Marshall Emma

Salome

Emma Marshall

Salome

Marshall E.

Salome / E. Marshall — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Marshall Emma
Salome

CHAPTER I
THE HOME AND THE CHILDREN

MAPLESTONE COURT was a pretty, spacious, and comfortable English home. The house was built of old red brick, which took a deep, rich colour in the rays of the western sun as it shone upon the wide porch and the many windows. Before the house there was a wide expanse of emerald turf, skirted by stately trees; and this lawn was not cut up into flower-beds, but rolled and shaven close, so that the dark shadows of the trees lay upon it in unbroken masses morning and evening.

To the right of the house the ground sloped gently down to what was called by courtesy a river, though it was but a little rippling stream, which had taken many curves and windings, and just below Maplestone had made for itself a deep basin, called by the same courtesy a lake.

Lake or pond, mere or tarn, this was a delightful refuge in sultry noon-tide. Here the water-lilies rocked themselves to sleep; here the plumy ferns hung over the crystal depths; and here the children of Maplestone Court brought their small craft of every shape and size to sail across from one side to the other of the lake, often to make shipwreck amongst the reeds and lilies, sometimes to sink in the clear water!

A rude wooden bridge crossed the stream just above the lake; and several seats, made of twisted boughs and ornamented with the large cones of the firs which shut in Maplestone at the back, were to be found here and there on the banks.

On one of these seats, on a hot August day, Salome was half-sitting, half-lying, looking dreamily down upon the water. Her wide straw hat was lying at her feet, a book with the leaves much crumpled was in the crown. One little foot hung down from the bench; the other was curled up under her in a fashion known and abhorred by all governesses and those who think the figure of a girl of fifteen is of greater importance than careless ease of position like Salome's at this moment.

The rounded cheek, which was pillowed by the little hand as Salome's head rested against the rough arm of the seat, was not rosy. It was pale, and all the colour about her was concentrated in the mass of tawny hair which was hanging over her shoulders, and varied in its hue from every shade of reddish brown to streaks of lighter gold colour.

It was wonderful hair, people said; and that was, perhaps, all that any one ever did see at all out of the common in Salome.

Quiet and thoughtful, liking retirement better than society, she often escaped out of the school-room to this favourite place, and dreamed her day-dreams to her heart's content.

Salome was the elder of two sisters, and she had one brother older than herself and three younger. Sorrow or change had as yet never come near Maplestone. The days went on in that serene happiness of which we are none of us conscious till it is over. When we hear the rustle of the angels' wings, then we know they are leaving us for ever, and when with us we had not discerned their presence.

Salome roused herself at last, picked up her hat and book, and uncurling herself from her position, stood up and listened. "Carriage wheels in the drive," she said to herself. "I suppose it is nearly luncheon time. I hope no stupid people are coming; that's all. I hate – "

Salome's meditations were broken off here; for a boy of thirteen or fourteen came clattering over the wooden bridge and took a flying leap down into the hollow, and exclaimed, "The bell will ring directly. Make haste, Sal; you are all in a tangle as usual. And won't Miss Barnes be angry?

There is the book she has been hunting all over the place for; and the cover is in rags and tatters, and no mistake!"

Salome looked ruefully at the book, a French story by Madame Pressensé which has delighted many children in its day and generation.

"'L'Institutrice' does not belong to Miss Barnes," Salome said; "it is Ada's. Why should she be in such a fuss? and Ada won't mind."

"Well, come on," Reginald said; "and don't put out every one by being late."

"Who is come?" Salome asked, as the brother and sister walked towards the house together. "Who came in the carriage just now?"

"It was only father. Mr. Stone brought him back from Fairchester in his brougham."

"Father!" Salome exclaimed. "How very odd! And why did Mr. Stone drive him home?"

The sound of the bell stopped any reply from Reginald; and Salome, being obliged to go up to her room to give her hair a superficial combing, and her hands a hasty dip in water, entered the dining-room just as the whole party were assembled.

Mrs. Wilton always lunched with the children at one o'clock, but to-day her place at the head of the table was taken by Miss Barnes.

"Where is mother?" was Salome's instant inquiry.

"You are very late, as usual, Salome," was Miss Barnes's rejoinder; it could not be called a reply.

"I asked where mother was. Do you know, Ada?"

Ada, a pretty, fair girl of fifteen, fresh as a rose, trim as a daisy, without an imperfection of any kind in her looks or in her dress, said, "Father wanted her, I believe;" while Salome, half satisfied, turned to her eldest brother Raymond.

"Is anything the matter, Ray?"

"I am sure I don't know," he answered carelessly. "There's something the matter with this soup – it's beastly."

"Raymond!" Ada exclaimed reprovingly, "pray, don't be so rude," as Raymond pushed away his plate, and, pulling another towards him, attacked some cutlets with tomatoes.

"The cooking is fifty times better at old Birch's," the young Etonian growled. "I can't think how mother can put up with that lazy Mrs. Porson."

"I say," said Reginald, "don't grumble at your bread and butter because it is not just to your mind."

"Shut up, will you," said Raymond, "and don't be cheeky."

And now the two little boys of eight and nine began to chime in with eager inquiries as to whether Raymond would help them with their tableaux, which were to be got up for their double birthday on the 1st of August. For Carl and Hans were both born on the same day of the month, Hans always affirming that he came to keep Carl's first birthday.

"Tableaux at this time of year; what folly! I shall be gone off in Strangway's yacht by then, you little duffer."

"I'll help you," Reginald said. "We'll have the tableaux Black Prince, Joan of Arc, and Mother Hubbard, if mother will lend us the finery, and Sal will advise us what to do."

"Oh, mother says we may have the tableaux. She says Shakespeare acted out of doors. We want to have them in the house by the lake, as a surprise, and bring in the lake," exclaimed Carl. "If Thursday is a day like to-day, it will be jolly. And, Ada, you said you'd write the invitations, didn't you? – the Holmes, and the De Brettes, and the Carruthers, Ada."

Ada, thus appealed to, smiled, and said, "We'll see."

"I have got some pink paper," Carl vociferated. "Nurse gave it to me. She bought it at her nephew's shop in Fairchester. It is just fit for invitations."

"Oh no; that would be fearfully vulgar!" said Ada. "Pink paper!"

Poor Carl was extinguished, and began to eat his rice-pudding in large mouthfuls.

All this time Miss Barnes had not spoken, and Salome watched her face anxiously. Yet she dared not question her, though she felt convinced Miss Barnes knew more than any of them about their mother's non-appearance and their father's unusual return from Fairchester in Mr. Stone's carriage. Mr. Stone was the doctor; and though Salome tried to persuade herself Mr. Stone's carriage had probably been at her father's office, and perhaps having a patient to see out in their direction, Mr. Wilton had accepted the offer of a drive homewards, and that Mr. Stone being a doctor had nothing to do with it, she was but half satisfied with her own self-deception.

The dining-room at Maplestone Court was like all the other rooms – a room suggestive of *home* and comfort. The three large windows, to-day thrown wide open, looked out on the lawn, and beyond to quiet meadows and copses skirted in the far distance by a range of hills, seen through the haze of the summer day blue and indistinct. Within, there were some fine pictures; and the wide dining-table was decorated with flowers – for of flowers there were plenty at Maplestone. If banished from the front of the house, they had their revenge in the dear old-fashioned kitchen-garden – a garden where beds for cutting were filled with every coloured geranium and verbena and calceolaria; a garden which seemed an enclosure of sweets and perfumes, where the wall-fruit hung in peerless beauty, and a large green-house, of the type of past days, was the shelter of a vine so luxuriant in its growth and so marvellous in its produce, that Maplestone grapes continually carried off the prize at the flower and fruit shows of the neighbourhood.

The children gathered round that pretty table – which, in spite of Raymond's dissatisfaction, was always well supplied with all that could please the taste – were singularly ignorant of whence all their good things came. They had all been born at Maplestone. They took it and all its comforts as a matter of course. Till Raymond went to Eton they had none of them concerned themselves much about what others had or had not. Raymond, the eldest son, had been the most indulged, the least contradicted, and had an enormous idea of his own importance.

He was very handsome, but by no means clever. He had no higher aim than to lounge through life with as little trouble to himself as possible; and now, at seventeen, when asked if he meant to turn his mind to any profession, he would say, "Oh, I may scrape through the militia, and get a commission; but I don't bother about it."

A naturally selfish disposition, he was altogether unconscious of it. He had spent a great deal of money at Eton; he had wasted a great deal of time. He cared nothing about Latin and Greek, still less about Euclid. If his clothes were well made, and he could get all Lord Clement Henshaw got, and the Marquis of Stonyshire's nephew, he was content. But as to a thought of his responsibility as his father's eldest son, or any idea beyond the present moment, he had nothing of the kind. Of late he had grown arrogant and self-asserting at home; and the holidays, when Reginald came rushing in with joyous gladness from Rugby, were by no means unmixed pleasures to the other children, by reason of Raymond's return from Eton. Reginald was Salome's especial friend. Ada, in her pretty completeness, stood somewhat alone. She was so "provokingly perfect," Reginald said. No one ever caught Ada out; and it was so dull.

The little boys were under Miss Barnes's care; but Carl was to go to a preparatory school at Christmas. The very idea of such a separation set "Hans's water-works flowing," Reginald said; so the great event was only generally understood, and not talked about.

Just as Miss Barnes had risen from the table, saying, "Your grace, Hans," and just as little Hans had lifted his voice in childish treble, with the accustomed form used by all his predecessors in the Wilton family, the door opened, and Mrs. Wilton came in.

Salome went to her impetuously. "Have you had no luncheon, mother? Let me ring for some hot soup."

Mrs. Wilton took the chair Miss Barnes vacated, and saying in a low voice to her, "Take the children away," she declined anything but a glass of wine and a biscuit, and scarcely seemed to notice the children's eager —

"We may have the tableaux, mother, mayn't we? and Ada may write the notes for our birthday party?"

"Yes, darlings, yes. Run away now."

The two little boys scampered off, and Ada, stooping over her mother, kissed her, and said, —

"You look so tired, mother!"

Raymond and Reginald were still lingering at the bottom of the table, when Raymond said, —

"I suppose I can take out Captain this afternoon? I want to ride over to St. John's."

"Your father – " Mrs. Wilton got no further; and Salome said, —

"Father does not like Captain to be ridden carelessly, Raymond. You had better take old Bess."

"*Thank* you!" was Raymond's retort; "I did not ask for your opinion, Miss Sal."

Then Raymond left the room, and Reginald, seeing his mother did not wish to be troubled with questions, followed him.

Ada with another kiss, as she leaned over the back of her mother's chair, also went away, and Salome and her mother were left to themselves.

Salome knew something was wrong – very wrong, but her lips refused to form the words she longed to utter. Mrs. Wilton, finding they were alone together, covered her face with her hand, and then in a broken whisper said, —

"Your father is in great trouble, Salome."

"Is he ill?" the girl asked quietly.

"Ill, and most miserable. He thinks he is ruined."

"I don't understand, mother. How is he ruined?"

"The great Norwegian firm with which he traded has failed; and as if that were not enough, rumours are floating to-day that the Central Bank is likely to stop payment to-morrow."

Salome's bewildered expression struck her mother as pathetic. "She is only a child," she was saying to herself; "she does not take it in."

Presently Salome said with a deep-drawn breath, "Has father all his money in the bank, then?"

"All his private fortune; and then, if he has to stop trading as a timber merchant, the loss will be – simply ruin, Salome."

"This house is ours, isn't it?" the girl asked.

"My dear child, ours no longer if it has to be sold to meet the debts – the liabilities, as they are called. But do not say a word to any one to-day. There is just this chance, the rumours about the Central Bank may be false. Your father's partners incline to the hope that it may prove so; but I have no hope, no hope. Oh, your father's face of misery is more than I can bear! At his age, to have everything taken from him!"

"Not everything, mother; he has got *you*."

"What am I? A poor weak woman, never strong, never fitted for much exertion. What will become of the children?"

"I will do my best, mother," Salome said. "I will do all I can."

"*You*, Salome! My dear," said her mother sadly, "what could you do?"

"Take care of the boys; teach the little ones; save the expense of a governess; help you to do without so many servants," Salome said promptly.

"Ah, Salome, we shall want no servants, for we shall have no home. Maplestone must be sold, and all the dear old pictures; – but I must not go over this part of it. Mr. Stone happened to meet your father in Fairchester, and thought him looking so ill that he brought him home. He told me he was very anxious about him, and I was by no means to allow him to go back to Fairchester to-day. I heard him order the dog-cart round at three o'clock, and he ought not to go; yet how can I stop him?"

"May I go and see father?" Salome asked. "I will be very quiet, and not worry him."

"I hardly know. He said none of the children were to be told to-day – that I was to keep the trouble from you; that is why I dared not come in to luncheon. And the De Brettes and Fergusons

dine here to-night. They ought to be put off; but he won't hear of it. Miss Barnes saw Mr. Stone leading your father across the hall. I was obliged to tell her about it; but she said she would keep it from the children."

"I am not a child now, mother," Salome said; "I am nearly sixteen. Somehow," and her voice faltered – "somehow I don't feel as if I should ever be a child any more if – If you come upstairs and lie down in your sitting-room, I will go and see father, and try to persuade him not to go to Fairchester. Now, mother."

For the first time in her life Salome felt that she must think for others as well as for herself. It was a sudden awakening. Long years after, she recalled that last dreamy noon-tide by the little lake, and all her visions and illusions: the fairy web of youthful weaving, which some of us remember, was so delicious and so sweet. Now, when she had drawn down the venetian blinds and left her mother to rest, if rest were possible, she paused before she could summon courage to turn to the library and see the father she so dearly loved in his sore trouble.

CHAPTER II
SORROW AND SIGHING

TO Salome's great relief, she remembered there were no school-room lessons that afternoon. Miss Barnes had to take Ada into Fairchester in the pony-carriage for a music lesson. Carl and Hans were full of their birthday party, and had possessed themselves of a heap of decayed finery, which they were sorting in their spacious old nursery. Raymond had taken Captain, and Salome saw him trotting quickly down the drive, from the staircase window when she passed on her way to the library. She saw Reginald, too, lingering about on the lawn, and at last stretch himself full length under a spreading cedar, with his cap tilted over his eyes, and Puck, a little white dog, lying near him. She wished she could only tell Reginald. It was better Ada should not know; but Reginald was so different. Reginald lying there so unconscious of coming trouble; Raymond riding off on the very horse which had been forbidden; the little pony-carriage wheeling away to Fairchester, Ada whipping up the fat gray pony, and turning out on the road with a grand flourish; Carl and Hans singing over their wreaths of faded flowers, worn by their mother in young, happy days; nurse's voice in occasional remonstrance; and the loud singing of a canary, – all these sounds and sights told of life at Maplestone going on as it had done for so long, and only she – Salome – knew that all things were on the very brink of change. There, as she stood thus thinking, some words came to her soul in that strange, mysterious way which all of us, young and old, must have recognized sometimes as coming from some One higher and holier than ourselves – "With God is no variableness, neither shadow of turning;" and then, as if in answer to all her day-dreams, there came the memory of other words, left as a beacon pointing heavenward to all young hearts, —

> "Be good, dear maid, and let who will be clever;
> *Do* noble deeds, nor dream them all day long;
> And so make life, death, and that vast for ever
> One grand sweet song."

"I want to do what is right," she sighed. "I want to help them, – father, and all of them, – but oh, I must pray God to help me and make me patient!" Then, with a quiet, slow step she went to the library door and tapped gently. There was no answer. Then Salome opened the door and went in.

Her father was sitting in his arm-chair, with his back turned towards her. Salome went up to him and touched his arm.

"Papa."

Mr. Wilton turned his face towards her at last, and said, almost roughly, —

"What do you want, Salome?"

"Mother has told me all, and I am come to tell you how I love you, and I will try to help you, if I can."

"My dear – my dear child," Mr. Wilton said, "no one can help me now; I am ruined! But your mother promised not to tell you. You might as well have had another night of peace, – just as well. I told her to keep it from the children."

"But, dear father, I am not like a child now. I am the eldest girl, and I ought to know what troubles you. Mother could not keep it from me; she was obliged to tell some one. I want to ask you to be so very kind as not to go into Fairchester again to-day, but stay quiet."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Wilton impatiently; "I must go. Why should I leave the sinking ship like this? I am very well. It is all Stone's humbug, frightening your poor mother out of her wits. Here, give me another glass of wine, and then ring for Curtis to come round with the dog-cart."

Mr. Wilton suddenly rose from his chair, and before Salome could prevent it he had emptied the decanter into a tumbler, and was raising it to his lips when he dropped it with a crash upon the ground, his hand fell powerless at his side, and he sank back in the chair speechless and unconscious of any outward thing.

Instantly Salome's first thought was of her mother – to save her from the sudden shock which had blanched her own lips with terror, and for a moment left her as helpless as her poor father.

Then, instead of ringing the bell frantically, or calling out aloud, as so many girls would have done, she ran with the speed of lightning to the nursery and called her faithful friend there.

"Come to papa! quick, Stevens, quick!" Then as nurse threw down her work and obeyed her she flew to the garden, where Reginald, all unconscious of the impending sorrow, was lying under the cedar tree.

"Reginald, Reginald, get up! father is much worse. Send to Fairchester for Mr. Stone, or any doctor; *pray* make haste."

"Father! what is the matter with him?"

"Oh, I don't know! His face is an awful gray colour, and his mouth – O Reginald, don't ask me, only go and get some help; but don't let mother be frightened."

Reginald did as she told him without farther question; and Salome returned to the library.

The servants were gathered there now – the old butler, Greenwood; Stevens, the nurse, who had seen Mr. Wilton bring home his bride; others of the large household standing near in awe-struck silence. They made way for the little figure that appeared at the door, and let Salome pass to Stevens, who was supporting her master's head, while Greenwood was loosing his collar.

"You can do no good, my dear Miss Salome; no good."

"What do you mean, Stevens? I have sent Reginald for Mr. Stone – " Here she stopped, for Greenwood broke out into convulsive crying.

"The dear master is struck for death, and no mortal power can help him now!"

That evening about seven o'clock, Salome, sitting by her mother's side in the hushed and darkened room where the master of Maplestone lay breathing heavily, quite unconscious of any outward thing, heard the sound of horses' feet. She rose quickly and went to the hall door.

"It is Raymond. I had better tell him," she said.

On her way she met Ada, her pretty face washed with tears, like a rose in a heavy shower, who said, —

"Raymond has come back on one of Mr. St. John's horses, Salome. He has broken Captain's knees; just think of that!"

"Does he know?" Salome asked.

"I daresay they have told him in the stables. Is there any change in father?"

Salome shook her head. "Will you go and sit with mother while I find Raymond? Reginald is gone with the messages to the De Brettes and Fergusons."

"Oh, I am afraid to see father," Ada said, shuddering. "I dare not go. I wonder if Uncle Loftus will come; Miss Barnes says he is sure to start when he gets the telegram. Here comes Raymond."

Raymond came in with a would-be careless air, trying to whistle. Salome went up to him.

"Raymond, do you know what has happened?"

"My father is ill, you mean. What is the matter with him? I shall be spared a row about Captain. I have been and done for Captain, and for myself pretty nearly. What do you both look so scared for?"

"Come into the drawing-room and I will tell you, Raymond. O Raymond!" Salome said, "father is dying! Mr. Stone has telegraphed for Dr. Scott, but he has no hope."

Raymond's lip quivered, and the real boy-nature asserted itself. "I wish I had not taken Captain," he said. "Where's mother?"

"In the library. He was seized with this fit while I was with him there. He could not bear the dreadful blow which has fallen on him."

"Blow! What do you mean?"

"I forgot," Salome said simply. "Father has lost all his money, and we shall have nothing."

"What nonsense! We shall have this house, and – "

"Oh no, Raymond! The house and everything in it will have to be sold. But oh! what is that – what is that to – losing father?" and Salome covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly.

"I say, Salome, don't take on like this," said Raymond in a strangely husky and unnatural voice. "There is some mistake, depend upon it. Things can't be as bad as that. Why, what am *I* to do, if I can't go back to Eton?"

Ah, there was the sting to the undisciplined, selfish nature, – "What am *I* to do?"

Salome turned away and went back to keep her sorrowful vigil by her mother's side.

The next week was like a terrible dream to Salome. The dreaded news of the stoppage of the Central Bank came, as had been expected; but Mr. Wilton died unknowing that his worst fears had been realized, and that all was lost. He was laid to rest in the pretty churchyard of Maplestone just one week after the blow had fallen, and his widow and children were left desolate.

Uncle Loftus had arrived, as Miss Barnes had expected. He had not remained all through the sad week, – while the sunshine reigned without, and darkness and dreariness within Maplestone Court, – but he returned for the funeral; and the same evening he sat in consultation with Mr. Calvert, the lawyer, and Mr. De Brette, with the partners of the great timber concern which had collapsed in the general and widespread pressure of the time. Mr. Wilton's case was rendered far worse by the loss of a large private income derived from shares in the Central Bank. There was literally nothing left to his children but his heavy liabilities and his wife's small settlement.

"Under three hundred a year," Dr. Loftus Wilton said; "and with all their previous habits and way of life, this will be little enough. My sister-in-law is not a strong woman, and has had her own way, poor thing – I mean she has been blessed with a very indulgent husband."

"I suppose the eldest boy can earn his living," Mr. De Brette said; "he is over seventeen."

"He ought to do so. We must get him into an office. Perhaps, when the concern is wound up, Mr. Ferguson may find him a berth when a fresh start is made."

"A fresh start!" exclaimed Mr. Ferguson; "that will never be, as far as I am concerned. I should think a clerkship in a bank would be better."

"I think you ought to see Raymond," Dr. Loftus Wilton said; "he is his father's representative, and everything should be laid before him. Then there is the eldest girl, close on sixteen; a little creature, but full of nerve and sense. Shall we call them?"

The gentlemen seemed doubtful; and Mr. De Brette said, —

"Poor things! I think we had better leave it to you to tell them what must happen. The house will realize a good deal," he added, looking round; "fine pictures, and everything in good order. The cellar, too, must be valuable – poor Wilton's wine was always of the choicest."

"Yes, poor fellow. My brother lived up to the mark, perhaps a little too much so; but who was to foresee such a calamity as this?"

After a little more discussion the party broke up, – the lawyer gathering together the papers and Mr. Wilton's will with a half sigh, as he said, —

"This is so much waste paper now. It is a melancholy story, and there are hundreds like it. Nothing but losses all round."

Dr. Loftus Wilton strolled out into the grounds when he was left alone. He would put off talking to the children till the next day, he thought, and there was no immediate necessity to do so. He was sorry for them; but he had a large family, and a hard fight to provide for them out of a professional income as a doctor in a fashionable watering-place, where much was required in the way of appearance, and people were valued very much by what they wore, and very little by what they were. The summer was always a flat time at Roxburgh, and hence Dr. Loftus Wilton could better afford the time away from his practice. "There are good schools at Roxburgh for the small boys, and

the two girls could get advantages," he thought; "but then Anna will not trouble herself about poor Arthur's family. In fact, she would not care to have them there. Still, I must do my duty. She and Emily never did hit it off. Anna thought she patronized her; and now it would be the other way, poor things." And then Dr. Wilton lighted another cigar and paced up and down the garden, till at last he found himself on the wooden bridge, and in the stillness of the summer evening heard voices. He went on, and came upon the lake, on the bank of which three black figures were sitting – Salome and her two elder brothers. The opportunity was too good to be lost, and knocking the ashes off his cigar end, Dr. Wilton descended, saying, —

"The very people I wanted to see. – Here, Reginald, my boy, stop – Raymond, I mean."

But Raymond, at the sight of his uncle, had suddenly left his seat, and, with his hands in his pockets, had disappeared in the tangled shrubbery which led away from the lake on the other side.

Reginald, however, stopped when his uncle called, and Salome, rising, said, —

"Did you want us, Uncle Loftus?" The pale, tear-stained face and little slight figure, in its black, sombre dress, touched Dr. Wilton.

"Yes, my dear; I came to talk with you and your eldest brother, as – well, as reasonable people. Sit down, Salome," and he drew her towards him on the bench.

"You know, my dear," he began, "you know you will have to leave Maplestone at once, – the sooner for all of you the better, I think, – for the place is in the possession of your poor father's creditors. Now, my dear, listen to me."

"I am listening, Uncle Loftus," Salome said.

"I cannot do much for you, for I have a large family and many expenses; but I have been thinking Roxburgh would be a good place for you all to live in. The small boys could go to school, and – "

"I mean to teach Carl and Hans, Uncle Loftus. There are Raymond and Reginald. Reginald is not fourteen."

"Oh, well, Reginald must have a year or two more, I suppose. But Raymond is well over sixteen; he must work for his living."

"And there is Ada, Uncle Loftus, – she must go on with her lessons."

"My dear, I am afraid *must* is a word we shall have to leave alone now. It is what you can afford out of your poor mother's income, not what you *must* have. Now I want you to ask her what she thinks of my plan. If she approves it, I will look for a small furnished lodging, somewhere in Roxburgh, and I will speak to your Aunt Anna – only you must get your mother's mind about it first. I shall see her to-morrow before I leave, and you can prepare her for my proposition. You must take heart, my dear. Things may brighten."

"Nothing can bring father back," said Salome passionately. "I could bear anything if only I had him. To have worked so hard for us, and then to die ruined and broken-hearted!"

Dr. Wilton had nothing to say except, "My dear, don't fret – pray don't. From what I have observed as a medical man, I think your poor father's life would not have been a long one at the best. He had a slight attack, you know, two years ago, when I advised him to go abroad for a few weeks for entire rest. And this fearful blow was too much for him – brought on the last attack of paralysis, which proved fatal. Your brothers ought not to have gone off in that way."

"I am here, Uncle Loftus," Reginald said. "I have heard every word; I am ready to do anything to help my mother," he continued, drawing himself upright from the long grass where he had been lying full length.

"That's a brave little man," Dr. Wilton said. "I wish your brother may show the same good feeling." And then he relighted his cigar, and went over the bridge again.

"How unfeeling he is!" were Reginald's first words. "Oh, dear Sal, *don't*!" for Salome was sobbing bitterly. "Don't, Sal; and, for any sake, don't let us go to Roxburgh to be patronized by that set of heartless people. Let's stick together, and go and live near a big school, where I can go as a day boy. Not at Rugby though; I shouldn't like that. The fellows in Crawford's house might look down

on me as a day boy. It is hard to have to leave Rugby; but I don't mean to give up because I have to do my work somewhere else. One's work doesn't alter – that's one comfort; and I'll do my best. And I have got *you*, Sal; that's more than most fellows can say, for sisters like you don't grow like blackberries in the hedge."

"O Reg! I am sure I have not been of much use to you, only I think I understand you. And, Reg" – this was said very earnestly – "you must tell me always when I am untidy, and wake me up when I am in a dream, and remind me to put my books away, and not leave everything in a higgledy-piggledy fashion."

"Oh, bother it! clever girls like you, who are always thinking and making up stories and verses, often are all of a heap."

"But that does not make it right, Reg; and I am not a bit clever, really. Think of Ada – how beautifully she works and plays and draws! and I don't do one of those things. Sometimes I think I might make a very little money by writing a story. You know I have written heaps, and torn them up, but now I shall keep the next and read it to you. I have got it all straight in my head, not a hitch anywhere. Reg, isn't it strange I can make all things in my stories go so pit-pat and right, and yet I never can keep my goods straight? Why – would you believe it? – I've already lost one of my new black kid gloves with four buttons. I can't find it *anywhere*. It just shows what I shall have to do to *make* myself orderly."

"Ah!" said Reginald, "I see; if I were you, Sal, I would have some of my hair cut off."

"I have turned it up," Salome said; "I thought I had better try to do it myself to-day."

"Yes; but there is a great pin sticking out, and a long tail hanging down, and" – Reginald hesitated – "it makes you *look* as if you weren't quite trim. Trim isn't prim, you know, Sal."

"No; that's right, Reginald. Tell me just what you think, won't you, and I will tell you. I suppose," she went on, "such a sorrow as ours makes us think more of God. We are forced to think of Him; but, O Reg! I have been thinking of Him before this trouble – His love and care for every tiny creature, and giving us so many beautiful things. I feel as if no loss of money could take *them* away – the sky, the sunshine, the flowers – all signs of God's love. And then even *this* comes from Him; and I know He is love, and so I try to bear it."

"You are awfully good, Salome," Reginald said in a husky voice. "You know that talk we had at Easter. I have done what you said ever since, you know. Not that I always or ever get much good from it; but I always read the verses you said you would, and try to say a real prayer in chapel. The dear old chapel," Reginald said; "fancy if I never see it again!"

The brother and sister sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Salome said, "I must go to mother now, and tell her what Uncle Loftus wishes, and try to find Raymond. Poor Ray! it is worse for him than for any of us somehow. Ray was made to be rich."

"He'll have to get a lot of nonsense knocked out of him, I expect," Reginald said, as he and Salome parted – Reginald turning off to the stables to see poor Captain, who had been brought back comparatively worthless. And Salome, going to her mother's room, met Raymond on the stairs. To her surprise he said, —

"Come here, Sal; I want to speak with you."

They went into the library together, now so full of memories to Salome that she could hardly restrain her tears; but she was always saying to herself, "I must keep up for mother's sake, and not be weak and useless."

"I say, Salome, don't you be taken in by Uncle Loftus; he is going to ride over us, and I won't stand it. I shall not go to Roxburgh, and so I shall tell him. I must try and get into – well, into the militia, and – "

"Raymond, you cannot do it. There is only just enough money to keep mother and all of us. You don't seem to take it in, Ray. Dear Ray! I am dreadfully sorry for you, for you will feel it most; but you would do anything for mother, and if you went into a bank or an office you might soon get rich and – "

"Rich! whoever heard such nonsense? I shall go and see Mr. Calvert the first thing to-morrow, and tell him how Uncle Loftus tries to put us down."

Salome was really astonished at her brother's unreasonableness and absolute childishness; and Ada coming in to say mother wanted Salome directly, she left her with Raymond, despairing of making any impression upon him.

CHAPTER III
EDINBURGH CRESCENT

DR. WILTON was too busy all the day after his return to Roxburgh to think much about his nieces and nephews at Maplestone. The incessant calls on a medical man in the full swing of practice in a place like Roxburgh are urgent and cannot be put aside. He came in to dinner at half-past seven, and the scene of his home comfort and his elder children seated round him brought back to him forcibly the condition of his brother's widow and his family.

When the servant had left the room, Dr. Wilton said, —

"I have advised these poor things to come here for the winter anyhow, Anna. Can you look for lodgings for them to-morrow? I think there may be some to be had cheap down by St. Luke's Church."

"Come here, Loftus! You surely are not going to bring Emily and the children here, the most expensive place to decide upon."

"Well, I don't know what else to advise. You see we might show them some attention, and help them on a little. The boys could go to the college, and the girls get advantages which will fit them for teaching. Poor things! it makes my heart ache when I think of them, I can tell you."

"Papa!" exclaimed Louise Wilton, "I am sure we don't want them here. I never could get on with Salome and Ada. I am sure I hated being at Maplestone that summer; and Aunt Emily was so grand and stuck-up."

"Nonsense, Louise!" said her father sharply. "Grand and stuck-up indeed! Poor thing! she will only just be able to pull through with all those children. Hans and Carl are quite little things."

"Well, I must say," said Mrs. Loftus Wilton, "I do think it is a mistake to bring them all here; and I don't believe for an instant you will get lodgings for them at a low price."

"I am not going to try," said Dr. Wilton. "I leave that to you; and to-morrow morning you had better take the carriage and drive about till you find some at thirty shillings or two pounds a week. Four bed-rooms and two sitting-rooms will do."

Mrs. Wilton leaned back in her chair and said, "I shall send Betha; she is a far better judge than I am of lodgings. But I feel sure you will be disappointed. It will be utterly impossible to get lodgings in Roxburgh for two pounds a week to accommodate a family like poor Emily's."

"I should have thought," said Dr. Wilton, "you might have troubled yourself to help these poor people. It is not unlikely that you may find yourself in the same position one day; and then I don't know how you will manage. My poor brother had far less reason than I have to look forward to leaving his wife and children unprovided for."

With these words Dr. Wilton left the dining-room; and Louise said, —

"What shall we do with all the Maplestone people, mother? it will be so awkward to have them in lodgings here. Just the last place for people to come to who are poor."

"Your father seems to be of a different opinion, my dear Louise, and we must abide by his decision."

"Really," exclaimed Kate, the second sister, "Roxburgh does not belong to us. I suppose our cousins may come here if they like."

"You have not practised to-day, Kate," Mrs. Wilton said sharply. "Go into the school-room at once."

Dr. Wilton had a large family, of whom Louise and Kate were the eldest girls. Then came three boys, who were at the college; and then three more little girls. A daily governess had educated Louise and Kate, who at seventeen and eighteen were supposed to have finished with the school-room except for music and a little German. The trio of little girls – Edith, Maude, and Hilda – were under Miss Browne, as their sisters had been. And in the nursery there was a little delicate, fragile

boy of four years old, who was the especial care of the kind aunt of Mrs. Wilton, who lived in her house as a poor relation, and performed an unlimited number of services small and great for the whole family. Her presence in the doctor's household obviated the necessity of an experienced nurse, an experienced cook, or an experienced housemaid. A staff of young girls under Aunt Betha's management got through the onerous duties of the doctor's household, and thus Mrs. Wilton practised economy by her help.

Like many people who love a showy outside of things and sacrifice much to attain their object, Mrs. Wilton was very mean in small matters. An extra quarter a pound of butter used in the house, or a shilling expended on little Guy over and above the sum she thought right for his beef tea and other nourishment, caused her real concern. She would fly off to Aunt Betha to inquire into the matter, and would inveigh upon her want of management with some asperity. But she did not grudge anything in her drawing-room which kept it up with the fashion of the day, and encouraged her eldest girl to dress, as she did herself, with excellent taste and prettiness.

Mrs. Wilton went up to the nursery after dinner, where Aunt Betha was sitting by little Guy. He had been very feverish and ailing all day, and his father had paid him several visits. Aunt Betha raised her head as Mrs. Wilton rustled in.

"He has just gone off to sleep," she whispered.

His tall graceful mother went up to the little bed where Guy lay.

"Loftus does not think there is much amiss," she said. "Poor little man!" Then she sat down by the fire and said, "I want you, auntie, to go out lodging-hunting to-morrow for me. It is for Emily Wilton and her children. They are almost penniless, and it is necessary that they should leave Maplestone at once, for the creditors are in possession of the place. Shall I wake him?" Mrs. Wilton asked, as Aunt Betha turned her head towards Guy's bed.

"No, I think not; he is really sound now. But, oh, I am so sorry for those poor children; I am indeed."

"It is a pitiable case, and I don't see myself the wisdom of bringing them to Roxburgh. However, as Loftus wishes it to be done, I must look for the lodgings, or get you to look for them. I think down by St. Luke's Church is the most likely locality, or behind Connaught Crescent. They want four bed-rooms and two sitting-rooms for two pounds a week."

"I fear we shall not succeed at that price; but I will go directly after breakfast to-morrow, – if Susan can be trusted here. Guy must be kept quiet till after his luncheon, and the children are so apt to rush in."

"*Poor* little man!" the mother repeated. "He has but small enjoyment in his life; but we shall see him a strong man yet. Oh, those boys!" And Mrs. Wilton hastily left the nursery as sounds of boisterous mirth ascended from the boys' study, a small room on the ground floor where they got through their evening preparations. Three vociferous young voices were raised at their highest pitch, while Edith's shrill treble was heard.

Down went Mrs. Wilton, and at the sound of her footstep there was a lull.

"Edith, have I not forbidden you to interrupt your brothers at their work? Go up to bed immediately."

"Mamma," sobbed Edith, – "mamma, it is all Ralph's fault. He says – he says that Uncle Arthur's children are all paupers, and that if papa – if – "

"She is such a baby," Ralph exclaimed; "she says pauper is a bad word."

"Yes," laughed Cyril, "the silly baby. I believe she thinks *pauper* is swearing."

"No, she does not," said Digby, the eldest of the three brothers. "No, poor little thing. It is a shame to tease her as you have done. Come on upstairs, Edith. I will take you," and Digby took his little sister by the hand and was leading her away when his mother interposed.

"Don't encourage her in naughtiness, Digby. She is very disobedient to come here at all. – Now, Edith."

Poor Edith obeyed at once, sobbing out, "I only said I was glad we were not so poor as our cousins; and they all laughed at me – at least Ralph and Cyril did – and said if papa died – "

"That will do, Edith. You are *not* to go down to disturb your brothers again. The next time I find you in this room of an evening, I shall punish you severely. Run away to bed. Aunt Betha ought to have called you by this time; and what can Sarah be thinking of?"

Then Mrs. Wilton kissed her little girl, and returned to the drawing-room, where Louise was reading by the bright gaslight.

"You have four burners lighted, Louise. It is quite unnecessary," and Mrs. Wilton's height made it easy for her to turn down two of the burners in the glass chandelier.

"What a noise the boys have been making downstairs!" Louise said. "I am sure I hope we shall not have them here all the holidays. Are we not going to Torquay or Ilfracombe?"

"Decidedly not *en masse*," Mrs. Wilton said. "Lodgings by the sea are so fearfully expensive."

"Well," said Louise, "I think it is very dull staying in Roxburgh all the summer, and the boys are so tiresome. If we had only a proper tennis-court; playing in the square is so disagreeable."

"You are very discontented, Louise," said her mother. "Pray, do not grumble any more."

Mrs. Wilton sat down to write a letter, and no more was said till Kate came in with Digby. They were great friends, and Digby was the generally acknowledged good-temper of the family. I am afraid it was too much the motto of each of the doctor's children, "Every one for himself." There could not be said to be one really unselfish person of that household. But Digby and Kate had more thought for others than the rest of the brothers and sisters, and were naturally better tempered and contented.

"Are you going to look for lodgings for Aunt Emily, mother?" Digby asked.

Mrs. Wilton looked up from her writing as if the idea were a new one to her.

"No, my dear, I shall not have time to do so. I am engaged to take Louise and Kate to a tennis-party at Cawfield to-morrow."

"Digby, I wish you would not sit on that sofa. Look what you have done to the cover."

Digby changed his seat from the sofa to a straw chair, one of those half-circular ones with cushions which creak at every movement.

"O Digby, do pray be quiet," said Louise irritably. "It does fidget me to hear that noise."

"You will be an old maid to a certainty, Louise," said her brother, "if you are so cantankerous, – another Aunt Betha, only not half as good. – Come on, Kate; let us have a game of backgammon."

"Not in here!" exclaimed Louise. "I hate the rattling of the dice. Pray go into the back drawing-room."

"Yes, let us go there," said Kate, "in peace."

"Peace! There is none in this house," said Digby as he followed Kate, who jumped up on a chair to light the gas, and came down with a thud on the floor, when she had achieved her object, which shook the glass-drops of both chandeliers ominously.

"I say, Kate, what a clumsy elephant you are. You'll bring down the chandelier and a torrent of abuse from a certain person at the same time."

"Where are Ralph and Cyril?" Kate asked.

"Downstairs. We have all been 'preparing a lesson,' doing a holiday task. Such humbug, as if fellows of our age ought not to dine late."

"Well, the Barrington boys always have school-room tea."

"They are younger. Ned isn't fifteen, and I am sixteen."

"No, not quite; not till next week," Kate said. "You are younger than Raymond. Are you not sorry for them at Maplestone?"

"Awfully," said Digby; "and I think every one so unfeeling. You girls ought to be in mourning."

"Mamma said it would be too expensive," said Kate; "but then she never expected they would all come here and see us. I believe she is going to get up something if they do come; but they may not get lodgings. Isn't it odd, Digby, to think of our visit to Maplestone a year and a half ago, when we

felt them so much better off than we were, and envied the house and the gardens, and the ponies and the carriages? And Raymond talked so much of his swell Eton friends; and Reginald was at Rugby; and you grumbled because you could not go to school, but had to be a day boy at the college here."

"Yes, I remember," said Digby. "And how pretty Ada looked when she went to church on Sunday. And that quiet one, they say, is clever, with the queer name."

"Salome! ah, yes," said Kate. "She was odd – so dreamy, and unlike other girls. Dear me, it is very sad for them all. I wish they were not coming here all the same, for I know they will be disappointed; and Roxburgh is not a place to be poor in. I am sick of all the talking about who this person is, and where they come from, and what they wear; and that 'residents' can't know 'lodgers' for fear of getting mixed up with what is not quite the thing. I do hate it," said Kate vehemently; "and yet what is one to do?"

"Play backgammon now," said Digby; "and go to bed and forget it. With slow holidays like these, one had better lie there half the day."

"*Pray* don't be late to-morrow, Digby; it does make such a fuss. Now then – sixes as a start. What luck for me!"

So the cousins in Edinburgh Terrace talked of the cousins at Maplestone. So small a part of the lives of others do griefs and sorrows make. That evening, while Digby and Kate were so lightly discussing the coming of Ada and Raymond, of Aunt Emily and Reginald, Salome was standing in the fading light by her father's grave in the quiet churchyard of Maplestone, with some freshly-gathered flowers in her hand, and crying as if her heart would break!

CHAPTER IV
LOOKING FOR LODGINGS

UNT BETHA was not the person to do anything by halves. She had promised to set forth early the next day to "hunt for lodgings," and she did not shrink from her task. She was up earlier than usual, that everything might be in order and her daily routine gone through in good time. First there was Guy to be washed and dressed; and his breakfast, with his two little sisters, Maude and Hilda, – Edith breakfasting in the dining-room with her elders. Then came the visit to the kitchen, and Mrs. Wilton's orders and counter-orders to convey to the young servant who cooked under Aunt Betha's supervision. There were the daily accounts to balance, and the daily arrangements to make; and last, not least, the daily burden of others to be borne. How nobly and uncomplainingly Aunt Betha bore this burden I have no words to tell you. She had gone through deep trials in her young days, and had been the useful sister to Mrs. Wilton's mother. Then when that sister died, and dying said, "You will have a home with Anna; don't give her up, she will want help," Aunt Betha transferred her faithful service from the mother to the daughter. She was too poor to live without earning her own living, and she chose to do this by the position in Dr. Wilton's house in which we find her.

Dear Aunt Betha! She was plain, and short, and very old-fashioned in her dress. "I hear too much about dress in this house," she would say, "to care much about my own." And black silk for Sundays, and a black merino or alpaca for week-days, made short and full, was her unvarying costume. Aunt Betha was scrupulously neat and clean, and her caps, tied with mauve ribbon under her chin, were always fresh and bright. So were the large collar and cuffs which finished her "afternoon dress;" though when she was busy about the house in the morning she dispensed with the cuffs, and wore a large apron and holland sleeves over her gown.

Mrs. Wilton had that dislike to trouble which can hardly be called indolence; for she was active in her habits, and could go through a good deal of fatigue without complaining. She would walk with Louise to a house at some distance, if the carriage was not available, rather than miss an afternoon party. She would give herself any amount of trouble about one of her husband's patients who she thought belonged to a good family. She would plan and contrive for Louise and Kate's dress and amusement; and her own appearance was singularly youthful and her dress faultless; and all this was not effected without much pain and trouble. But all the daily routine of household duties which did not bring any especial honour with them she disliked. Drudgery could be as well done by Aunt Betha as by her. Why should she be a drudge? "Aunt Betha was made to be useful, and she enjoys it. Dear old woman! We give her a comfortable home, and she is happy. Nothing could fit in better."

"I am not to exceed two pounds a week, Anna?" Aunt Betha asked, as she put her head into the dining-room, where Mrs. Wilton and Louise were lingering over breakfast and complaining that Digby was so late.

"Oh, about the lodgings!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilton. "Are you going now, dear?" (Mrs. Wilton often called Aunt Betha "dear.") "I will go up to Guy, then."

"Susan is with him. He is better this morning. Good-bye, – I have no time to lose."

"Very well. Take a cab if you are very tired. Certainly not more than two pounds a week for the lodgings; but less will be better."

Aunt Betha closed the door, and was soon on her way, her quick, light footsteps growing faint and fainter as she went along the smooth pavement of Edinburgh Crescent. She had a message at the green-grocer's and an order at the butcher's to leave as she passed the shops which supplied the wants of Roxburgh; and then she turned away from what might be called the West End of Roxburgh to the neighbourhood of St. Luke's Church. Here there was a substratum of small villas and long, narrow streets, which were a long way from the crescents and terraces of the gay town to which

so many people resorted for health and pleasure. The college at Roxburgh stood a little apart from crescents and small streets, and a large number of well-built houses clustered around it, where the families of boys who attended the college mostly lived. In days gone by there had been a mineral spa at Roxburgh, which had proved the starting-point of the large fashionable watering-place of these later times. But "the spa" had declined in popularity, and the old pump-room was in a forlorn state of decay and desolation. It had given Roxburgh its fame; and now, being out of repute, was cast aside and renounced.

The part of the town towards which Aunt Betha directed her efforts lay below the deserted spa, and was nearer the large, smoky town of Harstone, which was scarcely two miles from Roxburgh, where a busy life of trade and commerce went on in the valley, apart from the life of pleasure on the hill above. A cloud of smoke lay in the valley above Harstone, and the river fogs crept up on this side of Roxburgh, laden with the smut and breath of the chimneys, in late autumn and winter; but on this bright August morning, the towers and spires of the Harstone churches looked picturesque in the soft, gray mist which lay over them and the tall masts of the ships in the docks.

Aunt Betha did not, however, turn her eyes to the valley. She was too much intent on scanning the rows of small houses with "Apartments," "Furnished Apartments," printed on boards in the windows.

"Number 3 Lavender Place. That is a nice bow window, and white curtains. I'll try there." Aunt Betha rang the bell, and did not fail to notice "that you might see your face in the brass knob of the handle." A very neat woman came to the door, and in answer to her inquiries said —

"Yes, I have apartments to let, – a drawing-room and four bed-rooms."

Aunt Betha felt quite delighted at what seemed likely to be the speedy end of her labours. Everything was so neat. Drawing-room back and front. Could anything be better? Then came the question of terms.

"Two guineas a week."

"Would you, Mrs. – " Aunt Betha paused.

"Parsons – my name is Parsons," said the landlady.

"Could you, Mrs. Parsons, say less if the rooms were taken for some time?"

"Perhaps I might, ma'am. I *might* say two pounds."

"Very well. I don't think I shall do better. I will close at once, and send you word as to the day the family will arrive."

"Pray, ma'am," inquired Mrs. Parsons, "how many are there in the family?"

"A widow lady, and, let me see, a servant, – poor thing, she must keep one servant; she has been used to more than you can count on your fingers, – and six children."

"I never take children, ma'am, *never*," said Mrs. Parsons.

"Oh dear, that is unfortunate; but these are not young children. The little boys are twins, and are – "

"*Boys!* that quite decides me, ma'am. I don't like other folk's servants about my place; but I *might* have got over that, had the children been girls. But boys – "

"Then I must wish you good-morning," said Aunt Betha. "Can you tell me of any house where children would not be objected to? *I* live in a house full of children myself, and I find them, as a rule, a deal pleasanter than grown-up people. But of course you must please yourself."

"I look at my furniture, ma'am, and my peace and comfort. I look to the ruin of carpets and chairs, and – "

But Aunt Betha stayed to hear no more, and trotted off on her arduous errand.

In and out of houses went poor Aunt Betha, with alternate hopes and fears. Some were dirty and slovenly: the landladies of these called the children "little dears," and said "they doted on children." Some rooms were too dear; some too small; and as the sharp-sounding clock of St. Luke's struck twelve, Aunt Betha felt tired out and ready to give up. She was standing hopelessly at the corner of

Lavender Place, when a pleasant-looking woman, crossing the road, exclaimed with a smile, "Why, if that's not Miss Cox! Dear me, Miss Cox, how are you, ma'am?"

"I am pretty well, Ruth, thank you; but I am tired out. I am looking for lodgings for poor Mr. Arthur Wilton's family, and I can't find any."

"Mr. Arthur Wilton! Poor gentleman. I saw his death in the paper, and thought it must be the doctor's brother. He has left a long family, hasn't he?"

"Yes; that is, shorter than my niece's; but six are enough to provide for when there is nothing left but debts and difficulties."

Ruth was an old married servant of Dr. Wilton's, one of the innumerable young cooks who had been under Miss Cox, and had basely deserted her as soon as she could *cook*– send up a dinner fit to be eaten – to dress the dinner of the baker's boy who had served 6 Edinburgh Crescent with bread.

"Dear me! I thought Mr. Wilton was a very rich gentleman. I have heard the young ladies talk of the fine country place. How was it?"

"He had misfortunes and losses, Ruth; and his family are coming here to live in furnished lodgings. But I can meet with none. Can you help me?"

Ruth looked right and left, as if she expected to see some one coming up or down the road with the news of lodgings in their hands, and was silent. At last a light seemed to break over her rosy face. "If they don't mind being next to our shop, I believe I do know the very place. Will you come and see? The house belongs to my mother-in-law, and she has got it nicely furnished. It is not far; will you come, Miss Cox?"

"Is it quite near, Ruth? for I must be back for the children's dinner, and I am so tired."

"You can take a tram from the Three Stars, and that will get you home in no time. It is not far, Miss Cox."

"Well, I will come, Ruth; but I don't feel sure about engaging the lodgings. Your mother-in-law won't mind my looking at them?"

"Oh no, ma'am, not a bit. She was an old servant, you know, of some real gentry at Whitelands, and the old lady died last fall twelvemonth, and left mother – I always calls her mother – a nice little sum and some real valuable furniture."

"Oh! then she won't take children," said Miss Cox despairingly. "She won't take boys?"

"That she will, if you like the apartments; there won't be no difficulties," said Ruth in a reassuring voice. "You see, my Frank's father died when he was an infant, and mother went back to her old place, where she lived till two years ago, when the mistress died. Then she took this little business for Frank, and the house next. It is quite a private house, and was built by a gentleman. She thought she should be near us and help us on a bit, and so she has. And she put the furniture in it, and has added a bit here and there; and she let it all last winter to the curate and his mother; and here we are, Miss Cox. Look straight before you."

Miss Cox looked straight before her as she was told, and there, at the end of the road, stood a neat white house with a pretty good-sized baker's shop on the lower floor, and two windows above. There was a wing with a bake-house, and then a tall elm tree, left of its brethren which had once stood there in a stately group, either by accident or by design, and given their name to the locality – Elm Fields.

"There's my Frank at the door," Ruth said, nodding; "he wonders what I am come back for."

"I remember him," said Miss Cox; "he used to take an hour to deliver the bread. Ah, Ruth, you should not have married such a boy."

"Shouldn't I? Then, Miss Cox, you and I don't agree there. If I am a bit older, Frank is the best husband that ever lived. – This way, ma'am."

Ruth opened a wooden gate and went up a narrow path to the door of a small house, built of old-fashioned brick, with a porch at the side, and a trellis covered with clematis.

"Quite like country, isn't it, ma'am? – Mother," Ruth called. And then from the back of the house Mrs. Pryor emerged, a thin, pale, respectable-looking woman, but with a sad expression on her face. "Here's a lady, mother, come to look at your apartments, for a family – Dr. Wilton's brother, you know, mother, where I lived when I first saw Frank."

"Ah! indeed; will you please to look round, ma'am? It is a tidy place; I do all I can to keep it neat and clean; and there's some good furniture in it, left me by my dear blessed mistress." And Mrs. Pryor raised her apron to her eyes, and spoke in a low voice, like one on the brink of tears.

"Well then, mother, when ladies come to be in their eighty-sevens, one can't wish or expect them to live. It is only natural; we can't all live to be a hundred."

"I don't like such flighty talk, Ruth," said Mrs. Pryor reprovingly. "It hurts me. – This way, ma'am."

Aunt Betha followed Mrs. Pryor into a sitting-room on the ground floor, square and very neat, – the table in the middle of the room, a large mahogany chiffonier, with a glass of wax flowers on it, and two old china cups. Miss Cox went to the square window and looked out. The ground sloped away from the strip of garden, and the hamlet of Elm Fields, consisting of the cottages and small houses where Frank now delivered his own bread, was seen from it. There was nothing offensive to the eye, and beyond was a line of hills. Harstone lay to the right. Another room of the same proportions, and four bed-rooms, all very neat, and in one, the pride of Mrs. Pryor's heart, a large four-post bed with carved posts and heavy curtains, the very chief of the dear mistress's gifts and legacies.

Aunt Betha felt it would do – that it must do; and there was a little room for the servant which Mrs. Pryor would throw in, and all for the prescribed two pounds a week.

"I will tell Dr. Wilton about it, and you shall hear this evening, or to-morrow morning at latest, and you will do your best to make them comfortable. They have had great sorrows. One thing I forgot to consider, – how far are we from the college?"

"Not a quarter of an hour by the Whitelands road," said Ruth eagerly. "I can walk it in that time; and young gentlemen, why they would do it in five minutes."

"How many young gentlemen are there?" Mrs. Pryor asked feebly, when they were in the passage.

"Two that will go to the college," said Ruth quickly. Then, with a glance at Miss Cox, she said in a lower voice, "I will make it right. Now, ma'am, you will catch the tram at the Three Stars if you make haste."

Poor Aunt Betha trudged off to the Three Stars, and stumbled into the tram just as it was starting.

She reached Edinburgh Crescent almost at the same moment as Dr. Wilton, who was returning from his first round.

"I have found a house which I think will answer for the poor people from Maplestone," she said. "I did not absolutely engage the rooms till I had consulted you and Anna."

Dr. Wilton gave a rapid glance to the white slate in the hall, and then said, "Come in here a minute, auntie," opening the door of his consulting-room. "Where are the lodgings?"

"In the neighbourhood you mentioned – by St. Luke's Church – in that new part by Whitelands called the Elm Fields. They are kept by a respectable woman, the mother of an old servant of ours – Ruth – and there is room for them all. Four bed-rooms, two sitting-rooms, and a little room for the servant."

"I'll take a look at the place this afternoon. I expect it is the very thing; and I have to see a patient in that direction. If I am satisfied, I will engage them from this day week. Guy is better to-day."

"Yes; he slept better," said Aunt Betha.

She was very tired, for she carried the weight of sixty-five years about with her on her errands of love and kindness. "I must go now and carve for Anna," she said. "It is past one o'clock."

Dr. Wilton always took his hasty luncheon in the consulting-room, – a glass of milk and a few biscuits. He did not encounter that long array of young faces in the dining-room in the middle of his hard day's work. Aunt Betha departed with her news, which was received with some satisfaction by Mrs. Wilton. At least, Elm Fields did not lie much in the way of Edinburgh Crescent. There was safety in distance. And Aunt Betha wisely forbore to make any reference to the baker's shop.

That afternoon a telegram was handed in at Maplestone, which Salome opened for her mother with trembling fingers: —

"Dr. Wilton, Roxburgh, to Mrs. Wilton, Maplestone Court, near Fairchester.

"I have taken comfortable lodgings here for you from the twenty-third. I will write by post."

CHAPTER V
A JOURNEY

THAT last week at Maplestone was like a hurried dream to all the children, who had known no other home. Their neighbours and friends were very kind and full of sympathy, and Mrs. Wilton and the little boys were invited to spend the last two days with the De Brettes, who lived near, and it was arranged that they should stay there with Ada; and that Salome, and Stevens, and the two elder boys should precede them to Roxburgh. Miss Barnes had said she would come with them for a day or two to help them to arrange the rooms, and prepare everything for Mrs. Wilton; but she was called away to the sick-bed of her own mother, and Stevens and Salome went with Raymond and Reginald alone. The beautiful summer seemed over, and it was in a chill drizzling rain that Salome looked her last at Maplestone. She did not cry as the fly, laden with boxes, rumbled slowly down the drive. Stevens sobbed aloud, and Raymond and Reginald kept their heads well out of each window; but Salome sat pale and tearless. The coachman's wife at the lodge stood with her children round her at the large gate, and curtseyed; but she hid her face in her apron, and cried bitterly. The gardener had preceded them with the cart to the station, and the boxes were all labelled before the party in the fly arrived.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.