

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Hildegarde's Home



Laura Richards
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CHAPTER I

THE HOME ITSELF

It was a pleasant place. The house was a large, low, old-fashioned one, with the modern addition of a deep, wide verandah running across its front. Before it was a circular sweep of lawn, fringed with trees; beside it stood a few noble elms, which bent lovingly above the gambrel roof. There were some flower-beds, rather neglected-looking, under the south windows, and there was a kitchen-garden behind the house. This was all that Hildegarde Grahame had seen so far of her new home, for she had only just arrived. She stood now on the verandah, looking about her with keen, inquiring eyes, a tall, graceful girl, very erect, with a certain proud carriage of the head. Her dress of black and white shepherd's plaid was very simple, but it fitted to perfection, and there was a decided "air" to her little black felt hat.

Hildegarde's father had died about six months before the time our story opens. He had been very wealthy, but many of his investments had shrunk in value, and the failure of a bank whose cashier had proved dishonest entailed heavy losses upon him; so that, after his death, it was found that the sum remaining for his widow and only child, after all debts were paid, was no very large one. They would have enough to live on, and to live comfortably; but the "big luxuries," as Hildegarde called them, the horses and carriages, the great New York house with its splendid furniture and troops of servants, must go; and go they did, without loss of time. Perhaps neither Hildegarde nor her mother regretted these things much. Mrs. Grahame had been for years an indefatigable worker, giving most of her time to charities; she knew that she should never rest so long as she lived in New York. Hildegarde had been much in the country during the past two years, had learned to love it greatly, and found city life too "cabined, cribbed, confined," to suit her present taste. The dear father had always preferred to live in town; but now that he was gone, they were both glad to go away from the great, bustling, noisy, splendid place. So, when Mrs. Grahame's lawyer told her that an aged relative, who had lately died, had left his country house as a legacy to her, both she and Hildegarde said at once, "Let us go and live there!"

Accordingly, here they were! or to speak more accurately, here Hildegarde was, for she and auntie (auntie was the black cook; she had been Mrs. Grahame's nurse, and had been cook ever since Hildegarde was a baby) had come by an early train, and were to have everything as comfortable as might be by the time Mrs. Grahame and the little housemaid, who had stayed to help her pack the last trifles, should arrive in the afternoon.

It was so pleasant on the wide verandah, with the great elms nodding over it, that Hildegarde lingered, until a mellow "Miss Hildy, chile! you comin'?" summoned her in-doors. Auntie had already put on her white jacket and apron, without which she never considered herself dressed, and her muslin turban looked like a snow-drift on an ebony statue. She had opened the door of a large room, and was peering into it, feather duster in hand.

"Spouse this is the parlour!" she said, with a glance of keen observation. "Comicalest parlour ever I see!"

Hildegarde stepped lightly across the threshold. It *was* a singular room, but, she thought, a very pleasant one. The carpet on the floor was thick and soft, of some eastern fabric, but so faded that the colours were hardly distinguishable. Against the walls stood many chairs, delicate, spider-legged affairs, with cushions of faded tapestry. The curtains might once have been crimson, when

they had any colour. A table in the exact centre of the room was covered with a worked cloth of curious and antique pattern, and on it were some venerable annuals, and "Finden's Tableaux," bound in green morocco. In a dim corner stood the great-grandmother of all pianos. It was hardly larger than a spinnet, and was made of some light-coloured, highly polished wood, cunningly inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl. Over the yellow keys was a painting, representing Apollo (attired, to all appearance, like the "old man on a hill," in his grandmother's gown), capering to the sound of his lyre, and followed by nine young ladies in pink and green frocks. The last young lady carried a parasol, showing that the Muses thought as much of their complexions as other people do. At sight of this venerable instrument Hildegard uttered a cry of delight, and, running across the room, touched a few chords softly. The sound was faint and tinkling, but not unmusical. Auntie sniffed audibly.

"Reckon my kittle makes a better music 'an that!" she said; and then, relenting, she added, "might ha' been pooty once, I dassay. That's a pooty picture, anyhow, over the mankel-piece."

Hildegard looked up, and saw a coloured print of a lady in the costume of the First Empire, with golden ringlets, large blue eyes, particularly round rosy cheeks, and the most amiable simper in the world. Beneath was the inscription, "Madame Récamier, Napoleon's first love."

"Oh!" cried Hildegard, half-laughing, half-indignant, "how ridiculous! She wasn't, you know! and she never looked like that, any more than I do. But see, auntie! see this great picture of General Washington, in his fine scarlet coat. I am sure you must admire that! Why! – it cannot be – yes, it is! it is done in worsted-work. Fine cross-stitch, every atom of it. Oh! it makes my eyes ache to think of it."

Auntie nodded approvingly. "That's what I call work!" she said. "That's what young ladies used to do when I was a gal. Don't see no sech work nowadays, only just a passel o' flowers and crooked lines, and calls it embr'idery."

"Oh! you ungrateful old auntie," cried Hildegard, "when I marked your towels so beautifully last week. Here! since you are so fond of cross-stitch, take this dreadful yellow sofa-pillow, with pink roses worked on it. It will just fit your own beloved rocking-chair, with the creak in it, and you may have it for your very own."

The pillow flew across the room, and auntie, catching it, disappeared with a chuckle, while Hildegard resumed her examination of the quaint old parlour. The "cross-stitch" was everywhere: on the deep, comfortable old sofa, where one leaned against a stag-hunt, and had a huntsman blowing his horn on either arm; on the chairs, where one might sit on baskets of flowers, dishes of fruit, or cherubs' heads, as one's fancy dictated; on the long fender-stool, where an appalling line of dragons, faintly red, on a ground that had been blue, gaped open-mouthed, as if waiting to catch an unwary foot.

"Oh! their *poor* eyes!" cried Hildegard. "How *could* their mothers let them?" She passed her hand compassionately over the fine lines of the stag-hunt. "Were they girls, do you suppose?" she went on, talking to herself, as she was fond of doing. "Girls like me, or slender old spinsters, like the chairs and the piano? Mamma must have known some of them when she was a child; she said she had once made a visit here. I must ask her all about them. Uncle Aytoun! what a pity he isn't alive, to show us about his house! But if he were alive, we should not be here at all. So nice of you to leave the house to mamma, dear sir, just as if you had been her real uncle, instead of her father's cousin. You must have been a very nice old gentleman. I like old gentlemen." The girl paused, and presently gave an inquiring sniff. "What is it?" she said meditatively. "Not exactly mould, for it is dry; not must, for it is sweet. The smell of this particular room, for it, suits it exactly. It is" – she sniffed again – "it is as if some Aytoun ladies before the flood had made *pot-pourri*, and it had somehow kept dry. Let us examine this matter!" She tiptoed about the room, and, going round the corner of the great chimney, found a cupboard snugly tucked in beside it. She opened it, with a delightful thrill of curiosity. Hildegard did love cupboards! Of course, there might be nothing at all – but there was something! On the very first shelf stood a row of china pots, carefully covered, and from these pots came the faint, peculiar perfume which seemed so to form part of the faded charm of the room. The pots were of delicate white porcelain, one with gold sprigs on it, one with blue flowers, and one with

pink. "Belonging to three Aytoun sisters!" said Hildegard. "Of course! dear things! If they had only written their names on the jars!" She lifted the gold-sprigged jar with reverent hands. Lo, and behold! On the cover was pasted a neat label, which said, "Hester's recipe, June, 18 – ." She examined the other two jars eagerly. They bore similar legends, with the names "Agatha" and "Barbara." On all the writing was in minute but strongly marked characters; the three hands were different, yet there was a marked resemblance. Hildegard stood almost abashed, as if she had found herself in presence of the three ladies themselves. "The question is" – she murmured apologetically – and then she stooped and sniffed carefully, critically, at the three jars in turn. "There is no doubt about it!" she said at last. "Hester's recipe is the best, for it has outlived the others, and given its character to the whole room. Poor Miss Agatha and Miss Barbara! How disappointed they would be!" As she closed the cupboard softly and turned away, it almost seemed – almost, but not quite, for though Hildegard had a lively imagination, she was not at all superstitious – as though she heard a faint sigh, and saw the shadowy forms of the three Aytoun sisters turning away sadly from the cupboard where their treasure was kept. The shadow was her own, the sigh was that of an evening breeze as it stole in between the faded curtains; but Hildegard had a very pretty little romance made up by the time she reached the other side of the long room, and when she softly closed the door, it was not without a whispered "good evening!" to the three ladies whom she left in possession.

Shaking off the dream, she ran quickly up the winding stairs, and turned into the pleasant, sunny room which she had selected as the best for her mother's bedchamber. It was more modern-looking than the rest of the house, in spite of its quaint Chinese-patterned chintz hangings and furniture; this was partly owing to a large bow-window which almost filled one side, and through which the evening light streamed in cheerfully. Hildegard had already unpacked a trunk of "alicumtweezles" (a word not generally known, and meaning small but cherished possessions), and the room was a pleasant litter of down pillows, cologne-bottles, work-implements, photograph cases and odd books. Now she inspected the chairs with a keen and critical eye, pounced upon one, sat down in it, shook her head and tried another. Finding this to her mind, she drew it into the bow-window, half-filled it with a choice assortment of small pillows, and placed a little table beside it, on which she set a fan, a bottle of cologne, a particularly inviting little volume of Wordsworth (Hildegard had not grown up to Wordsworth yet, but her mother had), a silver bonbonnière full of Marquis chocolate-drops, and a delicate white knitting-basket which was having a little sunset of its own with rose-coloured "Saxony." "There!" said Hildegard, surveying this composition with unfeigned satisfaction. "If that isn't attractive, I don't know what is. She won't eat the chocolates, of course, bless her! but they give it an air, and I can eat them for her. And now I must put away towels and pillow-cases, which is not so interesting."

At this moment, however, the sound of wheels was heard on the gravel, and tossing the linen on the bed, Hildegard ran down to welcome her mother.

Mrs. Grahame was very tired, and was glad to come directly up to the pleasant room, and sink down in the comfortable chair which was holding out its stout chintz arms to receive her.

"What a perfect chair!" she said, taking off her bonnet and looking about her. "What a very pleasant room! I know you have given me the best one, you dear child!"

"I hope so!" said Hildegard. "I meant to, certainly – Oh, no!" she started forward and took the bonnet which Mrs. Grahame was about to lay on the table; "this table is to take things from, dear. I must give you another to put things on."

"I see!" said her mother, surveying the decorated table with amusement. "This is a still-life piece, and a very pretty one. But how can I possibly take anything off it? I should spoil the harmony. The straw-covered cologne-bottle makes just the proper background for the chocolates, and though I should like to wet my handkerchief with it, I do not dare to disturb – "

"Take care!" cried Hildegarde, snatching up the bottle and deluging the handkerchief with its contents. "You might hurt my feelings, Mrs. Grahame, and that would not be pleasant for either of us. And you know it is pretty, *quand même!*"

"It is, my darling, very pretty!" said her mother, "and you are my dear, thoughtful child, as usual. The Wordsworth touch I specially appreciate. He is so restful, with his smooth, brown covers. Your white and gold Shelley, there, would have been altogether too exciting for my tired nerves."

"Oh! I have nothing to say against Mr. W.'s *covers!*" said Hildegarde with cheerful malice. "They are charming covers. And now tell me what kind of journey you had, and how you got through the last agonies, and all about it."

"Why, we got through very well indeed!" said Mrs. Grahame. "Janet was helpful and quick as usual, and Hicks nailed up all the boxes, and took charge of everything that was to be stored or sold. Sad work! but I am glad it is done." She sighed, and Hildegarde sat down on the floor beside her, and leaned her cheek against the beloved mother-hand.

"Dear!" she said, and that was all, for each knew the other's thoughts. It was no light matter, the breaking up of a home where nearly all the young girl's life, and the happiest years of her mother's, had been passed. Every corner in the New York house was filled with memories of the dear and noble man whom they so truly mourned, and it had seemed to them both, though they had not spoken of it, as if in saying good-by to the home which he had loved, they were taking another and a more final farewell of him.

So they sat in silence for a while, the tender pressure of the hand saying more than words could have done; but when Mrs. Grahame spoke at last, it was in her usual cheerful tone.

"So at last everything was ready, and I locked the door, and gave the keys to the faithful Hicks" (Hicks had been the Grahames' butler for several years), "and then Hicks came down to the station with me, and did everything that was possible to secure a comfortable journey for me – and Janet."

"Poor Hicks!" said Hildegarde, smiling. "It must have been very hard for him to say good-by to you – and Janet."

"I think it was!" said Mrs. Grahame. "He asked me, very wistfully, if we should not need some one to take care of the garden, and said he was very fond of out-door work; but I had to tell him that we should only need a 'chore-man,' to do odds and ends of work, and should not keep a gardener. At this he put on a face like three days of rain, as your Grimm story says, and the train started, and that was all.

"And now tell me, Sweetheart," she added, "what have been your happenings. First of all, how do you like the house?"

"Oh, it's a jewel of a house!" replied Hildegarde with enthusiasm. "You told me it was pleasant, but I had no idea of anything like this. The verandah itself is worth the whole of most houses. Then the parlour! such a wonderful parlour! I am sure you will agree with me that it would be sacrilege to put any of our modern belongings in it. I did give auntie one hideous sofa-pillow, but otherwise I have touched nothing. It is a perfect museum of cross-stitch embroidery, sacred to the memory of Miss Barbara, Miss Agatha, and Miss Hester."

Mrs. Grahame smiled. "How did you discover their names?" she asked. "I was saving them for an after-supper 'tell' for you, and now you have stolen my thunder, you naughty child."

"Not a single growl of it!" cried Hildegarde eagerly. "I am fairly prancing with impatience to hear about them. All I know is their names, which I found written on three bow-pots in the cupboard. I went mousing about, like little Silver-hair, and instead of three porridge-pots, found these. Miss Hester's was the only pot that had any 'sniff' left to speak of; from which I inferred that she was the sprightliest of the three sisters, and perhaps the youngest and prettiest. Now *don't* tell me that she was the eldest, and lackadaisical, and cross-eyed!"

"I will not!" said Mrs. Grahame, laughing. "I will not tell you anything till I have had my tea. I had luncheon at one o'clock, and it is now – "

"Seven!" cried Hildegarde, springing up, and beating her breast. "You are starved, my poor darling, and I am a Jew, Turk, infidel, and heretic; I always was!"

She ran out to call Janet; when lo, there was Janet just coming up to tell them that tea was ready. She was the prettiest possible Janet, as Scotch as her name, with rosy cheeks and wide, innocent blue eyes, and "lint-white locks," as a Scotch lassie should have. "No wonder," thought Hildegarde, "that Hicks looked like '*drei Tage Regenwetter*' at parting from her."

"Tea is ready, you say, Janet?" cried Hildegarde. "That is good, for we are 'gay and ready,' as you say. Come, my mother! let us go and see what auntie has for us."

Mother and daughter went down arm-in-arm, like two school-girls. They had to pick their way carefully, for the lamps had not been lighted, and there was not daylight enough to shed more than a faint glimmer on the winding stairs; but when they reached the dining-room a very blaze of light greeted them. There were no less than six candles on the table, in six silver candlesticks shaped like Corinthian columns. (Auntie had hidden these candlesticks in her own trunk, with a special eye to this effect.) On the table also was everything good, and hot blueberry cake beside; and behind it stood auntie herself, very erect and looking so solemn that Mrs. Grahame and Hildegarde stopped in the doorway, and stood still for a moment. The black woman raised her head with a gesture of tenderness, not without majesty.

"De Lord bless de house to ye!" she said solemnly. "De Lord send ye good victuals, and plenty of 'em! De Lord grant ye never want for nothin', forever an' ever, give glory, amen!"

And with an answering "amen!" on their lips, Hildegarde and her mother sat down to their first meal in their new home.

CHAPTER II

A DISH OF GOSSIP

The evening was too lovely to spend in the house, so Mrs. Grahame and Hildegard went from the tea-table out on the verandah, where some low, comfortable straw chairs were already placed. It was June, and the air was full of the scent of roses, though there were none in sight. There was no moon, but it was hardly missed, so brilliant were the stars, flashing their golden light down through the elm-branches.

They sat for some time, enjoying the quiet beauty of the night. Then – "I think we shall be happy here, dear!" said Hildegard softly. "It feels like home already."

"I am glad to hear you say that!" replied her mother. "Surely the place itself is charming. I hope, too, that you may find some pleasant companions, of your own age. Yes, I can see you shake your head, even in the dark; and of course we shall be together constantly, my darling; but I still hope you will find some girl friend, since dear Rose (Rose was Hildegard's bosom friend) cannot be with us this summer. Now tell me, did you find Mrs. Lankton here when you arrived? We don't seem to have come down to details yet."

Hildegard began to laugh.

"I should think we did find her!" she said. "Your coming put it all out of my head, you see. Well, when auntie and I drove up, there was this funny little old dame standing in the doorway, looking so like Mrs. Gummidge that I wanted to ask her on the spot if Mr. Peggotty was at home. She began shaking her head and sighing, before we could get out of the wagon. 'Ah, dear me!' she said. 'Dear me! and this is the young lady, I suppose. Ah! yes, indeed! And the housekeeper, I suppose. Well, well! I'm proper glad to see you. Ah, dear, dear!' All this was said in a tone of the deepest dejection, and she kept on shaking her head and sighing. Auntie spoke up pretty smartly, 'I'm de cook!' she said. 'If you'll take dis basket, ma'am, we'll do de lamintations ourselves!' Mrs. Lankton didn't hear the last part of the remark, but she took the basket, and auntie and I jumped out. 'I suppose you are Mrs. Lankton, the care-taker,' I said, as cheerfully as I could. 'Ah, yes, dear!' she said, mournfully. 'I'm Mrs. Lankton, the widow Lankton, housekeeper to Mr. Aytoun as was, and care-taker since his dee-cese. I've took care, Miss Grahame, my dear. There ain't no one could keep things more car'ful nor I have. If I've had trouble, it hasn't made me no less car'ful. Ah, dear me! it's a sorrowful world. Perhaps you'd like to come in.' This seemed to be a new idea to her, though we had been standing with our hands full of bundles, only waiting for her to move. She led the way into the hall. 'This is the hall!' she said sadly; and then she stood shaking her head like a melancholy mandarin. 'I s'pose 'tis!' said auntie, who was quite furious by this time, and saw no fun in it at all. 'And I s'pose dis is a door, and I'll go t'rough it.' And off she flounced through the door at the back of the hall, where she found the kitchen for herself, as we could tell by the rattling of pans which followed. 'She's got a temper, ain't she?' said Mrs. Lankton sadly. 'Most coloured people has. There! I had one myself, before 'twas took out of me by trouble. Not that I've got any coloured blood in me, for my father was Nova Scoshy and my mother State of New York. Shall I take you through the house, dear?'"

"Poor Mrs. Lankton!" said Mrs. Grahame, laughing. "She is the very spirit of melancholy. I believe she has really had a good deal of trouble. Well, dear?"

"Well," resumed Hildegard, "I really could not have her spoil all the fun of going over the house for me; though of course she was great fun herself in a way. So I thanked her, and said I would not give her the trouble, and said I supposed she lived near, and we should often call on her when we wanted extra help. 'So do, dear!' she said, 'so do! I live right handy by, in a brown cottage with a green door, the only brown cottage, *and* the only green door, so you can't mistake me. You've got beautiful neighbours, too,' she added, still in the depths of melancholy. 'Beautiful neighbours! Mis'

Loftus lives in the stone house over yonder. Ah, dear me! She and her darter, they don't never set foot to the ground, one year's eend to the other.' 'Dear me!' I said. 'Are they both such invalids?' 'No, dear!' said she, sighing as if she wished they were. 'Carriage folks; great carriage folks. Then there's Colonel Ferrers lives in the brick house across the way. Beautiful man, but set in his ways. Never speaks to a soul, one year's eend to the other, in the way o' talk, that is. Ah! dear me, yes!'"

"It sounds like Alice in Wonderland!" exclaimed Mrs. Grahame. "In that direction lives a Hatter, and in that direction lives a March Hare. Visit either you like! they're both mad."

"Oh, Mammina, it is exactly like it!" cried Hildegard, clapping her hands. "You clever Mammina! I wonder if Colonel Ferrers has long ears, and if his roof is thatched with fur."

"Hush!" said her mother, laughing. "This will not do. I know Colonel Ferrers, and he is an excellent man, though a trifle singular. Well, dear, how did you part with your melancholy dame?"

"She went away then," said Hildegard. "Oh, no, she didn't. I forgot! she did insist upon showing me the room where Uncle Aytoun died; and – oh! mamma, it is almost too bad to tell, and yet it was very funny. She said he died like a perfect gentleman, and made a beautiful remains. Then, at last, she said good-night and charged me to send for her if any of us should be ill in the night. 'Comin' strange in,' she said, 'it's likely to disagree with some of you, and in spasms or anything suddint, I'm dretful knowin'.' So she went off at last, and it took me a quarter of an hour to get auntie into a good temper again."

They laughed heartily at Mrs. Lankton's idea of "the parting word of cheer"; and then Hildegard reminded her mother of the "tell" she had promised her. "I want to know *all* about the three ladies," she said. "They seem more real than Dame Lankton, somehow, for they belong here, and she never could have. So 'come tell me all, my mother, all, all that ever you know!'"

"It is not so very much, after all," replied Mrs. Grahame, after a moment's thought. "I came here once with my father, when I was about ten years old, and stayed two or three days. Miss Hester was already dead; she was the youngest, the beauty of the family, and she was still young when she died. Miss Barbara was the eldest, a tall, slender woman, with a high nose; very kind, but a little stiff and formal. She was the head of the family, and very religious. It was Saturday, I remember, when we came, and she gave me some lovely Chinese ivory toys to play with, which filled the whole horizon for me. But the next morning she took them away, and gave me Baxter's 'Saint's Rest,' which she said I must read all the morning, as I had a cold and could not go to church."

"Poor Mammina!" said Hildegard.

"Not so poor," said her mother, smiling. "Miss Agatha came to the rescue, and took me up to her room, and let me look in the drawers of a wonderful old cabinet, full of what your dear father used to call 'picknickles and bucknickles.'"

"Oh! I know; I found the cabinet yesterday!" cried Hildegard in delight. "I had not time to look into it, but it was all drawers; a dark, foreign-looking thing, inlaid with ivory!"

"Yes, that is it," said her mother. "I wonder if the funny things are still in it? Miss Agatha was an invalid, and her room looked as if she lived in it a good deal. She told me Bible stories in her soft, feeble voice, and showed me a very wonderful set of coloured prints illustrating the Old Testament. I remember distinctly that Joseph's coat was striped, red, green, yellow, and blue, like a mattress ticking gone mad, and that the she-bear who came to devour the naughty children was bright pink."

"Oh! delightful!" cried Hildegard, laughing. "I must try to find those prints."

"She told me, too, about her sister Hester," Mrs. Grahame went on; "how beautiful she was, and how bright and gay and light-hearted. 'She was the sunshine, my dear, and we are the shadow, Barbara and I,' she said. I remember the very words. And then she showed me a picture, a miniature on ivory, of a lovely girl of sixteen, holding a small harp in her arms. She had large grey eyes, I remember, and long fair curls. Dear me! how it all comes back to me, after the long, long years. I can almost see that miniature now. Why – why, Hilda, it had a little look of you; or, rather, you look like it."

The girl flushed rosy red. "I am glad," she said softly. "And she died young, you say? Miss Hester, I mean."

"At twenty-two or three," assented her mother. "It was consumption, I believe. Cousin Wealthy Bond once told me that Hester had some sad love affair, but I know nothing more about it. I do know, however, that Uncle Aytoun (he was the only brother, you know, and spent much of his life at sea), I do know that he was desperately in love with dear Cousin Wealthy herself."

"Oh!" cried Hildegard. "Poor old gentleman! She couldn't, of course; but I am sorry for him."

"He was not old then," said Mrs. Grahame, smiling. "He knew of Cousin Wealthy's own trouble, but he was very much in love, and hoped he could make her forget it. One day – Cousin Wealthy told me this years and years afterward, *à propos* of my own engagement – one day Captain Aytoun came to see her, and as it was a beautiful summer day, she took him out into the garden to see some rare lilies that were just in blossom. He looked at the lilies, but said little; he was a very silent man. Presently he pulled out his card-case, and took from it a visiting-card, on which was engraved his name, 'Robert F. Aytoun.' He wrote something on the card, and handed it to Cousin Wealthy; and she read, 'Robert F. Aytoun's heart is yours.'"

"Mamma!" cried Hildegard. "Can it be true? It is *too* funny! But what could she say? Dear Cousin Wealthy!"

"I remember her very words," said Mrs. Grahame. "'Captain Aytoun, it is not my intention ever to marry; but I esteem your friendship highly, and I thank you for the honour you offer me. Permit me to call your attention to this new variety of ranunculus.' But the poor captain said, – Cousin Wealthy could hardly bring herself to repeat this, for she thought it very shocking, – 'Confound the ranunculus!' and strode out of the garden and away. And Cousin Wealthy took the card into the house, and folded it up, and wound pearl-coloured silk on it. It may be in her work-basket now, for she never destroys anything."

"Oh! that was a most delightful 'tell!'" sighed Hildegard. "And now go on about Miss Agatha."

"I fear that is all, dear," said her mother. "I remember singing some hymns, which pleased the kind cousin. Then Miss Barbara came home from church; and I rather think her conscience had been pricking her about the 'Saint's Rest,' for she took me down and gave me some delicious jelly of rose leaves, which she said was good for a cold. We had waffles for tea, I remember, and we put cinnamon and sugar on them; I had never tasted the combination before, so I remember it. It was in a glass dish shaped like a pineapple. And after tea Miss Barbara tinkled 'Jerusalem, the Golden' on the piano, and we all sang, and I went to bed at nine o'clock. And that reminds me," said Mrs. Grahame, "that it must now be ten o'clock or after, and 'time for all good little constitutional queens to be in bed.'"

"Oh! must we go to bed?" sighed Hildegard. "It is so very particularly lovely here. Well, I suppose we should have to go some time. Good-night, dear stars! good-night, all beautiful things that I know are there, though I cannot see you!"

Hildegard helped her mother to lock up the house, and then, after a parting word and caress, she took her candle and went to the room she had chosen for her own. It opened out of her mother's dressing-room, so that by setting the doors ajar, they could talk to each other when so minded; and it had a dressing-room of its own on the other side, from which a flight of narrow, corkscrew stairs descended to the ground floor. These stairs had attracted Hildegard particularly. It seemed very pleasant and important to have a staircase of one's own, which no one else could use. It is true that it was very dark, very crooked and steep, but that was no matter. The bedroom itself was large and airy; a little bare, perhaps, but Hildegard did not mind that. The white paint was very fresh and clean, and set off the few pieces of dark old mahogany furniture well, – a fine bureau, with the goddess Aurora careering in brass across the front of the top drawer; a comfortable sofa, with cushions of the prettiest pale green chintz, with rosebuds scattered over it; a round table; a few spider-legged chairs; and a nondescript piece of furniture, half dressing-table, half chest of drawers, which was almost as mysteriously promising as the inlaid cabinet in Miss Agatha's room. The bed was large and

solemn-looking, with carved posts topped by pineapples. The floor was bare, save for a square of ancient Turkey carpet in the middle. Hildegard held the candle above her head, and surveyed her new quarters with satisfaction.

"Nice room!" she said, nodding her head. "The sort of room I have been thinking of ever since I outgrew flounces, and bows on the chairs. Dear papa! When I was at the height of the flounce fever, he begged me to have a frock and trousers made for the grand piano, as he was sure it must wound my sensibilities to see it so bare. Dear papa! He would like this room, too. It is a little strange-garretty to-night, but wait till I get the Penates out to-morrow!"

She nodded again, and then, putting on her wrapper, proceeded to brush out her long, fair hair. It was beautiful hair; and as it fell in shining waves from the brush, Hildegard began to think again of the dead Hester, who had had fair hair, too, and whom her mother had thought she resembled a little. She hoped that this might have been Hester's room. Indeed, she had chosen it partly with this idea, though chiefly because she wished to be near her mother. It certainly was not Miss Agatha's room, for that was on the other side of the passage. Her mother's room had been Miss Barbara's, she was quite sure, for "B" was embroidered on the faded cover of the dressing-table. Another large room was too rigid in its aspect to have been anything but a spare room or a death chamber, and Mr. Aytoun's own room, where he had died like a gentleman and become a "beautiful remains," was on the ground floor. Therefore, it was very plain, this must have been Hester's room. Here she had lived her life, a girl like herself, thought Hildegard, and had been gay and light-hearted, the sunshine of the house; and then she had suffered, and faded away and died. It was with a solemn feeling that the young girl climbed up into the great bed, and laid her head where that other fair head had lain. Who could tell what was coming to her, too, in this room? And could she make sunshine for her mother, who had lost the great bright light which had warmed and cheered her during so many years? Then her thoughts turned to that other light which had never failed this dear mother; and so, with a murmured "My times be in thy hand!" Hildegard fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

MORNING HOURS

"The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn:
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled:
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in his heaven —
All's right with the world!"

These seemed the most natural words to sing, as Hildegarde looked out of her window next morning; and sing them she did, with all her heart, as she threw open the shutters and let the glad June sunlight stream into the room. All sad thoughts were gone with the night, and now there seemed nothing but joy in the world.

"Where art thou, tub of my heart?" cried the girl; and she dived under the bed, and pulled out the third reason for her choosing this room. Her mother, she knew, would not change for anything the comfortable "sitz," the friend of many years; so Hildegarde felt at full liberty to enjoy this great white porcelain tub, shallow, three feet across, with red and blue fishes swimming all over it. She did not know that Captain Robert Aytoun had brought it in the hold of his ship all the way from Singapore, for his little Hester, but she did know that it was the most delightful tub she had ever dreamed of; and as she splashed the crystal water about, she almost ceased, for the first time, to regret the blue river which had been her daily bathing-place the summer before. Very fresh and sweet she looked, when at last the long locks were braided in one great smooth braid, and the pretty grey gingham put on and smoothed down. She nodded cheerfully to her image in the glass. It was, as dear Cousin Wealthy said, a privilege to be good-looking, and Hildegarde was simply and honestly glad of her beauty.

"Now," she said, when the room was "picked up," and everything aëtable hung up to air, "the question is, Go out first and arrange the Penates after breakfast, or arrange the Penates now and go out later?" One more glance from the window decided the matter. "They must wait, poor dears! After all, it is more respectful to take them out when the room is made up than when it is having its sheet and pillow-case party, like this."

She went down her own staircase with a proud sense of possession, and opening the door at its foot, found herself in a little covered porch, from which a flagged walk led toward the back of the house. Here was a pleasant sort of yard, partly covered with broad flags, with a grassy space beyond. Here were clothes-lines, well, and woodshed; and here was auntie, standing at her kitchen door, and looking well satisfied with her new quarters.

"What a pleasant yard, auntie!" said Hildegarde. "This is your own domain, isn't it?"

"Reckon 'tis!" replied the good woman, smiling. "Jes' suits me, dis does. I kin have some chickens here, and do my washin' out-doors, and spread out some, 'stead o' bein' cooped up like a old hen myself."

A high wall surrounded auntie's domain, and Hildegarde looked round it wonderingly.

"Oh! there is a door," she said. "I thought mamma said there was a garden. That must be it, beyond there. Call me when breakfast is ready, please, auntie." Passing through the door, she closed it after her, and entered — another world. A dim, green world, wholly different from the golden, sunny one she had just left; a damp world, where the dew lay heavy on shrubs and borders, and dripped

like rain from the long, pendent branches of the trees. The paths were damp, and covered with fine green moss. Great hedges of box grew on either side, untrimmed, rising as high as the girl's head; and as she walked between them their cool glossy leaves brushed against her cheek. Here and there was a neglected flower-bed, where a few pallid rosebuds looked sadly out, and pinks flung themselves headlong over the border, as if trying to reach the sunlight; but for the most part the box and the great elms and locusts had it their own way. Hildegard had never seen such locust-trees! They were as tall as the elms, their trunks scarred and rough with the frosts of many winters. No birds sang in their green, whispering depths; the silence of the place was heavy, weighted down with memories of vanished things.

"I have no right to come here!" said Hildegard to herself. "I am sure they would not like it." Something white glimmered between the bending boughs of box which interlaced across her path. She half expected to see a shadowy form confront her and wave her back; but, pushing on, she saw a neglected summer-house, entirely covered with the wild clematis called virgin's-bower. She peeped in, but did not venture across the threshold, because it looked as if there might be spiders in it. Through the opposite door, however, she caught a glimpse of a very different prospect, a flash of yellow sunlight, a sunny meadow stretching up and away. Skirting the summer-house carefully, she came upon a stone wall, the boundary of the garden, beyond which the broad meadow lay full in the sunlight. Sitting on this wall, Hildegard felt as if half of her were in one world, and half in the other; for the dark box and the drooping elm-branches came to the very edge of the wall, while all beyond was rioting in morning and sunshine.

"The new world and the old one,
The green world and the gold one!"

she murmured, and smiled to find herself dropping into poetry, like Silas Wegg.

At this moment a faint sound fell on her ear, a far-away voice, which belonged wholly to the golden world, and had nothing whatever to do with the green. "Hi-ya! Miss Hildy chile!" the mellow African voice came floating down through the trees with an imperious summons; and Hildegard jumped down from her stone perch, and came out of her dream, and went in to breakfast.

"And what is to be done, Mamma?" asked Hildegard, when the "eggs and the ham and the strawberry jam" were things of the past, and they were out on the piazza again. "Do you realise, by the way, that we shall live chiefly on this piazza?"

"It is certainly a most delightful place," said Mrs. Grahame. "And I do realise that while it would be quite out of the question to change anything in Miss Barbara's sacred parlour, it is not exactly the place to be cosy in. But, dear child, I shall have to be in my own room a good deal, as this arranging of your dear father's papers will be my chief work through the summer, probably."

"Oh, of course! and I shall be in my room a good deal, for there is sewing, and all that German I am going to read, and – oh, and quantities of things to do! But still we shall live here a great deal, I am sure. It is just a great pleasant room, with one side of it taken off. And it is very quiet, with the strip of lawn, and the ledge beyond. One cannot see the road, except just a bit through the gate. Sometimes you can bring your writing down here, and I can grub in the flower-bed and disturb you."

"Thank you!" said her mother, laughing. "The prospect is singularly attractive. But, dear, you asked me a few minutes ago what was to be done. I thought it would be pleasant if we took out our various little belongings, and disposed them here and there."

"Just what I was longing to do!" cried Hildegard. "All my precious alicumtweezles are crying out from the trunk, and waiting for me. But don't you want me to see the butcher for you, love, or let auntie tell me what she is going to make for dessert, or perform any other sacred after-breakfast rites?"

Mrs. Grahame shook her head, smiling, and Hildegard flew upstairs, like an arrow shot from a bow.

In her room stood a huge trunk, already unlocked and unstrapped, and a box whose aspect said plainly that it contained books. All the dresses had been taken out the day before and hung in the roomy closet, pretty, simple gowns, mostly white or grey, for the dear father had disliked "mourning" extremely. Now Hildegard took out her hats, the broad-brimmed straw with the white daisy wreath, the pretty white shirred mull for best, the black "rough and ready" sailor for common wear. These were laid carefully on a shelf in the closet, and covered with a light cloth to keep them from dust. This done as a matter of duty, the pleasant part began. One after another, a most astonishing array of things were taken from the trunk and laid on the bed, which spread a broad white surface to receive them: a trinket-box of ebony and silver; a plaster cast of the Venus of Milo, another of the Pompeian Psyche, both "treated" in some way that gave them the smooth lustre of old ivory; a hideous little Indian idol, carved out of dark wood, with eyes of real carbuncle; a doll's tea-set of exquisite blue and white china, brought to Hildegard from Peking by a wandering uncle, when she was eight years old; a stuffed hawk, confidently asserted by its owner to be the original "jolly gosshawk" of the Scottish ballad, which could "speak and flee"; a Swiss cuckoo clock; several great pink-lipped shells; a butterfly net; a rattlesnake's skin; an exquisite statuette of carved wood, representing Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths, a copy of the famous bronze statue at Innsbruck; a large assortment of pasteboard boxes, of all sizes and shapes; three or four work-baskets; last of all, some framed photographs and engravings, and a number of polished pieces of wood, which were speedily put together into a bookcase and two or three hanging shelves. On these shelves and on the mantel-piece the various alicumtweezles were arranged and re-arranged, till at length Hildegard gave a satisfied nod and pronounced them perfect. "But now comes the hard part!" she said. "The pictures! Who shall have the post of honour over the mantel-piece? Come here, dear persons, and let me look at you!" She took up two engravings, both framed in gilt laurel leaves, and studied them attentively. One was the portrait of a man in cavalier dress, strikingly handsome, with dark, piercing eyes and long, curling hair. The expression of the face was melancholy, almost sombre; yet there was a strange fascination in its stern gaze. On the margin was written, —

"John Grahame of Claverhouse,

"Viscount Dundee."

The other portrait showed an older man, clad in a quaint dress, with a hat that would have been funny on any other head, but seemed not out of place here. The face was not beautiful, but calm and strong, with earnest, thoughtful eyes, and a firm mouth and chin. The legend bore, in curious black-letter, the words, —

"William of Orange Nassau,

"Hereditary Grand Stadt-holder of the Netherlands."

No one save Hildegard knew that on the back of this picture, turned upside down in perpetual disgrace and ridicule, was a hideous little photograph of Philip II. of Spain. It was a constant gratification to her to know that it was there, and she occasionally, as now, turned it round and made insulting remarks to it. She hoped the great Oranger liked to know of this humiliation of his country's foe; but William the Silent kept his own counsel, as was always his way.

And now the question was, Which hero was to have the chief place?

"You are the great one, of course, my saint!" said Hildegarde, gazing into the calm eyes of the majestic Dutchman, "and we all know it. But you see, he is an ancestor, and so many people hate him, poor dear!"

She looked from one to the other, till the fixed gaze of the pictured eyes grew really uncomfortable, and she fancied that she saw a look of impatience in those of the Scottish chieftain. Then she looked again at the space above the mantel-piece, and, after measuring it carefully with her eyes, came to a new resolution.

"You see," she said, taking up a third picture, a beautiful photograph of the Sistine Madonna, "I put *her* in the middle, and you on each side, and then neither of you can say a word."

This arrangement gave great satisfaction; and the other pictures, the Correggio cherubs, Kaulbach's "Lili," the Raphael "violin-player," and "St. Cecilia," were easily disposed of on the various panels, while over the dressing-table, where she could see it from her bed, was a fine print of Murillo's lovely "Guardian Angel."

Hildegarde drew a long breath of satisfaction as she looked round on her favourites in their new home. "So dear they are!" she said fondly. "I wish Hester could see them. Don't you suppose she had *any* pictures? There are no marks of any on the wall. Well, and now for the books!"

Hammer and screwdriver were brought, and soon the box was opened and the books in their places. Would any girls like to know what Hildegarde's books are? Let us take a glance at them, as they stand in neat rows on the plain, smooth shelves. Those big volumes on the lowest shelf are Scudder's "Butterflies," a highly valued work, full of coloured plates, over which Hildegarde sighs with longing rapture; for, from collecting moths and butterflies for her friend, Bubble Chirk, she has become an ardent collector herself, and in one of the unopened cases downstairs is an oak cabinet with glass-covered drawers, very precious, containing several hundred "specimens."

Here is "Robin Hood," and Gray's Botany, and Percy's "Reliques," and a set of George Eliot, and one of Charles Kingsley, and the "Ingoldsby Legends," and Aytoun's "Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers," which looks as if it had been read almost to pieces, as indeed it has. (There is a mark laid in at the "Burial March of Dundee," which Hildegarde is learning by heart. This young woman has a habit of keeping a book of poetry open on her dressing-table when she is doing her hair, and learning verses while she brushes out her long locks. It is a pleasant habit, though it does not tend to accelerate the toilet.)

On the next shelf is "Cranford," also well thumbed, and everything that Mrs. Ewing ever wrote, and "Betty Leicester," and Miss Yonge's historical stories, and the "Tales of a Grandfather," and "Lorna Doone," and the dear old "Days of Bruce," and "Scottish Chiefs," side by side with the "Last of the Barons," and the "Queens of England," and the beloved Homer, in Derby's noble translation, also in brown leather. Here, too, is "Sesame and Lilies," and Carlyle on Hero-Worship.

The upper shelf is entirely devoted to poetry, and here are Longfellow and Tennyson, of course, and Milton (*not* "of course"), and Scott (in tatters, worse off than Aytoun), and Shelley and Keats, and the Jacobite Ballads, and Allingham's Ballad Book, and Mrs. Browning, and "Sir Launfal," and the "Golden Treasury," and "Children's Garland." There is no room for the handy volume Shakespeare, so he and his box must live on top of the bookcase, with his own bust on one side and Beethoven's on the other. These are flanked in turn by photographs of Sir Walter, with Maida at his feet, and Edwin Booth as Hamlet, both in those pretty glass frames which are almost as good as no frame at all.

"And if you are not a pleasant sight," said Hildegarde, falling back to survey her work, and addressing the collection comprehensively, "then I never saw one, that's all. *Isn't* it nice, dear persons?" she continued, turning to the portraits, which from their places over the mantel-piece had a full view of the bookcase.

But the persons expressed no opinion. Indeed, I am not sure that William the Silent could read English; and Dundee's knowledge of literature was slight, if we may judge from his spelling. I should not, however, wish Hildegarde to hear me say this.

Failing to elicit a response from her two presiding heroes, our maiden turned to Sir Walter, who always knew just how things were; and from this the natural step was to the "Lay of the Last Minstrel" (which she had not read so *very* lately, she thought, with a guilty glance at the trunk and box, which stood in the middle of the room, yawning to be put away), and there was an end of Hildegard till dinner-time.

"And that is why I was late, dear love!" she said, as after a hasty explanation of the above related doings, she sank down in her chair at the dinner-table, and gave a furtive pat to her hair, which she had smoothed rather hurriedly. "You know you would have brained me with the hammer, if I had not put it away, and that the tacks would have been served up on toast for my supper. Such is your ferocious disposition."

Mrs. Grahame smiled as she helped Hildegard to soup. "Suppose a stranger should pass by that open window and hear your remarks," she said. "A pretty idea he would have of my maternal care. After all, my desire is to keep tacks *out* of your food. How long ago was it that I found a button in the cup of tea which a certain young woman of my acquaintance brought me?"

"Ungenerous!" exclaimed Hildegard with tragic fervour. "It was only a glove-button. It dropped off my glove, and it would not have disagreed with you in the least. I move that we change the subject." And at that moment in came Janet with the veal cutlets.

CHAPTER IV

A WALK AND AN ADVENTURE

One lovely afternoon, after they were well settled, and all the unpacking was done, Hildegarde started out on an exploration tour. She and her mother had already taken one or two short walks along the road near which their house stood, and had seen the brand-new towers of Mrs. Loftus's house, "pricking a cockney ear" on the other side of the way, and had caught a glimpse of an old vine-covered mansion, standing back from the road and almost hidden by great trees, which her mother said was Colonel Ferrers's house.

But now Hildegarde wanted a long tramp; she wanted to explore that sunny meadow that lay behind the green garden, and the woods that fringed the meadow again beyond. So she put on a short corduroy skirt, that would not tear when it caught on the bushes, slung a tin plant-box over her shoulder, kissed her mother, who had a headache and could not go, and started off in high spirits. She was singing as she ran down the stairs and through auntie's sunny back yard, and the martial strains of "Bonny Dundee" rang merrily through the clear June air; but as she closed the garden door behind her, the song died away, for "one would as soon sing in a churchyard," she thought, "as in the Ladies' Garden." So she passed silently along between the box hedges, her footsteps making no sound on the mossy path, only the branches rustling softly as she put them aside. The afternoon sun sent faint gleams of pallid gold down through the branches of the great elm; they were like the ghosts of sunbeams. Her ear caught the sound of falling water, which she had not noticed before; she turned a corner, and lo! there was a dusky ravine, and a little dark stream falling over the rocks, and flowing along with a sullen murmur between banks of fern. It was part of the green world. The mysterious sadness of the deserted garden was here, too, and Hildegarde felt her glad spirits going down, down, as if an actual weight were pressing on her. But she shook off the oppression. "I will not!" she said. "I will not be enchanted to-day! Another day I will come and sit here, and the stream will tell me all the mournful story; I know it will if I sit long enough. But to-day I want joy, and sunshine, and cheerful things. Good-by, dear ladies! I hope you won't mind!" and grasping the hanging bough of a neighbouring elm, she swung herself easily down into the meadow.

It was a very pleasant meadow. The grass was long, so long that Hildegarde felt rather guilty at walking through it, and framed a mental apology to the farmer as she went along. It was full of daisies and sorrel, so it was not his best mowing-field, she thought. She plucked a daisy and pulled off the petals to see whether Rose loved her, and found she did not, which made her laugh in a foolish, happy way, since she knew better. Now she came to a huge sycamore-tree, a veritable giant, all scarred with white patches where the bark had dropped off. Beside it lay another, prostrate. The branches had been cut off, but the vast trunk showed that it had been even taller than the one which was now standing. "Baucis and Philemon!" said Hildegarde. "Poor dears! One is more sorry for the one who is left, I think, than for the fallen one. To see him lying here with his head off, and not to be able to do anything about it! She cannot even 'tear her ling-long yellow hair' – only it is green. I wonder who killed him." And she went on, murmuring to herself, —

"They shot him dead on the Nine-Stane Rigg,
Beside the Headless Cross.
And they left him lying in his blood
Upon the moor and moss,"

as if Barthram's Dirge had anything to do with the story of Baucis and Philemon. But this young woman's head was very full of ballads and scraps of old songs, and she was apt to break into

them on any or no pretext. She went on now with her favourite dirge, half reciting, half chanting it, as she mounted the sunny slope before her.

"They made a bier of the broken bough,
The sauch and the aspen grey,
And they bore him to the Lady Chapel
And waked him there all day.

"A lady came to that lonely bower,
And threw her robes aside.
She tore her ling-long yellow hair,
And knelt at Barthram's side.

"She bathed him in the Lady-Well,
His wounds sae deep and sair,
And she plaited a garland for his breast,
And a garland for his hair.

"They rowed him in a lily-sheet
And bare him to his earth,
And the grey friars sung the dead man's mass,
As they passed the Chapel Garth.

"They buried him at the mirk midnight,
When the dew fell cold and still;
When the aspen grey forgot to play,
And the mist clung to the hill.

"They dug his grave but a bare foot deep
By the edge of the Nine-Stane Burn,
And they covered him o'er with the heather flower,
The moss and the lady fern.

"A grey friar stayed upon the grave
And sung through the morning tide.
And a friar shall sing for Barthram's soul
While Headless Cross shall bide."

Now she had reached the fringe of trees at the top of the slope, and found that it was the beginning of what looked like a considerable wood. "A pine wood!" said Hildegard, sniffing the spicy perfume with delight. "Oh, pleasant place! No plants, but one cannot have everything. Oh! how good it smells! and hark to the sound of the sea! I shall call this Ramoth Hill." She walked along, keeping near the edge of the wood, where it was still warm and luminous with sunshine. Now she looked up into the murmuring cloud of branches above her, now she looked down at the burnished needles which made a soft, thick carpet under her feet; and she said again, "Oh, pleasant place!" Presently, in one of the upward glances, she stopped short. Her look, from carelessly wandering, became keen and intent. On one of the branches of the tree under which she stood was a small, round object. "A nest!" said Hildegard. "The question is, What nest?" She walked round and round the tree, like a pointer who has "treed" a partridge; but no bird rose from the nest, nor could she see at

all what manner of nest it was. Finding this to be the case, she transferred her scrutiny from the nest to the tree. It was a sturdy pine, with strong, broad branches jutting out, the lowest not so very far above her head, a most attractive tree, from every point of view. Hildegard leaned against the trunk for a moment, smiling to herself, and listening to the "two voices." "You are seventeen years old," said one voice. "Not quite," said the other. "Not for a month yet. Besides, what if I were?" "Suppose some one should come by and see you?" said the first voice. "But no one will," replied the second. "And perhaps you can't do it, anyhow," continued the first; "it would be ridiculous to try, and fail." "Just wait and see!" said the second voice. And when it had said that, Hildegard climbed the tree.

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