certainly never consulted the true ideas of Nature. Some of the old timber had been cut down to enlarge the view, as Clara expressed it.

This young lady was now exactly eighteen years of age. She was out, and so was her twin sister, Mabel. Annie, who was only seventeen, was still supposed to be in the school-room, but she was very much *en évidence* at all the parties and entertainments; but Penelope, who was only fourteen, was obliged to be to a certain extent under tutelage.

The Carters' ball, or rather, as they expressed it themselves, their little impromptu dance, had been the talk of all the girls and young men who were lucky enough to be invited to it. It was a great honour to be intimate with the Carters; they were jolly, good-natured girls, and certainly without a trace of snobbishness in their compositions. They were so rich that they did not want to be bothered, as they expressed it, with monied people; they liked to choose their own friends. Molly and Ethel and Nesta had attracted Clara and Mabel some time ago, and their brothers, too, had considered the girls very pretty; for the young Aldworths were of the laughing, joking, gay sort of girls, who could talk in a pert, frank fashion; who were not troubled with an overplus of brains, and, in consequence, were exceedingly popular with certain individuals.

It was to visit the Carters, therefore, and to unburden her mind of its load, that Ethel, with her aching head, proceeded to go on this hot summer afternoon. She found the girls and two boy friends from the neighbourhood having tea under the wide-spreading cedar tree on the lawn. This cedar tree

had been the pride of Sir John St. Just, but Mr Carter seriously thought of cutting it down in order to still further enlarge the view; therefore the poor old cedar was at present on sufferance, and the young people were enjoying its shade when Ethel appeared with crimson cheeks, and eyes which still bore traces of the heavy tears which she had shed. They jumped up, and Mabel ran to meet her.

"This is good; and so you have followed your horrid, detestable note. Why, of course, you are coming to-night. Clara and I won't hear of a refusal."

"We cannot, really," said Ethel. "We can't either of us come."

"Let me introduce you to Mr John and Mr Henry Grace," said Mabel, bringing Ethel up to the rest of the party.

"Have some tea, Ethel, do," said Clara, holding out her hand a little languidly. "How awfully hot you look."

Ethel sank down on a chair which one of the others had vacated and allowed herself to be cooled and petted. Clara suddenly began on the subject of the ball.

"What a queer note you sent; what does it all mean?" she asked.

"I will tell you afterwards; I have come over to explain," said Ethel, "if I can see you – you and dear Mabel for a few minutes alone before I leave."

"Dear me, what is the mystery?" said Jim, who had flung himself on the grass. "Why can't you tell us all? It would be no end of a lark. Another rumpus with the mother. Is she more cantankerous than ever?"

"No, mother is quite nice, particularly nice," said Ethel, who had often explained to the young Carters what a trial her mother was.

"Well, then, come and have a game," said Jim. "Come along, do, and forget all the worries. If it isn't the mother it can't be anything very serious."

"Yes, but it is, and I cannot tell you," said Ethel.

She looked so forlorn that everyone present pitied her. Her soft brown eyes filled with sudden tears and overflowed.

"Oh, how my head is aching. I've been lying down all the afternoon. I just managed to come out to tell you, for I felt you must know."

"Is it as bad as that? Then we had best make ourselves scarce," said Jim. "Come along, let us go away, we who are the unfavoured; we'll leave the select few to listen to confidences."

A game of tennis was presently in active progress, Clara and Mabel, who both longed to join, did not feel too sympathetic.

"Well," said Clara, "whatever is it? Do tell all. If you won't come to-night and you won't play, why – "

"Oh, you mean me to go," said Ethel. "It's always like that – I might have expected it."

"Oh, no; don't go," said Mabel, who was more good-natured than her sister, "that is," she corrected herself, "if we can do anything to help you."

"I must tell you – I won't keep you more than a few minutes. You know Marcia – you have heard of her?"

"Of your elder sister? Oh, how funny! There came a letter yesterday from Colonel St. Just to father, and he said that his sister, Mrs Silchester, is coming to spend the holidays with them, and that she had mentioned your sister, Miss Marcia Aldworth. She said what a splendid girl she was. Colonel St. Just told us to tell you – he thought you would be pleased."

"Oh, she is deceived in her," said Ethel, her face getting redder than ever. "She is deceived in her. I wish she knew. Well, I'll tell you all about it. You know Marcia isn't our real sister – "

"Oh, my dear, of course, that is no news," said Clara more crossly than ever.

"But she is older – she is older than I am, and older than Molly. She is twenty."

This was said with effect, and a long pause followed. "She will be twenty-one before long. You can't call that young, can you?"

"Well, not as young as eighteen, of course."

"But it isn't young at all," said Ethel, in a fretful tone. "Now I am only seventeen, and dear Molly is only eighteen; we are quite young."

"And so are we, we are both eighteen, aren't we, darling old Clay?" said Mabel, patting her sister on the face.

"Yes, but don't call me Clay – it does sound so earthy," said Clara. "But do go on, Ethel. Out with this trouble."

"Well, it is this – father sent for Marcia."

"What, from that delightful school where Mrs Silchester adores her so much?"

"Yes, why not? She is his child, and he sent for her, and she came, and Horace approved of the plan."

"I am always so frightened of that Horace of yours," said Mabel. "But do hurry up."

"Well, she came. We feared she wouldn't, for she is awfully selfish; but she did; she came, and we were so happy. It was, you know, liberation for us, for dear mother, poor darling, does take up such a lot of time. One of us has always to be with her, and sometimes two have to be with her, for father insists on her never being alone, and we are not rich like you, and cannot afford a hired nurse."

"And who would give a hired nurse to one's mother?" said Mabel.

"Well, anyhow, that is how it is; we wouldn't, of course, and Marcia came. She came last night. She is very staid, you know, not a bit like us."

One of the boys shouted across to ask Clara when she would be finished and ready to make up a set.

"I really cannot stay," said Clara. "Oh, you aren't a bit sympathising. I thought you would be; but I don't suppose any one will be. Well, she came, and she absolutely refused to give more than a little bit of her time to mother. We're to be tied as much as usual, and we cannot come to-night. You know Molly and I never do anything apart, and Molly won't be free, for mother is never settled till between nine and ten o'clock, and it would be much, much too late. We'll never be able to go anywhere. Marcia will manage that we're to be tied and bound as much as ever we were, and Marcia will have all the honour and glory. Oh dear, we can only be young once. I think Marcia might have remembered that – Marcia, whose youth is quite over. I do think she might – I do!"

"Poor Ethel," said Clara, with more sympathy. "It does seem hard. Well, we'll try and get some fun for you on your free days. After all she is your mother. Coming, Jim, coming. Sorry you can't be here to-night, Ethel; but we'll get up some fun again in a hurry. Now, cheer up, old girl, cheer up."

Chapter Six
The Joy of her Life

The next morning passed somehow. The girls had decided that they would send Marcia to Coventry. They had made up their minds in a solemn conclave late the night before.

"We daren't oppose her for the present," said Ethel, who had thought of this daring plan, "but we'll make her life so miserable that she just won't be able to bear it."

"She used to be so affectionate; I remember that," said Molly. "She was very good to me when I had the measles. She used to sit in the room and never think of herself at all."

"She caught them afterwards, don't you remember, horrid things?" said Nesta.

"And I don't think I went to sit with her at all," said Molly.

"It was rather piggish of you, wasn't it?" said Ethel.

"Well, well; don't rake up my old faults now. Am I not sad enough? Do you really think, Nesta and Ethel, that we had best send her to Coventry? Do you mean really to Coventry?"

"Yes; don't let's speak to her. We'll try the effect for a week. We'll do our duty, of course. We'll go into mother's room in turn, and we'll give up everything for our mother's sake, and we'll deny ourselves, and we'll never speak to Marcia at all. When we are at meals, if she forces us to speak, we'll say yes and no, but that's all, unless Horace or father is present. We'll leave her quite to herself; she shall have her free hours, and her time for writing, and we wish her joy of it."

This plan of action being determined on, the girls went to bed with a certain sense of consolation.

It was Ethel's turn to spend the morning with the invalid on the following day, and she determinedly went there without a word. The effect of the Coventry system seemed at first to be but small. During breakfast that morning Marcia was absorbed in some letters she had received. She asked her father the best way to get to Hurst Castle.

"Why do you want to go there?" asked her parent.

"I have had a letter from Angela St. Just. She is most anxious to see me."

Ethel very nearly dropped the cup of tea which she was raising to her lips.

"Angela St. Just?" she murmured under her breath. Even Mr Aldworth looked interested.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

"Of course I do; she was one of Mrs Silchester's pupils. She wants me to go and see her, and, if I can be spared, to spend a little time there in the summer. I have had a long letter from her."

"She was a remarkably handsome girl; I remember that," said Mr Aldworth. "Well, to be sure, and so she was at that school."

"You forget, father," said Marcia, "that Mrs Silchester is Sir Edward St. Just's sister-in-law."

"Indeed? That is news."

Horace made one or two remarks.

"I am glad you know her so well, Marcia, and I hope you will have a pleasant time when you go to Hurst Castle. You say Sir Edward is staying there at present?"

"Yes, with some relatives."

"And Angela?"

"Yes, they're going to spend some months there this summer."

Marcia then calmly read her remaining letters and then, just nodding towards Ethel, she said:

"I think it is your turn to look after mother, dear," and she left the room.

But just as she reached the door she came back.

"Be very careful, dear Ethel, not to allow her to sit in the sun. It is such a beautiful day that I think you might wheel her on to the balcony, where she can get some fresh air. Just do your best to make her happy. I shall be so pleased if I see her looking bright and comfortable this afternoon."

To these remarks Ethel proudly withheld any comment Marcia, not in the least disturbed, hurried away.

"Well," said Nesta, when her father and brother and elder sister had made themselves scarce, "she doesn't seem to be much put out by the beginning of Coventry; does she, Molly?"

"She's so eaten up with pride," said Molly, "talking about her Angela St. Just and her Hurst Castle – snobbish, I call it, don't you, Ethel?"

"I don't know that I shouldn't like a little bit of it myself," replied Ethel. "You should hear how the people talk of her in the town. They don't think anything at all of the Carters, I can tell you."

"You have never explained what happened during your visit yesterday," said Molly.

Marcia was passing the window. She looked in.

"It's time you went to mother, Ethel," she said.

Ethel rose with a crimson face.

"Hateful old prig!" she said.

"There, girls, I can't tell you now. I'm in for a jolly time, and you'll be amusing yourselves in the garden, and she'll amuse herself."

"Well, you can think of me to-morrow," said Nesta, "giving up my walk with Florrie Griffiths. That's what I call hard, and you and Ethel will have a jolly afternoon all to yourselves, and a jolly morning to-morrow. It's I who am to be pitied. I don't think I can stand it. I think I'll run away."

"Don't be a goose, Netty. You know you'll have to bear the burden as well as Miss Mule Selfish."

"Oh, what a funny name," said Nesta, laughing.

"Do let us call her Mule Selfish. It does sound so funny."

Ethel, having propounded this remarkable specimen of wit, went upstairs, considerably satisfied with herself. Her post that morning was no sinecure. Mrs Aldworth was in a terrible temper, and she was really weak and ill, too. It was one of her worst days. Ethel, always clumsy, was more so than usual. The sun poured in through the open window, and when the doctor arrived he was not pleased with the appearance of the room, and told Ethel so sharply.

"You are a very bad nurse," he said, "for all the training you've had. Now don't allow that blind to be in such a condition a moment longer. Get one of the servants to come and mend it. I am exceedingly annoyed to see your mother in such an uncomfortable condition."

Ethel was forced to go off in search of a servant. The blind was mended after a fashion; the invalid was pitied by the doctor, who ordered a fresh tonic for her. So the weary hours flew by, and at last Ethel's task was over. She rushed downstairs. The load was lifted from her mind; she was free for a bit. She immediately asked Molly how they might spend the afternoon.

Lunch was on the table and Marcia appeared. Marcia spoke to the young lady.

"How is mother?"

"I don't know," said Ethel.

"You don't know? But you have been with her all the morning."

"The doctor called; you had better ask him."

"She will turn at that. I would like to catch her in a rage," thought Ethel.

Marcia did not turn. She guessed what was passing through her young sister's mind. It would pass presently. They would take the discipline she was bringing them through presently. She was sorry for them; she loved them very dearly; but give them an indulgent life to the detriment of their characters, and to her own misery, she would not.

By-and-by lunch came to an end, and then Marcia rose.

"Now, you go to your imprisonment," thought Molly.

Marcia went into the garden. She gathered some flowers, then went into the fruit garden and picked some very fine gooseberries. She laid them in a little basket with some leaves over them, and with the fruit and flowers in her hand, and a pretty basket containing all kinds of fancy work, she went up to the sick-room.

Mrs Aldworth could not but smile when she saw the calm face, the pretty white dress, the elegant young figure. Of course, she must scold this recalcitrant step-daughter, but it was nice to see her, and the flowers smelt so sweet, and she had just been pining for some gooseberries. Why hadn't one of her own girls thought of it?

Marcia spent nearly an hour putting the room in order. The Venetian blind did not work; the servant had mended it badly. She soon put that straight. She then sat down opposite to Mrs Aldworth.

"Our afternoons will be our pleasantest times," she said. "There is so much to be done in the mornings, but in the afternoons we can have long talks, and I can amuse you with some of the school-life stories. I have something quite interesting to tell you to-day, and I have brought up a book which I should like to read to you, that is, if you are inclined to listen. And, oh, mother, I think you would like this new sort of fancy work. I have got all the materials for it. It would make some charming ornamental work for the drawing room. We ought to make the drawing room pretty by the time you come back to it."

"Oh, but I shall never come back to it," said Mrs Aldworth.

"Indeed you will, and very soon too. I'm not going to allow you to be long in this bedroom. You will be downstairs again in a few days."

"Never," said Mrs Aldworth.

"Indeed you will. And anyhow we ought to have the drawing room pretty now that Molly and Ethel are out – or consider themselves so. And, mother, dear," – Marcia's voice assumed a new and serious tone – "I have so much to talk to you about the dear girls."

Mrs Aldworth trembled. Now, indeed, was the moment when she ought to begin, but somehow, try as she would, she found it impossible to be cross with Marcia. Still, the memory of Molly and her wrongs, of Nesta, and the burden she was unexpectedly forced to carry, of Ethel, and her tendency to sunstroke, came over her.

"Before you say anything, I must be frank," she said.

"Oh, yes, mother; that's what I should like, and expect," said Marcia, not losing any of her cheerfulness, but laying down her work and preparing herself to listen.

She did not stare as her young sisters would have done, for she knew that Mrs Aldworth hated being stared at. She only glanced now and then, and her look was full of sympathy, and there was not a trace of anger on her face.

"You really are very nice, Marcia; there's no denying it. I do wish that in some ways – not perhaps in looks, but in some ways, that my girls were more like you. But, dear, this is it – are you not a little hard on them? They're so young."

"So young?" said Marcia. "Molly is eighteen. She is only two years younger than I am."

"But you will be twenty-one in three months' time."

"I think, mother, if you compare birthdays, you will find that Molly will be nineteen in four months' time. There is little more than two years between us."

Mrs Aldworth was always irritated when opposed.

"That's true," she said. "But don't quibble, Marcia; that is a very disagreeable trait in any girl, particularly when she is addressing a woman so much older than herself. The girls are younger than you, not only in years but in character."

"That I quite corroborate," said Marcia firmly.

"Why do you speak in that tone, as though you were finding fault with them, poor darlings, for being young and sweet and childish, and innocent?"

"Mother," said Marcia, and now she rose from her seat and dropped on her knees by the invalid's couch, "do you think that I really blame them for being young and innocent? But I do blame them for something else."

"And what is that?"

"For being selfish: for thinking of themselves more than for others."

"I don't understand you."

"If you will consider for a moment I think you will quite understand what I mean."

"Marcia, my head aches; I cannot stand a long argument."

"Nor will I give it to you. I have come back here to help you – "

"Why, of course, you were sent for for that purpose."

Marcia felt a very fierce wave of passion rising for a moment in her heart. After all, she had her passions, her strong feelings, her idiosyncrasies. She was not tame; she was not submissive; hers was a firm, steadfast, reliable nature. Hers also was a proud and rebellious one. Nevertheless, she soon conquered the rising irritation. She knew that this bad hour would have to be lived through.

"I am glad you are talking to me quite plainly," she said, "and I on my part will answer you in the same spirit. I have come back here not because I must, for as a matter of fact, I am my own mistress. You see, by my own dear mother's will I have sufficient money of my own – not a great deal, but enough to support me. I can, therefore, be quite independent; and the fact that by my mother's will I was made of age at twenty, puts all possibility of misconstruction of my meaning out of the question."

"Marcia, you are so terribly learned; you use such long words; you talk as though you were forty. Now, my poor children – "

"Mother, you are quite a clever woman yourself, and of course you know what I mean. I have come back to help you, because I wished to – not because I was forced to do so."

"Molly says you are terribly conceited; I am afraid she is right."

Marcia took no notice of this.

"Although I have come back to help you, I have not come back to ruin my young sisters."

"Now, Marcia, you really are talking the wildest nonsense."

"Not at all. Don't you want them to love you?"

Mrs Aldworth burst into tears.

"What a dreadful creature you are," she said. "As though my own sweet children did not love me. Why, they're madly devoted to me. If my little finger aches they're in such a state – you never knew anything like it. I have seen my poor Molly obliged to rush from the room when I have been having a bad attack of my neuralgia, just because her own precious nerves could not stand the agony. Not love me? How dare you insinuate such a thing?"

"Mother, we evidently have different ideas with regard to love. My idea is this – that you ought to sacrifice yourself for the one you love. Now, if I came here and took the complete charge of you away from your own daughters; if I gave them nothing whatever to do for you, and if they were to spend their entire time amusing themselves, and not once considering you, I should do them a cruel wrong; I should injure their characters, and I should make them, what they are already inclined to be – most terribly selfish. That, God helping me, I will not do. I will share the charge of you with them, or I will return to Frankfort to Mrs Silchester, whom I love; to the life that I delight in; to the friends I have made. I will not budge an inch; I will nurse you with the girls, or not at all."

Mrs Aldworth looked up. After all, with a captious, fretful, irritable invalid, a woman with so vacillating a nature as Mrs Aldworth's, there was nothing so effective as firmness. She succumbed. In a minute she had flung her arms round Marcia's neck.

"My darling," she said, "I do see what you mean. And you are right; you will train them, you will be, in my absence, a mother to them."

"Not a mother, for I, like them, am young; but I will be to them an elder sister, and I will teach them – not in words, but by precept and by sympathy and by love, what I should like them

to learn. They want a great deal of looking after; and, first of all, they want a complete change in their method of living."

"I am afraid even for them, and for you, I cannot quite ignore my pain, my constant suffering, my weary nights, my long, long, fatiguing days."

"Of course you cannot, and I have said enough for the present. Now, let us have a jolly time. See, I am going to have a particularly nice tea for you this afternoon. I have told Susan to bring it up when it is ready. We'll have it on that balcony."

"Oh, but I shall catch cold."

"Indeed you won't. Do you see that shady corner, and how the scent-laden air is pervading the whole place, and the sun will be shining across the other half, and you can see a long way down the garden? I'll sit near you and read to you when you like, out of such a funny book."

"My taste and yours don't agree with regard to reading," said Mrs Aldworth, always glad to hail any interruption. "I suppose I have degenerated; I am certainly not an intellectual woman; I don't pretend that I am. I like the stories that are in the penny papers. We get two or three of them, and we always enjoy them. Will you read me one of those?"

"No, mother."

"Oh, how cross you are!"

"I am very sorry, mother, but I will read you something just as amusing. Did you ever hear of 'The Reminiscences of an Irish R.M.'?"

"No, it sounds very dull."

"Wait till you hear it. It will make you laugh a great deal more than the stories in the penny papers."

"They make me cry a great deal. Molly reads rather badly, but yesterday I found myself weeping in the middle of the night over the woes of the poor little heroine. I am sure the next number of the paper has come in, and I am so anxious to know if she is really married to the Earl of Dorchester."

"It will be Nesta's turn to-morrow, and she can read to you. Now for the balcony and a pleasant time." They had a pleasant time, and the hours flew by on wings. Marcia told stories; she laughed, she chatted, and she read a little from "The Reminiscences of an Irish R.M." Mrs Aldworth laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

"Oh, rich! rich!" she exclaimed. "That scene with the dog is inimitable. How funny, how truly funny! But, Marcia, isn't it bad for my nerves to laugh so much?"

"It's the best thing for them in all the world."

"Marcia, you are wonderful!"

"Now for the new fancy work," said Marcia.

She taught the invalid a different sort of stitch from any which she had before learned. She gave her bright-coloured silks, and a piece of art cloth to embroider upon, and soon her stepmother was so fascinated that she allowed her young companion to work in silence, often raising her eyes to look across the distant garden.

The girls were spending the afternoon in the garden; but presently they went out, all three of them gaudily and badly dressed. They walked through the garden, gathered some roses, and then disappeared through a little wicket gate at the further end.

Marcia felt quite sure that they did this for the purpose of showing her how they were enjoying themselves, while she was in prison. She smiled to herself.

"Poor little things," she thought. "I wonder how soon I shall win their hearts."

She had marked out a plan of action for herself. She had practically secured Mrs Aldworth – not for long, of course, for Nesta would turn her round the next day, and Molly the day after. It would be a constant repetition of the battle; but in the end she would win her. The girls, of course, were different. Unselfishness must be born within them before they really did what Marcia wanted them to do. Unselfishness, brave hearts, pure spirits, noble ways.

"Two, three months should do it," thought the girl; "then I can go back with Angela St. Just in the autumn; for she is returning to Frankfort, I know, just to be with Mrs Silchester, and I can take her back. Oh, little Angela!"

Marcia recalled the soft touch of Angela's blooming cheek; the look in her lovely eyes; the refinement in all her bearing.

Mrs Aldworth indulged in a nap; but now tea appeared and there was again bustle and movement, and when Mr Aldworth entered the room presently, he was so surprised at the improvement in his wife that he scarcely knew her.

"Marcia, you are a magician," he said.

"You must uphold me with regard to the girls," said Marcia.

"Of course, dear, you must uphold her. She has been explaining things to me," said the wife. "She says that my children are exceedingly selfish."

"I have always known that," replied Mr Aldworth, looking at his daughter.

Mrs Aldworth began to frown. "I must say I think it is very unkind of you to say so; but of course you stick up for Marcia, and you abuse my poor children. That is always the way. I suppose just because Marcia's mother thought herself a fine county lady and I – my people only in common trade, that – "

"Oh, hush, Amelia," said her husband.

"Mother – dear mother!" said Marcia.

Mr Aldworth backed out of the room as quickly as he could. He met his son on the stairs.

"Don't go in," he said. "She's as jealous as ever she can be. Like a bear with a sore head. The girls are all out enjoying themselves and Marcia is keeping guard. I must say that she makes an excellent nurse. I believe your mother will be ever so much better in a short time. She has her out on the balcony, prettily dressed, surrounded by coloured silks and all that sort of thing, and Marcia herself is looking like a picture."

"She is very handsome," interrupted Horace. "I'll go in and have a peep. I don't often visit mother."

If there was a person in the whole world whom Mrs Aldworth respected, it was her stepson. She was, of course, a little bit afraid of him; she was not in the least afraid of her husband. She had led him a sorry sort of life, poor man, since he had brought her home, an exceedingly pretty, self-willed, rather vulgar little bride. Horace and Marcia had a bad time during those early days, but Marcia had a worse time than Horace, for Horace never submitted, never brooked injustice, and managed before she was a year his stepmother to turn that same little stepmother round his fingers. Marcia, luckily for herself, was sent to school when she was old enough, but Horace lived on in the house. He took up his father's business and did well in it, and was his father's prop and right hand.

"Horace, dear," exclaimed Marcia, when she saw her brother.

Horace came out through the open window, bending his tall head to do so.

"Upon my word," he said, "this is very pleasant. How nice you look, mother, and how well. Marcia, I congratulate you."

"Horace, she has been reading me such a lecture – your poor old mother. She says that my children are so selfish."

"A most self-evident fact," replied Horace.

"Horace! You too?"

"Come, mother, you must acknowledge it."

"Marcia is going to take them in hand."

"Good girl, capital!" said Horace, giving his sister a glance of approval.

"Don't you think we needn't talk of it just now?" said Marcia. "We don't see so much of you, Horace. Have you nothing funny to tell mother?"

"I have, I have all kinds of stories. But you look tired, old girl. Run away and rest in the garden for an hour. I'll stay with mother for just that time."

Marcia gave him a glance of real gratitude. Oh, she was tired. The invalid was difficult; the afternoon hours seemed as though they would never end.

When she went back again Horace had soothed his mother into a most beatific state of bliss. She told Marcia that she was the best girl in all the world; that she would confide the entire future of her three girls to dear Marcia, that Marcia should train them, should make them noble like herself.

"And I'll tell them so: I'll tell that naughty little Nesta to-morrow afternoon. I'll tell her she must look after me: I'll be firm; I'll put down my foot," said Mrs Aldworth.

Marcia made no response. Another long hour and a half had to be got through and then the invalid was safe in bed, with all her small requirements at hand. She opened her eyes sleepily.

"God bless you, Marcia dear. You are a very good girl, and the joy of my life."

Chapter Seven
Shirking Duty

Now Nesta was perhaps the naughtiest of the three Aldworth girls. She had been more spoiled than the others, and was naturally of a somewhat braver and more determined nature. She was fully resolved that nothing would really induce her to give up her walk with Flossie Griffiths. Flossie was her dearest friend. Between Flossie and Nesta had sprung up that sort of adoring friendship that often exists between two young girls in that period of their lives. Flossie and Nesta declared that they thought alike, that when a thought darted through the brain of one, it immediately visited the other. Every idea was in common; all their plans were made to suit the convenience of each other. Nesta used to say that Flossie was like her true sister, for her own sisters were of course absorbed in each other.

"There are Molly and Ethel, they are always hugger-muggering," she used to say. "What should I do but for my Flossie? I am quite happy because I have got my Flossie."

Therefore, to have to tell her that she could not walk with her, could not confide secrets to her, could not be so much in her company just because there was a tiresome old mother at home, who ought to be nursed by an equally tiresome elder sister, a confirmed old maid, was more than Nesta could brook. She had made up her mind, therefore, what she would do. She would not confide her scheme to her sisters, but after dinner, instead of going to her mother's room, she would slip out of the house, rush down a side path in the garden, get into the wood, and go off to Flossie's house. The idea had come into her venturesome brain that morning; but she was quite cautious enough to keep it to herself. She knew well that with regard to such an escapade she would have no sympathy from her elder sisters. They were highly pleased with the complete day of liberty which lay before them. They had planned it delightfully. They were resolved to ask the Carters to have tea with them in the summerhouse at the far end of the garden. They had so often been at the Carters' house, now it would be their turn to entertain them, and they should have a right good time. They had coaxed Susan, the parlour maid, into their conspiracy, and Susan had proved herself agreeable. She said that hot cakes and several dainty sweets should be forthcoming, and that the two Miss Carters should have as good a tea as she and cook could devise between them.

"But not a word to Marcia," said Molly, "and for goodness' sake, not a word to Nesta. She is so greedy that she would be capable of coming down and helping herself to the things in the pantry if she knew."

Nesta did know, however; for nothing ever went on in that house that she did not contrive to learn all about, but as she herself had a scheme quite ripe for action, she was determined to leave her sisters alone.

"One of them will have to go to mother," she thought, "and goodness me what a fuss there'll be. Of course, mother can't be left alone, and I cannot be got back in a hurry, particularly when Flossie and I'll be out and away the very minute I get to her house. Marcia is going by train to visit that tiresome Angela St. Just. I heard her telling father so this morning. I wouldn't be in Molly's shoes, or in Ethel's shoes. Yes, it will be Molly's turn – I wouldn't be in Molly's shoes. Dear, dear! What fun it is! It is quite exciting, we live in a continual sort of battle, each of us dodging the others."

Nesta had to be very careful, and to keep the watchful eyes of her companions from fixing themselves too much on her face.

Marcia came down to lunch that day neatly dressed, with her hat on.

"Did you leave mother to put your hat on?" asked Ethel, in a vindictive tone.

"No, mother helped me to dress. She was most particular. She has very good taste when she likes."

"She is everything that is good; don't run her down to us," said Molly.

They had, it may be perceived, almost dropped the Coventry system. It was tiresome and uninteresting when nobody took any notice of it.

"Nesta, dear," said Marcia during lunch, "you will be very careful about mother. I think you are going to have a nice afternoon. I have left her so well and comfortable, and so inclined to enjoy herself."

"Oh, yes," said Nesta.

"That's a good girl," said Marcia. "I see by your face that you are going to make us all happy."

"I hope so," replied Nesta.

These remarks would have aroused the suspicions of Molly and Ethel on another occasion, for they would have considered them wonderfully unlike the pert Nesta; but they were absorbed by the thought of their own tea party, and took no notice.

Marcia had to hurry through her lunch in order to catch her train. She told her sisters she would be back about nine o'clock that evening and went away.

"Now, Nesta, it is your turn," said Molly. "You ought to be going to mother. Do go along and make yourself scarce. Do your duty; it's no use grumbling. She's off now for her fill of pleasure, and we cannot get her back. Horrid, mean, spiteful old cat!"

"You can't be called Miss Mule Selfish for nothing, can you?" said Nesta.

Molly laughed at this.

"Doesn't it sound funny?" she said. "I'll tell – "

She stopped herself. She was about to say that she would tell the Carters, who would keenly relish the joke.

Nesta slipped out of the room. She had already secreted her hat under the stairs. It was soon on her head, and a minute or two later she had dashed down the sidewalk, passed through the wicket gate, and was away through the woods.

The Griffiths lived about three-quarters of a mile away. They were not rich like the Carters, but they had a little house in the opposite suburb of the town, a little house with a fairly big garden, and with woods quite near. Flossie was an only child; she was a great pet with her father and mother, whom she contrived completely to turn round her little finger.

She was standing now at the gate, waiting anxiously for the moment when her darling Nesta would arrive. She and Nesta were to go for a picnic all by themselves to a distant ruin. Flossie was to bring the eatables; Nesta knew nothing of this delectable plan, for Flossie had resolved to keep it a secret all to herself. But now, with her basket packed – that basket which contained tea, milk, sugar, various cakes, a small pot of jam, some bread, and a little pat of butter, as well as a second basket filled with ripe gooseberries – she anxiously waited for her visitor.

By-and-by Nesta was seen. She was running, and looked very untidy, and not like her usually spruce self.

"Dear, dear!" called out Flossie. "How do you do, Nesta? What in the world is the matter? You haven't put on your best frock or anything."

"I'm very lucky to be here at all," said Nesta. "For goodness' sake don't speak to me for a minute, until I have got back my breath. I have run all the way, and I am choking – oh, my heart will burst."

"Lean against me," said Flossie.

Nesta flung herself against her friend. Flossie was slender and dark, with very curly hair. Nesta was a large girl, built on a generous scale. When she flung herself now against poor Flossie, the latter almost staggered.

"Oh, come," said Flossie, "not quite so violent as that. Here, let us flop down under this tree. You can take your breath and tell me what it is all about."

"Oh, I can't," said Nesta, who was beginning to recover herself already. "We must be off as fast as possible. Oh, I have had a time of it coming to you. Goodness gracious me, whatever is that?"

She pointed to the tea basket.

"We're going to Norland's Cliff, you and I, to have tea all by ourselves. Isn't it prime? Isn't it golloptious?" said Flossie.

"Flossie! Has your mother said you might?"

"Yes, yes, of course, she has. I asked her this morning, and she said: 'Certainly, dear.'"

"But I thought there were donkey races there to-day."

"There are; but I didn't say a word about that to mother. She never guessed. Luckily, father was out of the room. It will be much more fun going there to-day, for we'll see the races; that is if we are quick. But I'm sure, Nesta, I did think you'd come looking a little bit smart, and you've got your very oldest hat on too, and that dress."

"Oh, if you're ashamed of me," began Nesta, tears springing to her blue eyes – they could always rise there at a moment's warning.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, dear," said Flossie, who was really deeply attached to her friend; "but whatever is it?"

"You must take me as I am, or I'll go home again if you like," said Nesta. "It would be much better for me to go home. I wouldn't get into quite such an awful row as I shall get into all for love of you, if I went home now. I'll go if you wish. I'll just be in time to escape the very worst of the fuss. What am I to do, dear?"

"Never mind about your dress. I'd lend you something of mine, only you are twice as big."

"Well, I'll carry this basket," said Nesta, picking up the tea basket. "Now, do let us go; I shan't have an easy moment until we are well out of sight of the house."

The girls walked on briskly. They had, for some time, to walk along the dusty road, but soon they came to a stile which led across some fields, delightfully green and inviting looking at this time of the year. The fields led again into a wood, and this wood, by an upland path, came at last to Norland's Cliff. Norland's Cliff was the highest point in that part of the country, and on this eminence had once been built by an eccentric Sir Guy Norland, a tower. He had built it as a sort of a vantage tower, in order to see as far round him as possible; but in the end, in a fit of madness, he had thrown himself from the tower, and his mangled body was found there on a certain winter's night. Afterwards no one had gone near the tower except as a sort of show place; and it was, of course, supposed to be haunted, particularly at night, when Sir Guy Norland was said to ride round and round on horseback.

But it was a beautiful summer day on the present occasion, and the girls thought of no ghosts, and when they were in the shelter of the woods Nesta began to recount her wrongs.

"She has come back, the old spitfire," she said, and she explained the whole situation.

Flossie was full of commiseration.

"She wanted you to give up your delightful time with me – this Saturday to which we have been looking forward for such a long time – just to sit with your mother?"

"That's it, Floss; that's the truth, Floss. Oh, Floss, how am I to bear it?"

"And you ran away then?"

"Yes, I ran away, I just could do nothing else; I couldn't give up my afternoon with you. It is all very well to talk of filial affection, but the deepest affection of my heart is given to you, Floss."

"That's very kind of you," said Flossie, but she did not speak with the intense rapture that Nesta expected.

"Aren't you awfully, awfully shocked about it all?" said Nesta, noticing the tone, and becoming annoyed by it.

"I am dreadfully sorry that anything should have occurred to prevent your coming to me; but it does seem fair that you should sometimes be with your mother. When my darling old mothery has a headache I like to sit with her and bathe her forehead with eau de Cologne."

"Oh, that's all very well," said Nesta, "and so would I like to sit with my dear mothery, if she only had a headache once a month or so; but when it is every day, and all day long, and all night too, you get about tired of it."

"I expect you do," said Flossie, who was not at all strong-minded, and was easily brought round to Nesta's point of view. "Well, at any rate, here you are, and we'll try and have all the fun we can. Oh, do look at those donkeys down there, and the crowd of men, and girls and boys. Isn't it gay?"

"I wonder if we can get into the tower," said Nesta.

"We must get into the tower," remarked Flossie. "I have determined all along that we will have tea just on the very spot where Sir Guy threw himself over the wall. I know the very niche. It will seem so exciting to-night when we are dropping off to sleep. I do like to have a sort of eerie feeling when I'm in a very snug bedroom, close to my father and mother, with the door just a teeny bit open between us. I love it. I wouldn't like it if there was anything to be frightened about, but to know that you have been close to something queer and uncanny, it makes you seem to sort of hug yourself up, don't you know the feeling, Nesta?"

"I do, and I don't," said Nesta. "I sleep in the room with Molly and Ethel, and we always jabber and jabber until we drop asleep. That's what we do, but we have great fun all the same."

Flossie gave a faint sigh. They approached the tower; but to their surprise a custodian stood at the entrance and informed the two little girls that this was a very special show day, and that no one could be admitted into the tower under the large sum of twopence. Neither Nesta nor Flossie had brought a farthing with them, and they stood back, feeling dismayed.

"Never mind," said Nesta, "let us go and have tea in the wood, it will be just as good fun."

"I suppose it will; only I did want to see the donkey races. Where are the races, please?" continued Flossie, turning to the man.

But here again disappointment awaited them. They would not be allowed within sight of the donkey races without paying a penny each.

"I have heaps of money at home," said Flossie, "a whole little savings bank of pennies."

"And I have half a crown which I have not broken into yet," said Nesta. "It's too bad."

"Well, we have an excellent tea, and it is very shady and pleasant in the woods, much better than sitting in your mother's room, getting scolded," said Flossie, "so do come along and let us enjoy ourselves."

Chapter Eight
A Feast to Delight the Eyes

Meanwhile matters were not going on quite so comfortably at the Aldworths' house. They began smoothly enough. Mrs Aldworth had spent a morning full of perfect happiness, order, and comfort with her eldest daughter. Marcia had done everything that was possible for the well-being of the invalid. She had given instructions also with regard to the food which she was to be supplied with that afternoon, and last, but not least, had not left her, until she saw her enjoying a delicious little dinner of roast chicken, fresh green peas, and a basket of strawberries.

Mrs Aldworth was already beginning to feel the benefit of the change. Until Marcia arrived on the scene she had been, not nursed, but fussed over, often left alone for long hours together to fret and bemoan herself, to make the worst of her trials, and the least of her blessings. Her girls did not mean to be unkind, but they were very often all out together, and the one who was in, was always in a state of grumbling. Now the house seemed suddenly to have the calm and sweet genius of order and love presiding over it. Mrs Aldworth was conscious of the agreeable change, without analysing it too closely. She was glad, yes, quite glad, that dear Marcia should have a happy time with the St. Justs. She knew all about her husband's first marriage. He had married a penniless girl of very good family, who had been a governess in a nobleman's house. He had come across her when he was a poor lawyer, before he rose to his present very comfortable position. He had married her and she had loved him, and as long as she lived he had been a very happy man. But Marcia's mother had died, and Mrs Aldworth was his second wife. She had been jealous of the first wife in a way a nature like hers would be jealous, jealous of a certain grace and charm about her, which the neighbours had told her of, and which she herself had perceived in the beautiful oil portrait which hung in Marcia's room. She had always hated that portrait, and had longed to turn it with its face to the wall. But these sort of petty doings had gone out of fashion, and the neighbours would be angry with her if they knew. Then her own children had come, and ill health had fallen upon her, and she had sunk beneath the burden.

Yes, she knew all these things. Her past life seemed to go before her on this pleasant summer's afternoon like a phantasmagoria. She was not agitated by any reminiscences that came before her eyes, but she was conscious of a sense of soothing. Marcia was nice – Marcia was so clever, and Marcia was wise. She was glad Marcia was out. She too would vie with her in being unselfish; she too would become wise; she too would be clever.

She thought of Marcia's promise, that whatever happened she would visit her for a few moments that evening just to tell her about Angela. Mrs Aldworth, with all the rest of the inhabitants of the little suburb, had worshipped the St. Justs. She had seen Angela occasionally, and had craned her neck when the girl passed by in their open carriage with her aristocratic-looking father by her side. She had felt herself flushing when she mentioned the name. She had been conscious, very conscious on a certain day when Angela had spoken to her. On that occasion it was to inquire for Marcia, and Mrs Aldworth had been wildly proud of the fact that she was Marcia's stepmother. But Marcia could talk about Angela in the calmest way in the world, evidently being fond of her, but not specially elated at the thought of her friendship.

"I suppose that is called breeding," thought the good woman. "Well, well, I mustn't grumble. My own dear children are far prettier, that is one thing. Of course, whatever advances Marcia's welfare she will share with them, for she is really quite unselfish. Now, I wonder why my little Nesta doesn't come. I am quite longing to kiss my darling girl."

Mrs Aldworth was not angry with Nesta for being a bit late.

"It is her little way," she thought. "The child is so forgetful; she is certain to have to run out to the garden twenty times, or to stroke pussie, or to remember that she has not given old Rover his bone, or to do one hundred and one things which she knows I would be annoyed at if she forgot."

So for the first half-hour after dinner, Mrs Aldworth was quite happy. But for the next quarter of an hour she was not quite so calm. The sun had come round, and it was time to have the blind rearranged. It was also time for Nesta, who had been given explicit instructions by Marcia, to wheel her mother on to the balcony. Mrs Aldworth felt hot; she felt thirsty; she longed to have a drink of that cold water which was sparkling just beyond her reach. Even the penny paper was nowhere in sight; her fancy work had dropped to the floor, and she had lost her thimble. How annoying of naughty little Nesta – why, the child was already an hour late!

Mrs Aldworth managed in her very peevish way to ring her bell, which was, of course, within reach. The first ring was not attended to; she rang twice, with no better result. Then with her finger pressed on the electric button, with her face very red and her poor hand trembling, she kept up a continued peal until Susan opened the door.

Susan had been busy rushing backwards and forwards to the garden, putting everything in order for the advent of the Carters.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," she said. "I am sorry I kept you waiting; but isn't Miss Nesta here?"

"No, she is not; why didn't you answer my ring at once?"

"The young ladies, ma'am, are expecting one or two friends in the garden, and I was helping them. I thought, of course, Miss Nesta was with you."

"She is not; I have been shamefully neglected. Tell Miss Nesta to come to me at once."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Before you go, Susan, please pull down that blind."

"Yes, ma'am, of course. I am sorry – the room is much too 'ot. Whatever would Miss Marcia say?"

Susan, who was exceedingly good-natured, did all in her power for her mistress; picked up her fancy work, found the thimble, moved the sofa a little out of the sun's rays, and then saying she would find Nesta in a jiffy and bring her to her mother in double haste, she left the room.

But the jiffy, if that should be a measurement of time, proved to be a long one. When Susan did come back it was with a face full of concern.

"I'm ever so sorry, ma'am, but Miss Nesta ain't anywhere in the house. I've been all over the house and all over the garden, and there ain't a sign of her anywhere. Shall I call Miss Marcia, ma'am?"

"Nonsense, Susan, you know quite well that Miss Marcia has gone to Hurst Castle. She has gone to see the St. Justs."

Susan was not impressed by this fact.

"Whatever is to be done?" she said.

"Send one of the other young ladies to me. Send Miss Molly, it is her turn, I think, but send one of them."

Now this was exactly what naughty Nesta had prophesied would happen, Molly, dressed in a pale blue muslin, which she had made herself, a pale blue muslin with little bows of forget-me-not ribbon all down the front of the bodice, her hair becomingly dressed, her hands clean and white, with a little old-fashioned ring of her mother's on one finger, was waiting to greet the Carters. The Carters were to come in by the lower gate; they were to come right through the garden and straight along the path to the summerhouse. Ethel was in the summerhouse. She was in white; she was giving the final touches to the feast. It was a feast to delight the eyes of any tired guest, such strawberries, so large, so ripe, so luscious; a great jug of cream, white, soft sugar, a pile of hot cakes, jam sandwiches, fragrant tea, the best Sèvres china having been purloined from the cupboard in the drawing room for the occasion.

"They haven't china like that at the Carters', rich as they are," said Molly.

Oh, it was a time to think over afterwards with delight; a time to enjoy to the full measure of bliss in the present. And they were coming – already just above the garden wall Molly could see Clara's hat with its pink bow and white bird-of-paradise feather, and Mabel's hat with its blue bow and seagull's wings. And beside them was somebody else, some one in a straw hat with a band of black ribbon round it. Why, it was Jim! This was just too much; the cup of bliss began to overflow!

Molly rushed on tiptoe into the summerhouse.

"They're coming!" she whispered, "and Jim is with them! Have we got enough cups and saucers? Oh, yes, good Susan! Now I am going to stand at the gate."

The gate was opened and the three visitors appeared. Molly shook hands most gracefully; Jim gave her an admiring glance.

It was just then that Susan, distracted, her face crimson, hurried out.

"Miss Molly," she said, "Miss Molly!"

"Bring the tea, please," said Molly, in a manner which seemed to say – "Keep yourself at a distance, if you please."

"Miss Molly, you must go to the missus at once."

"Why?" said Molly.

"She's that flustered she's a'most in hysterics. That naughty Miss Nesta has gone and run away. She ain't been with her at all. Missus has been alone the whole blessed afternoon."

"I can't go now," said Molly, "and I won't."

"Miss Molly, you must."

"Go away, Susan. Clara, dear, I'm sorry that the day should be such a hot one, but you will it so refreshing in the summerhouse."

"You have quite a nice garden," said Clara, in a patronising voice, but Mabel turned and looked full at Molly.

"Did your servant say your mother wanted you?"

"Oh, there's no hurry," said Molly, who felt all her calm forsaking her, and crimson spots rising to her cheeks.

"Oh, do go, please," said Clara. "Here's Ethel; she will look after us. Oh, what good strawberries; I'm ever so thirsty! Run along, Molly, you must go if your mother wants you."

"Of course you must," said Jim.

"You must go at once, please," said Clara. "Do go. I heard what the servant said, she was in quite a state, poor thing."

Thus adjured Molly went away. It is true she kept her temper until she got out of sight of her guests; but once in the house her fury broke bounds. She was really scarcely accountable for her actions for a minute or two. Then she went upstairs and entered her mother's room with anything but a soothing manner to the poor invalid.

"Is that you, Nesta?" said Mrs Aldworth, who from her position, on the sofa could not see who had entered the room.

"No," said Molly, "it's not Nesta, it is I, Molly, and it is not my day to be with you, mother. We have friends in the garden. Please, what is the matter? I can't stay now, really; I can't possibly stay."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.