Meade L. T.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. – "I PROMISE."

"And how is she to-day, Nan?" said the kindly voice of Mrs. Richmond.

The time was early spring. The lady in question had come into a dark and somewhat dismal room; she herself was richly wrapped in furs and velvet; her large, smooth face was all beams and smiles. A dark little girl with thin cheeks, about eleven years of age, clasping a battered doll in her arms, looked full up at her.

"She is no better," said Nan; "and I think perhaps it would be a good plan for you to go."

"What a little monkey you are!" said Mrs. Richmond. "But I do not mind you, my dear Anna; I have known you too long. Come here, dear, and let me look at you."

Nan laid her doll on the table and approached slowly. Her dress was untidy, her hair unkempt. There were traces of tears round her eyes, but none showed at that moment; the sad eyes looked bold and full and defiant into the kindly face of the lady.

"You are not too tidy, my dear little girl; that pinafore would be the better for the wash-tub. And must you play with that horrid old doll?"

"I would not give up dear Sophia Maria for anybody on earth," said Nan in a determined voice; and now she went back and clasped her ragged and disreputable-looking baby to her breast.

"But you might have a new one."

"I would not like a new one, thank you."

"And you are rather old to play with dolls. Now, my Kitty and my Honora have long ceased to make babies of themselves; you must when you come."

"I must when I come!" repeated Nan; and now, her eyes grew very big and bright and angry. "Oh! please," she added, "will you excuse me? I want to go up to mother."

"Certainly, dear. Tell her I am here, and would be glad to have a talk with her."

Nan vouchsafed no reply to this, and left the room. Mrs. Richmond sat on in thought; she folded her hands in her lap.

"I will do my duty," she said to herself; "it is my duty. Poor, dear Amy was always improvident, and careless of her health. She married without means; her husband died within a year; there is this child now eleven years of age and with no provision. Ah!"

There came a tap at the door, and the wizened and somewhat cross face of a middle-aged woman appeared.

"How do you do, Mrs. Vincent?" said Mrs. Richmond. She always spoke cordially to every one; her face beamed kindness itself on all the world.

Mrs. Vincent came in slowly.

"I am glad you have called, ma'am; the poor thing upstairs is very bad – very bad indeed – not likely to live many hours, the doctor says."

"Oh! my good soul, I had not an idea that it was so near as that."

"I am telling you the truth, madam; and the fact is, her poverty is excessive, and" —

"Now listen to me, Mrs. Vincent. Everything she needs as far as you are concerned will be paid for; see that she has every imaginable comfort. And leave the room."

Mrs. Richmond's kindly eyes could flash when occasion arose, and Mrs. Vincent, curtsying and mumbling, but highly delighted all the same, went downstairs.

There was no sign of Nan coming back, and Mrs. Richmond, after waiting for a quarter of an hour, determined to go upstairs to her sick friend's room. The door was a little ajar; she pushed it open and went in. Nan was lying across the bed, her face close to the very white face of a woman whose features were wonderfully like her own. The woman's eyes were open, and her lips were moving. Mrs. Richmond came and, without saying a word, lifted the child off the bed. Nan turned in a wild fury; she felt very much inclined to strike the intruder, but the look on her visitor's face restrained her.

"You can stay, dear, if you like," said Mrs. Richmond; and then she went round to the other side of the bed.

"Have you anything to tell me, Amy, before you go?" she

asked.

There came a low – very low – murmur, and a glance of the dying woman's eyes in the direction of the child.

"Only – only" – she began.

"I will see to everything, dear; I have promised."

"And if – if at the end of a year – You remember – you remember that part, don't you, Caroline?"

"I remember it. It will not be necessary."

"But if it is – if it should be – you will send her" —

"I faithfully promise."

"You are so good!" said the dying woman.

"God bless you! You have made things easy for me."

"Come here, Nan, and kiss your mother," said Mrs. Richmond suddenly.

The child, overawed by the entire scene, advanced. She pressed her lips to the lips growing colder moment by moment.

"And now leave the room," said Mrs. Richmond. "Go – obey me."

Nan went.

CHAPTER II. – "I WON'T EVER GO TO YOU."

But she only went as far as the landing; there she crouched down in a corner and waited. She did not know what she feared, nor exactly what was going to happen; it seemed to her that there was a great darkness everywhere, and that it pressed her round and shut away the light.

The outward circumstances of Nan Esterleigh's life had never been too bright, but all the same she had been a happy little girl; she had been petted and fussed about and loved, and her battered doll, Sophia Maria, had been the greatest imaginable comfort to her. She was quite accustomed to scanty meals and poor rooms and cross landladies. She was, alas! too, poor little girl, thoroughly accustomed to her mother's state of miserable health. Mother had been often as bad before. Ever since Nan could remember, her mother had ached and shivered and moaned with pain; she had spent restless nights, and had stayed in bed to breakfast, and had struggled against the illness which crept on her more and more day by day. Nan in her heart of hearts supposed that very few people were well; she thought children enjoyed good health as a rule, and that grown people had illness. It was the law of life, she supposed. Now and then she confided her thoughts to Sophia Maria.

"My darling," she used to say, "you must be as happy as you can while you are young, because there is no chance at all when you are grown-up. You will have pains then, Maria, and aches, and you will grow old, and you won't have any strength. I'll be the same; there'll be two of us to keep each other company – that is one comfort."

Now she crouched in the corner, feeling a little more depressed and a little more anxious than usual, but not really alarmed or stricken or subdued. She wondered, however, what her mother meant by the curious words she had spoken, with long pauses between, to Mrs. Richmond. They certainly pointed to a future for Nan herself; she was to go somewhere, and if all was not well she was at the end of a year to go somewhere else.

"But I am not going to leave my own mother," thought the little girl. "Oh dear! oh dear! I know now why I am lonely; I want my poor darling Sophia."

She ran downstairs, clasped her doll to her heart, and crouching over the fire, presently fell asleep.

It was during Nan Esterleigh's sleep that her mother died. Mrs. Esterleigh died without a pang or a struggle – she just ceased to breathe; and Mrs. Richmond, with tears in her eyes, came downstairs.

Nan had stretched herself full length on the hearth-rug. The doll was clasped to her breast; her sallow little face looked more sallow than usual, and Mrs. Richmond noticed how black and long were the lashes that rested against her cheeks.

"Poor little girl, she is my care now," thought the good woman. "I know what I should like to do; I should like to pick her up, and wrap a shawl round her, and take her right away in the cab with me. Nora will be nice to her, and Kitty will show her her favourite kittens. I have a great mind to try."

But just then the big black eyes were opened wide, and Nan sat up and stared at Mrs. Richmond.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "Is mother no better? Has nobody thought of giving her her tea?"

"Come here, Nancy," said Mrs. Richmond. "I have something I want to say to you."

"But I don't want to listen," answered Nan; and she clutched her doll tightly in her embrace, staggered to her feet, and stood, with defiance in her eyes, a few feet away from Mrs. Richmond.

"Dear, dear! she is an extraordinary child," thought the good lady. "She will be very difficult to manage. I should not be a scrap surprised if she felt this very much; some children do, and I should not be astonished if she was the sort, she is so stubborn and self-contained – not a pleasant child by any means. But Amy's little girl shall always have a warm corner in my heart – always, always."

"Come here, Nan," she said again.

"If you want to say anything to me, please, Mrs. Richmond, be quick," said Nan, who was now wide awake and felt absolutely composed; "I must go up to mother. This is the hour for her tea; I always make it myself for her. I know just how much she wants

put into the little brown teapot, and the right quantity of milk and sugar; and, oh! I am going to toast her bread for her, for Mrs. Vincent does send it up so hard and untempting. Perhaps you will come another day, Mrs. Richmond, and talk to me then."

"I must talk to you now, Nancy, my poor little girl; I have something to say."

Curious emotions stirred in the child's breast. She stood quite still for a moment; then she said slowly:

"You had better not say it."

"I must; it is about your mother."

"What! is mother worse?"

"She is better, Nancy." Mrs. Richmond's eyes brimmed over with tears.

"Then how silly of you to cry!" said the child, her face brightening up, and smiles dawning round her lips. "If she was worse you might cry – not that you ought ever to cry, for she is no relation of yours; but if she is better, Sophia Maria and I will sing."

"Nancy dear, I cannot break it to you. I must tell it to you at once, and God help you to bear it. Your mother is better in one sense – in the sense that God has taken her away from all her pains. She won't ever be tired or ill or sorry any more, and she will never again have aches or wakeful nights or sad days; she has gone to God. There is a beautiful heaven, you know, Nan, and – Oh, good gracious! what ails the child?"

Nan had given one smothered scream and had rushed from

the room. Fast – very fast – did the little feet run upstairs. Mrs. Esterleigh's room was on the third floor. Past the drawing-room landing she ran, where a good-natured-looking old gentleman resided. He was coming out of his comfortable drawing-room, and he saw the scared little face. He knew, of course, what had happened, and he wondered if the child knew. He called to her:

"Nancy, come in and sit by my fire for a little."

But she did not heed him. She ran past the second floor; no one called her here or detained her. There was a very cross old maid who lived on that floor, and Nancy had always hated her. She ran on and on. Presently she reached her mother's room.

"It is not true," she gasped. "It is that dreadful Mrs. Richmond trying to frighten me. It is not a bit true – not a bit." And then she took the handle and tried to turn it and to open the door, but the door was locked.

"Mother, mother!" she shrieked. "Mother, it is me – it is Nan. Don't let them keep me out. Get some one to open the door. Mother, mother!"

Footsteps sounded in the room, and an elderly woman, whom Nancy had never seen before, opened the door, came quickly out, and stood with her back to it.

"You must go away, my dear little girl," she said. "I will bring you to see your mother presently. Go away now, dear; you cannot come in."

"But I will. You shall not keep me out. You are hurting mother. You have no right to be in the room with her;" and Nancy

pommelled at the woman's hands and arms. But she was strong and masterful, and presently she picked up the exhausted child and carried her right downstairs.

"Oh! give her to me," said Mrs. Richmond. "Poor little child! Nancy dear, I am so sorry for you! And I promise, darling, to be a mother to you."

"Don't!" said Nan. "I don't want you as a mother – no, I don't want you."

"Never mind, I will be a friend to you – an aunt – anything you like. I have promised your own dear mother; and she is quite well, and it would be selfish to wish her back."

"But I want to be selfish; I want to have her back," said Nan. "I don't believe that God has come and taken her. He would not take mother and leave me; it is not likely, is it?"

"God sometimes does so, and He has His wise reasons."

"I don't believe it. You only want me not to go to her, and you are telling me lies."

"It is the truth, Nancy; and I wish for your sake it were not. Will you come back with me to-night, dear?"

"I won't. I won't ever go to you. I will always stay just outside mother's door until they let me in. I do not believe she is dead – no, not for a moment."

In vain Mrs. Richmond argued and pleaded and coaxed; Nan was firm. Presently the good lady had to consult with Mrs. Vincent, who promised to look after the child. The landlady was now all tears and good-nature, and she assured Mrs. Richmond

that Nan should have all her wants attended to.

"I have got a very nice, good-natured servant-girl," she said. "Her name is Phoebe. I will send her upstairs, and she shall sit in the room with Miss Nan, and if necessary stay with her to-night."

"Very well," said Mrs. Richmond. "It is the best that I can do; but, oh dear! how anxious I feel about the unhappy child!"

CHAPTER III. – THE FROCK WITH CRAPE

All the lodgers in the house, the landlady, and the servants were extremely kind to Nan that night; but Nan would have none of them. Presently Phoebe was sent to sit in the parlour with her. The lamp, which usually smoked, burned brightly, and there was quite a good fire in the grate – of late it had been a miserable one – and the curtains were drawn, and a clean cloth had been put on the table, and Nan was treated as if she were a princess. Phoebe, too, dressed in her Sunday best, came and sat with her. Phoebe was sixteen years of age; she had left her country home about two months ago, and felt now wonderfully important. She took a sorrowful, keen, and at the same time pleasurable interest in Nan. She put the bowl of bread and milk, which Mrs. Vincent considered the best solace for grief, inside the fender to keep warm, and then she sat on a hard-bottomed chair, very erect, with her hands folded in her lap. For a long time her eyes sought the ground, but then curiosity got the better of her. She began to watch Nan. Nan sat with her back to her. Sophia Maria was lying on the table near. As a rule this battered and disreputable doll was clutched tight in her little mistress's embrace, but even the doll could not comfort Nan now. Phoebe gave a groan.

"What are you doing that for?" said the child. She raised her

eyes; there came a frown between her brows; she looked full at Phoebe.

"I am so sorrowful about you, missy!" replied Phoebe.

There was something in Phoebe's hearty tone that interested Nan. She hated Mrs. Richmond and Mrs. Vincent when they expressed their grief; even the dear old gentleman, Mr. Pryor, on the first floor was intolerable to her to-night. As to Miss Edgar, the old maid who lived on the second floor, Nan would have fled any distance from her; but there was something about Phoebe's country tone, and her round face, and the tears which filled her blue eyes which touched Nan in spite of herself.

"I wish you would eat your supper, miss," was Phoebe's next remark.

Nan shook her head. After a time she spoke.

"If your mother had just gone to heaven, would you eat a big bowl of bread and milk?"

"Oh, lor', miss! I don't know."

"Has your mother gone to heaven?" was Nan's next question.

"Indeed and she has not, miss; I would break my heart if she had."

"Oh!" said Nan.

For the first time tears rose to her eyes. She looked again at Phoebe, then she glanced at the fire, then at the doll.

"Sophia Maria does not comfort me any longer," she said. "Would it kill you, Phoebe, if your mother went to heaven?"

"I 'spect so, miss. Oh dear, missy! I 'spect so."

"Then," said Nan – and the next instant she had tumbled from her seat, had tottered forward, and was clasped in Phoebe's arms – "let me cry. Don't say anything to comfort me; I want to cry such a big, big lot. Let me cry, and clasp me tight – very tight – Phoebe."

So Phoebe did clasp the motherless little girl, and the two mingled their tears. After that affairs moved better. Phoebe herself fed Nan, and then they cuddled up on the sofa, which Phoebe drew in front of the fire. Phoebe found her occupation intensely interesting. She was very, very sorry for Nan, and very comfortable in the thought that her own mother was alive. Nan began to ask her questions, and Phoebe answered.

"Did you ever know a little girl whose mother died 'cept me – did you, Phoebe?"

"Oh yes, miss; there was a girl in our village. It was a more mournful case than yours, miss, for there were two little brothers – they were young as young could be, nothing more than babies – and she was left to mind them, so to speak."

"That must have been very nice for her. I wish I had two little brothers to mind. And did she mind them, Phoebe? Was she good to them?"

"No, miss; that she warn't. She were for a bit, but afterwards she took to neglecting of them, and they were sent to an orphan school, and the girl went to service."

"Oh! she was not a lady," said Nan in a tone of slight contempt.

"We 'as our feelings even if we ain't ladies," was Phoebe's

somewhat sharp retort.

"Dear, dear Phoebe, I know you have; but tell me more about her. What happened just immediately afterwards, before she began to be cross to the little brothers?"

"Well, miss, there was the funeral and the funeral feast."

"A feast!" interrupted Nan.

"In the country, miss, and amongst us we always take the occasion to have a big and hearty meal; but that ain't interesting to you."

"I could not eat – not now that mother is dead."

"Well, miss, that was in the country; it is different there – grief makes us hungry. And she had her mourning to get."

"Her mourning! What is that?"

"Black, miss – black from head to foot – and crape. She went into debt for the crape."

"Did she? What is crape?"

"Something they put on black dresses to make people know that you are mourning for a near relative; and according to the amount of crape you puts on, so is the relation between you and the deceased," said Phoebe in a very oracular voice.

Nan became intensely interested.

"Then I ought to get a black dress at once," she said.

"As you will, miss. Mrs. Richmond will see to that."

"I don't want Mrs. Richmond to. I would rather get it myself. I have a little money. Don't you think I could get my own dress?"

"Of course, miss, if you have the money."

"Are you anything of a dressmaker, Phoebe?"

"Well, miss, I made the dress I am now wearing."

"And it is awfully nice," said Nan. "And Sophia Maria ought to wear black too."

"To be sure, miss."

"I wish I could get it to-night. But you might go out early in the morning and get the stuff, and we could begin to make it."

"So we could," said Phoebe, who wondered much if her mistress would allow her to devote all her time to Nan.

"I know a little bit about dressmaking myself; we could easily make the dress," continued Nan. "And we need not let any one into the room; I could keep the door locked, and we could both make the dress that I am to wear for my own mother. Phoebe, would it make her happier to know I was putting stitches into a black, black dress with crape on it to wear because of her, because she has gone to God?"

"It would make a wonderful difference," said Phoebe.

"Would it indeed? Then I will have it very black, and a lot of crape. If I have a lot of crape, would she be glad?"

"If anything could make her more glad than she is now, that would," said Phoebe; "I know it for a fact."

"And Sophia Maria would wear crape and a black dress too?"

"Yes, miss."

After that the two girls talked on until they grew sleepy, and finally Phoebe wrapped her little mistress in a warm blanket, and lay down herself on the rug; and so the first night passed away.

Nan possessed exactly two pounds, which she had saved, sixpence by sixpence. She broke into her little savings-bank now and gave the money to Phoebe, who went out at an early hour and purchased coarse cashmere and the poorest crape she could get, and brought the materials to Nan.

They kept the parlour door locked, and sewed and sewed. Nan was interested, and although her tears often dropped upon the black stuff, yet, when Phoebe assured her that her mother was growing happier each moment at the thought of the very deep mourning her little daughter was to wear, she cheered up.

"You are quite, quite certain you are telling me the truth, Phoebe?" said Nan at last.

"Certain sure, miss. Didn't I live through it all when poor Susan Fagan lost her mother? This is a dress for all the world the same as Susan appeared in at the funeral."

After two or three days' hard work the dress was finished. It was certainly not stylish to look at. Then there came an awful time when carriages drove up to the house, and all that was left of poor Mrs. Esterleigh was borne away to her long home. Nan could never afterwards quite recall that dreadful day. Mrs. Richmond arrived early. She had borne with Nan's wish to stay locked into the parlour with what patience she could; but on the day of the funeral she insisted on the door being opened, and when Nan appeared before her in her lugubrious dress, badly made, with no fit whatever, the good woman gave a shocked exclamation.

"My dear child," she said, "I have got a suitable dress for you. I found a frock of yours upstairs and had it measured. Take off that awful thing."

"This awful thing!" said Nan. "I bought it with my own money. I won't wear anything – anything else. And Sophia Maria is in mourning too," she added; and she pointed to her doll, which was attired in crape from head to foot.

"Let her wear it," said a voice behind her; and raising her eyes, Nan saw the kindly face of Mr. Pryor looking at her.

He had always been a strange sort of character, and it seemed now that in one glance he understood the child; he held out his hand and drew her towards him.

"You bought this out of your own money?" he asked,

"Yes," answered Nan.

Tears trembled on her eyelashes; she raised her eyes and looked full at Mr. Pryor.

"And there is a lot of crape," she said. "Everybody must know that she was a very near relation."

"And you made it yourself?"

"Phoebe and I made it ourselves; and Maria is in black too." She touched the doll with her finger.

"Then you shall go to the funeral in that dress," said Mr. Pryor. "I take it upon me to say that your mother would wish it, and that is enough."

So Nan attended her mother's funeral in the dress she had made herself, and stood close to the grave, and tried vaguely to

realise what was taking place. But what chiefly impressed her was the depth of the shabby crape on her little skirt, and the fact that she had bought her mourning out of her very own savings, and that the doll, Sophia Maria, from whom she would not be parted for a single moment, was also in mourning.

CHAPTER IV. – THE BEST GIRL

Immediately after the funeral Mrs. Richmond took Nan's hand.

"Now, dear," she said, "you come home with me."

Nan turned first red and then very white. She was just about to reply when Mr. Pryor came forward.

"Madam," he said, "may I make a request? I want to ask a very great favour."

"If possible I will grant it," replied Mrs. Richmond.

"I have known Mrs. Esterleigh, this dear little girl's mother, for two or three years; and on the whole, although I am not specially fond of children, I think I also know Nan well. Now, I want to know if you will grant me the great favour of allowing me to take Nan home to my rooms until this evening. I will promise to bring her to you this evening."

"Oh yes, I will go with you and with Phoebe," said Nan. She clasped hold of Mr. Pryor's hand and held it to her heart, and she looked round for Phoebe, who in her shabby frock was standing on the outskirts of the group.

Phoebe was nodding to Nan and making mysterious signs to her. Mrs. Richmond looked full at Mr. Pryor.

"I do not wish to make Nan more unhappy than I can help to-day," she said; "so if you will bring her to my house by six o'clock this evening I will be satisfied."

She turned away and entered her own carriage, and Mr. Pryor looked at Nan.

"It is only two o'clock," he said; "we have four hours. A great deal can be done in four hours. What do you say to our spending the day out here in the country?"

"Oh," said Nan, "in the country! Is this the country?"

"This is Highgate. I have a carriage, and I will get the man to drive us quite out into the country parts – perhaps to Barnet. The day happens to be a lovely one. I have a kind of desire to go into the Hadleigh Woods with you; what do you say?"

Nan gave a vague nod, and looked round for Phoebe.

"You would like your little friend Phoebe to come too?"

Nan's whole face lit up.

"Oh, very, very much!" she said.

"Well, she is standing there; go and ask her."

So Nan rushed up to Phoebe.

"Phoebe," she said, "shall we go into the country with Mr. Pryor? I need not be back till six o'clock."

"I don't know if my mistress would wish it," said Phoebe.

"I will take upon myself to say that Mrs. Vincent will not be angry with you," said Mr. Pryor, coming up at this moment. "Now, children, get into my carriage; I will give the driver directions."

So they left the cemetery and drove away and away into the heart of the country. It took them some little time to reach it, but at last they got where the trees grew in numbers and houses were

few and far between; and although it was winter the day was a lovely one, and there was a warm sunshine, and it seemed to Nan that she had come out of the most awful gloom and misery into a peace and a joy which she could scarcely understand.

Mr. Pryor dismissed the carriage when it set them down at a pretty little inn, and he took Nan by the hand and led her into the parlour, and asked the landlord for a private room; and there he and Nan and Phoebe had dinner together.

It was a simple dinner – the very simplest possible – and Sophia Maria sat on Nan's lap while she ate, and Mr. Pryor talked very little, and when he did it was in a grave voice.

Phoebe looked somewhat awed; and as to Nan, the sense of grief and bewilderment grew greater each moment.

"Now, Phoebe," said Mr. Pryor when the meal was over, "I want our little party to divide. There are four of us, for of course I consider Sophia Maria quite one of the family."

"Oh, she is quite, the darling!" said Nan.

"Will you take charge of her for a little, Phoebe," said Mr. Pryor, "while Nan and I go for a walk?"

"Oh, must we?" said Nan, looking full at him.

He smiled very gravely at her.

"We will not be long," he said. "There are a few things your mother has asked me to say to you. I would rather say them to you alone, without even Sophia Maria listening."

Then Nan's little white face lit up.

"Phoebe," she said, "Mr. Pryor and I have something most

important to say to each other. Be sure you take great care of Maria, and don't let her catch cold."

Phoebe promised, and Mr. Pryor and Nan, hand in hand, walked in the direction of the Hadleigh Woods.

They walked in absolute silence until they reached the woods, and then their steps became slower, and Nan looked up into the face of her companion and said:

"I wish you would tell me. What did mother say?"

"My dear Nan, your mother knew very well that the day was soon coming when God would send for her. She did not like to talk to you about it, although she often tried to; she was anxious about you, but not very anxious."

"I wonder mother was not very anxious when she thought of leaving me so far, far behind," said Nan.

"You see, she did not think that, for in reality those who go to God are not separated very far from those they leave."

"Then is mother near me?"

"You cannot see her, nor can you realise it, but I should not be surprised if she were quite near you."

"She knows all about my black dress and my crape?" said Nan. "Phoebe said she would be so glad about the crape!"

"Well, Nan, the fact is that the crape could not make her glad, nor the black dress; but the thought that you, her little girl, made it and wore it for love of her would make her glad. It is not the colour of the dress makes her happy; it is the love you put into it."

"Oh! I don't quite understand," said Nan.

"You will when you think it over. You see, she is in white; she has a crown and a harp. That is what we have learnt about those who leave us – that if they have loved God they go into His presence, and their dress is white and glistening, and they have harps to sing to and crowns to wear; and we know the more we love the nearer we get to them. So, Nan, the message your mother has left me is this: 'Tell Nan to be as good as girl can be – to be the best girl she knows. By being the best she must be the most loving, she must be the most unselfish. She must not wish to be the best to be thought well of by her fellow-men, but she must be the best because God loves those who try to follow Him.' Do you follow me, Nan, when I say these words?"

"I follow you," said Nan. "You want me to be good, but I do not think I can; and as to being the best, that I can never be. You want me to have a great deal of love, and I only love mother and Phoebe a little bit. And to-night everything is to be changed; I won't even have you."

"I am going to ask Mrs. Richmond to send you to see me sometimes – perhaps once a fortnight or so."

"Will you?" said Nan. "I think if I could like anything I should like that."

"I will arrange it then; and perhaps although you do not exactly love me now, you will regard me as your friend and love me presently. But there is something else I want to say. Your mother wished all these things for you, but she knew that you would have certain difficulties in your life. I am sorry to have to tell it to you,

my dear little girl, but it is the fact: your mother left you without any money."

"But mother could scarcely do that, because we had something to live on," said Nan. "Has mother taken our money away with her up to God?"

"No, dear. In the home where she is now money is not needed; but the little money she had was only to be here during her lifetime. It was what is called an annuity; that means, she could have the use of it for her life, but only for her life. So, my dear little girl, you have no money."

"Then I expect," said Nan, drawing herself up and fixing her eyes full on Mr. Pryor's face, "that I had best go to the workhouse. I can go to the workhouse until I am old enough to take a place as servant; and I would like, please, to go into the same house with Phoebe. Perhaps Mrs. Vincent would have me as her little servant, and Phoebe could teach me."

"That is not necessary; you are not suited for that kind of life, and God does not require it of you. Mrs. Richmond is very well off; she has more money than she knows what to do with, and she always loved your mother, so she is going to take you to bring you up with her two little girls. You will be trained and educated, and have everything that a little girl can require, and all Mrs. Richmond wants in return is your love and your obedience."

"But I don't think I can love her. I wish – oh, I wish she would not do it!" said Nan.

"Now, Nan, the first proof of your love for your mother has

arrived, for she wanted you to go to Mrs. Richmond. She would be dreadfully pained – far, far more pained, if trouble could reach her in heaven, by your not going there than even if you still wore a coloured frock."

"Oh, how puzzling it is, and how difficult!" said Nan. "I shall quite hate to go to Mrs. Richmond. I never liked her much, and now to think that I owe everything to her!"

"I have something more to say. There is a man who owed your father money long ago, and he has promised to adopt you in case you are not happy with Mrs. Richmond; but you must spend quite a year with her before you go to him. You would have a different life with him – freer, wilder. Your mother preferred the idea of your being with Mrs. Richmond, but if you are unhappy with her you are to go to the Asprays; when last I heard of them they lived in Virginia, in the States of America."

Nan pressed her hand to her forehead.

"That does not seem much better," she answered; "and I think my head aches, but I am not sure. Shall we go back again now, Mr. Pryor?"

CHAPTER V. – THE MYSTERY-GIRL

Kitty and Honora Richmond were in high spirits. Even the knowledge that Nan's mother had been buried that day could scarcely depress them. They had heard of Nan a great deal for the last couple of years of their lives, but they had never seen her. Honora called her the little mystery-girl, and Kitty invariably made the same remark when her name was mentioned.

"I wonder if her eyes are blue or brown. If she has brown eyes she will be like me, and if she has blue eyes she will be like you, Nora."

"As if the colour of her eyes mattered!" said Honora. "For my part," she added, "I do not think any girl matters, and I do not see why you are so excited about her. If she were a dog it would be a different thing."

"Yes, of course it would," answered Kitty, looking wistfully round. "But you see she is a girl, and mother will not let us keep any more dogs."

"The darlings!" cried Honora; "what a sin! Oh Kitty! do you know, I saw a dear little fox-terrier to-day when I was out. I know he was lost. He had one of those darling little square heads, and he did look so sweet! I would have given anything to bring him home, but when I spoke to nurse she said, 'There are enough

waifs and strays coming to the house without having stray dogs.'"

"I do wonder what she meant by that!" said Kitty.

"I expect," said Nora in a thoughtful voice, "she must have meant poor Nan. It was not nice of her – not a bit. Do you know that Nan has no money? Nurse told me so last night; she said that if mother had not adopted her she would have had to go to the workhouse. Is it not awful?"

"Poor darling!" said Kitty. "Then we will be good to her; and it is almost as nice as if she were a dog. I like her twice as well since I know that. If she were a rich girl I should hate her coming, but as she is a poor one we will give her the very best – won't we, Noney?"

"The best we could do," said Honora in a thoughtful voice, "would be to give her Sally's pup – you know, little Jack; would she not love it?"

Kitty looked very thoughtful.

"I thought perhaps I might keep Jack," she said. "Do you think I ought to give Jack to Nan – do you, Nora?"

"Yes," replied Nora in an emphatic voice. "We have just said that we ought to give her the best, and as Jack is your best, you ought to hand him over. Come, now, let us make the schoolroom look pretty. Mother said she would be here at six o'clock. She will be very sad, you know, Kitty; you must not laugh or be at all gay this evening. You must try to feel as if mother were in her coffin."

"Oh, don't!" said Kitty. "How horrid of you, Noney! How

could I think of anything so awful?"

"But poor Nan has to think of it. Oh dear! oh dear! it is exciting. Do you know what I should like to do? I'd like to rush downstairs and fling my arms round her neck, and drag her up to the schoolroom, and say, 'You poor little motherless, penniless creature, here is Jack to comfort you.' That is what I should like to do; but, of course, I suppose it would not be right."

Miss Roy, the children's governess, now entered the schoolroom. She was a kindly, good-natured woman. They went to school for most of their lessons, but she looked after their dress, and took them for walks, and saw to their comforts generally.

"What are you two puzzling your little heads over?" she said. "Oh Nora, my dear, why is the schoolroom in such a mess?"

"We were teaching Jack some of his tricks," said Nora. "Do you know, Miss Roy, he begs so beautifully, and he quite winks one of his dear little eyes when he sits upright and takes his biscuit."

"But he sulks a good bit when we teach him to trust," interrupted Kitty.

"Well, dears, get the brush now and sweep away the crumbs; when your little friend comes she will not like to see an untidy room."

"I hope she will," said Kitty. "It will be very much the worse for her if she is of the tidy sort."

"What nonsense, Kitty! You know I have always trained you

to be most careful and tidy."

"Yes," answered Kitty, with a sigh; "and when you do train us, Miss Roy, do you know what Nora and I think of?"

"What, dear?"

"Of the happy, happy days when we are quite grown-up, and can be as awfully untidy as we like, and sweep all our things into bundles, and never have a tidy drawer, and never be able to find anything; and have six or seven dogs, all in baskets, sleeping about the room; and a few cats, more particularly if they are sick cats, to bear them company; and birds, of course; and mice, and white rats, and" —

Miss Roy put her hands to her ears.

"Don't introduce your menagerie until I am out of the country. I would rather leave England, although I am devoted to my native land, than be anywhere near such an awful room."

"We told mother on Sunday," said Nora, "and she quite laughed. I think she was ever so glad."

Just then there came a sound of commotion downstairs. Nora drew herself up to her full height, and her heart beat a little faster than usual. Kitty rushed to her sister and clasped her hand.

"Oh Noney, has the little mystery girl come?"

"I think so," said Nora; and just then her mother's voice was heard shouting, and the two children ran downstairs.

Once again Honora thought of the impulse which she longed to give way to – the impulse to rush to the forlorn little figure in its quaint and peculiar frock and clasp it tightly in her arms,

and sweep the child upstairs to the warm schoolroom, where Kitty would sit at her feet, and Nora would hold her round the waist, and Jack would sit on her lap, and they would talk and talk, and be happy and free, and even mingle their tears together. But Mrs. Richmond, although the most good-natured and kindest of women, would have been much shocked by such a proceeding on Honora's part. She had lectured the little girls with regard to Nan's arrival for the last couple of days, and had given them so many things to be careful about, so many subjects on which they must on no account touch, that now they felt quite constrained, and it was a rosy-faced and apparently unconcerned little girl who came up now and took Nan's cold hand in hers; and a little girl in all respects her ditto, except that her eyes were brown, followed suit; and Nan gave one forlorn, frightened glance at the two little sisters, and then turned aside, a look of almost sullenness on her face.

"Take her upstairs, dears, and ask nurse to get her hot water; and then you shall all come downstairs to supper with me," said Mrs. Richmond.

Kitty said in a very low and frightened voice, "Will you come, please?" and the three children went upstairs.

They went through the cheerful schoolroom, where a fire was blazing brightly, and a lamp making a pleasant glow on the centre-table, and where there was a fascinating basket, out of which a bull-terrier raised his head and growled, and another basket with a cat and a heap of kittens in it; and there was a huge

cage in the window in which swung a parrot, who called out the moment he saw them, "Here comes the naughty girl – here comes the naughty girl!" Nan, notwithstanding her misery, would have given worlds to rush to the bull-terrier's basket to examine its pups, or to the cat's basket to look at the kittens, or to laugh when Poll the parrot said, "Here comes the naughty girl!" But she did not dare to do any of these things, and she was led swiftly past the impertinent bird, and the dog, and the cat, into her own little room.

Nan's room opened out of the pretty bedroom where the sisters slept, and there was a fire here also, and a nice white bed, and pretty furniture, and even a few flowers on the dressing-table; and nurse, a stout, shrewd-looking woman, was standing in the room; and there was a jug of hot water on the washing-stand. The moment Nan appeared, nurse spoke to the little girls.

"Now go away, my dears," she said. "I will look after Miss Esterleigh. Come, miss, you would like me to wash your face and hands, would you not?"

What reply Nan made the little sisters did not hear, for they found themselves pushed out into the schoolroom and the door was shut.

"Oh Nora, what do you think of her?" said Kitty.

"Well," replied Nora, "I suppose it is because she is unhappy, but she looks rather cross."

"I do not think she is really. Did you see how her eyes danced when Sally growled?"

"Sally has very bad manners," said Nora.

"And, oh Noney, Noney, was it not shocking of Poll to say, 'Here comes the naughty girl'? She will think always now, to her dying day, that he meant her."

"You know Poll always says that whenever we bring a stranger into the schoolroom," said Nora. "But come, Kitty; let us wash our hands and get ready for supper. I suppose we'll like her after a bit – although I'm not sure."

"Did you notice the doll she had in her arms? Was it not too funny?" said Kitty.

"I expect she loves it," said Nora, "but she won't do so for long; we gave up dolls when we were ever so young. A doll is no fun when you have got a live thing to pet."

At this juncture Nora rushed to Sally's basket, took Jack from his mother, and clasped him tight in her arms.

"Oh! is he not just an angel?" she said; and then the little girls went to their room to get ready for supper.

Nan appeared, just as pale and just as unsmiling, in the schoolroom after she had submitted to nurse's ministrations. She hated the bright fires and the gay lamp and the comforts.

"It is all charity," she thought.

That afternoon she had questioned Phoebe as to the position of a girl whose mother had died without leaving any money behind; and Phoebe, who had no idea that her remarks would have any personal meaning, had said at once:

"Why, she is nothing in the world but a girl, miss; I'd not like

to be her – that I wouldn't."

So Nan stood now with a bitter smile on her face. But as she stood alone in the schoolroom, looking wistfully about her, and wondering how she was to please her mother, and how by any possibility she could ever be the best girl whom Mr. Pryor spoke about, there came a funny little yap, and behold! Jack the bull-pup was at her feet.

Now, even a charity-girl could scarcely resist a bull-pup of six weeks old, and Nan felt a shiver of longing and delight creeping over her. She forgot Sophia Maria (the neglected doll was thrown on the nearest chair), and the next instant the little pup was clasped in the girl's arms. She was hugging it and petting it when Kitty came back. If there was one creature on earth whom Kitty loved it was Jack, and she had been wondering if another of the pups, little Flo or Tommy, would do equally well for Nan's possession. But Flo and Tommy were not nearly as perfect as Jack, for Jack was a little prince of bull-pups, perfect in every respect, with one white ear and one black, and with the most impudent face it was possible for a dog to have; and now Nan was smiling at him, and pressing his little cheek against hers, and then Kitty knew it was all up with her as far as Jack was concerned. She ran quickly forward.

"Oh! you have got Jack; he is yours, you know."

She panted out the words, being anxious to get the presentation over, to have the thing done beyond recall. Nan's face turned a little whiter.

"I am so sorry!" she said. "I know I ought not to have touched your pup, but he came to my feet, and he is so sweet!"

"Oh! you would like him, would you not?" said Kitty.

"Like him!" cried Nan. "I love him!"

"Then he is yours – yours! You may have him altogether."

"I – what!" cried Nan.

"I mean that he is mine, and I give him to you. We have got plenty more; will you take him? Say so – quick!"

Nan looked full into Kitty's eyes. Now, this was the last thing Kitty wished, for in spite of all her heroism and her desire to be as generous as possible, her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, as if I could take him!" cried Nan. "But thank you – thank you."

"You are to take him; Nora and I wish it. We said so; we made up our minds that you must be comforted by Jack. We cannot comfort you, because we do not know, and – Anyhow, we are not dogs. No person can comfort like a dog can. So, will you have him – will you, please?"

"Oh, I will!" said Nan; and then Kitty went up to her and kissed her; and Nan dropped Jack, and flung her arms round Kitty's neck, and said:

"Thank you – and thank God!"

CHAPTER VI. – THE BULL-PUP

But when the little girls went down to supper, Jack had to stay behind. Had he come downstairs, cuddled up contentedly on Nan's forlorn little shoulder, she might have been able to bear things; but as it was, all her miseries returned to her in a full tide. For the first time she observed how very peculiar and remarkable the dress was which Phoebe had made.

Nan was rather a small girl of eleven years of age, and the dress came down to her ankles. It was, of course, made without any attempt at style. The bodice fitted anyhow; the crape was put on in rucks instead of smoothly; the sleeves were too wide for the fashion, and too long for the little girl's arms; the neck was too big, the part which covered her chest too narrow. She was, as nurse expressed it, all askew in that frock, and poor Mrs. Richmond quite shuddered as she looked at her.

If Nan had been a dazzlingly fair child, black might have been becoming to her; but as she was sallow, with quantities of jet-black hair, and big, very black eyes, there was not a scrap of beauty about her little face just now, although it was possible she might grow up handsome by-and-by.

Little, however, Nan recked about her appearance either in the future or the present. Just then she kept repeating to herself, "I am only a charity-girl;" and then she sat down and ate her supper without well knowing what she ate. Mrs. Richmond was very

kind, and the two girls were as grave and sober as possible. They were not the least like themselves; they only spoke when they were spoken to; even the subject of the dogs did not draw them out. Kitty's merry eyes kept looking down, and Honora's sweet, bright face, with its wealth of light hair and smiling lips, seemed transformed into that of a very sober little girl indeed. Towards the end of supper Nan yawned once or twice. Mrs. Richmond suddenly rose.

"Come here, Nancy," she said.

She took the little girl's hand and drew her to her side.

"Nancy, you are my little girl henceforward."

Nancy's lips quivered.

"And these are your little sisters. This is Honora, aged twelve; and this is Kitty, aged eleven. You will be, I hope, the very best of friends; everything that Kitty has you have, and everything that Honora has also belongs to you. There will be three little sisters in this house instead of two. You will learn with the same kind governess, and go to the same nice school; and except that you will wear black and Kitty and Honora colours, you will be dressed alike. You will have the same pleasures and the same duties. I promised your mother that this should be the case, and all I ask of you in return is" – Mrs. Richmond paused and looked full at Nan-"happiness."

"I cannot be happy," whispered Nan then.

"Not yet, dear – no, not yet; but I want you to be contented, and to feel that I love you and will do what I can for you. I do

not want you to feel that" —

"I am a charity-girl, and I hate it," suddenly burst from Nan's lips.

Mrs. Richmond took both the little hands very firmly in hers and drew the unwilling child to sit on her knee.

"Nan," she said, "you must get that thought out of your head once and for ever. I am going to tell you something. Years and years ago, when I was young and when your mother was young, your mother did something for me which I can never repay – never. I will tell you what that thing was when you are older. Your mother died; and when dying, I asked her to let me adopt you as my own little girl. To do that does not anything like repay her for what she did for me, for she saved all my life and all my happiness. But for her I might not be alive now; and if spared, certainly be a most miserable woman. Sometime I will tell you everything; but what I want you clearly to know is this, that in taking you to live with me I still owe your mother something. You have a right to my home and my love for her sake. Now, does this make things any better?"

"Oh yes!" said Nan. "And, oh" she added, "I am a horrid girl not to feel very glad! I will try to be very glad, but do not ask me any more to-night."

"Poor little darling!" said Mrs. Richmond.

She kissed Nan, and nodded to Kitty to run up to Nan and take her hand.

"You are my sister, you know, and I love you already," said

Kitty; and so Nan went upstairs to bed.

Early the next morning, when the little girl felt that she had already only enjoyed her first sleep, she was awakened by some one pulling her rather violently by the arm. She looked up in astonishment. Just at first she could not in the least remember where she was, nor what had happened. Then it all rushed over her – her mother's funeral of the day before, her own great misery, the change in her life. But she had scarcely time to realise these things, and certainly had not a moment to fret about them, when the eager voice of Kitty was sounding in her ears.

"Get up, please, Nan; dress yourself as fast as ever you can in the dark, and come into the schoolroom. If you are not very quick you will miss seeing the animals getting their breakfasts, and that is the best fun of the day. Now, be quick – be quick! I will come back again in a few minutes. I have lit the candle for you; here it is. Hot water? No; you must do without that. Fly – dash into your clothes, and be in the schoolroom in a quarter of an hour."

Kitty disappeared, and Nan got up. She felt quite excited; she could not help herself. It was useless to pretend that she felt anything but a sense of rejoicing as she thought of the animals. When with human beings she must remember her mother, and her own suffering, and her great loss, but with the animals she could only rejoice. She scrambled into her clothes, making, it is true, a very sorry spectacle of herself.

"Sophia Maria, my darling," she said to her doll, "you had

better get warm into bed, and lie tucked up there while I am attending to the animals. I will never love them better than I love you, but I must see how they get their breakfasts. They are alive, Maria darling – they are alive; you understand, don't you?"

Sophia Maria stared with her vacant smile at her little mistress.

"How good she is! she never frets," thought the little girl; and then she went into the schoolroom, where a fire was lighted – a dull, dim-looking fire, which certainly gave forth no heat whatever just yet – and the gas was turned on.

"Is it not a good thing we have gas?" said Kitty.

Honora and Kitty were both in the schoolroom. They were wearing a long kind of holland smocks over their dresses; their faces looked quite serene and important.

"Now, Nan, which will you take? I think this morning, if you were to hold all the kittens in your lap, you might just watch us. We have to be ever so busy; Miss Roy only gives us a quarter of an hour at this time of day to clean out all the animals' homes, and I can tell you it is exciting when you have got pups and kittens and birds and mice and rats. Is it not nice of Miss Roy? The mice and rats she will not allow in the room, but she allows the others. We keep them upstairs in the top attic. Sometimes the rats bite, and the mice too; but who minds a little pain when it is an animal – a darling – that has to be attended to?"

Nan was perfectly satisfied to sit near the fire holding the kittens. There were two Persian kittens, and their names were

Lord and Lady. They were very handsome, with long, soft chinchilla fur, tiny tails at present, and big heads. Nan stroked them in ecstasy; there was not the slightest doubt that thrills of comfort went through her heart which Sophia Maria had never yet been able to bestow.

Kitty and Honora meanwhile were very busy. The parrot's cage required a great deal of attention. The parrot was inclined to be rather fierce; he would fly frantically after the little hands when they were put in to take out the seed-trough, and he would cock his head to one side, and then shout out, "Here comes the naughty girl!" and fix his eyes on Nan all the time.

"He does mean me," said Nan, forgetting the kittens and going up to the cage in her excitement. "Oh dear! is it not funny of him? And I suppose I am a naughty girl."

"Well, I hope so," said Kitty. "We don't want you to be a goody girl; we should not like that at all. We don't want you to be mournful and sulky and anything like that; we like you to have some spirit in you. You know your darling little Jack who belongs to you altogether? Well, you are to have all the trouble of him; and you are to take the blame also if he is naughty and fidgety, and tears our dresses, and bites the tablecloth. You will be the one to be reprimanded; don't forget that."

"I don't think I shall like that."

"Well, but surely you do not expect us to be blamed about your animal! I never heard of such a thing!" said Nora "Now we have done everything; go back and get as tidy as you can for

breakfast."

Nan went back to her room feeling much excited. While she was out nurse had entered.

"So you are going to have an animal, miss; and you are going to get up every morning to help the young ladies to feed their pets and clean out their cages?"

"Yes; they have asked me to," said Nan.

"That is right, my dear; and I hope you will have a happy time and make yourself one of the family."

"I will try to," said Nan.

"The first thing you have to do is to give me the frock you wore last night."

"But, oh!" said Nan, "that is my own frock, bought out of my own money. Please, I would rather – I would rather not give it."

"I am afraid if you are one of the family you have got to obey Mrs. Richmond, and she does not intend you to wear that ugly frock any more."

"It is not ugly," said Nan, colouring high.

"Well, miss, I am afraid it is; and anyhow you cannot wear it, for I am going to take it away. Here is a nice little suitable dress – black, of course, and made the same way as Miss Kitty's dresses are made. Here, put it on, miss, or you will be late for breakfast."

All poor Nan's misery returned to her at these words. She felt as if she were most unjustly treated; she could scarcely bear her own feelings. The pretty frock in which she looked so nice and fresh, and in which she had once again the appearance of a lady,

did not appeal to her. She shrugged her shoulders discontentedly, and was only comforted when nurse insisted on her wearing a white pinafore which nearly covered the frock.

Just as she was leaving her bedroom she turned and spoke.

"If you will not let me wear my own frock – and I bought all my own mourning for my own mother – may I at least keep it?"

"Oh yes, poor little girl!" said nurse, much touched by these words. "I will put it in the bottom of the little trunk you brought with you. You might give it to a poor girl some day, and she might make it fit her; it is not fit for any one to wear at present."

Nan was fain to be comforted with this sort of half-promise of nurse's, and entered the school-room, where she stood, looking somewhat forlorn, by the fire. But this mood was not to be of long duration, for Nora and Kitty came bounding in. They had made up their minds: the time of gloom was past; they were going to be their own riotous, gay, merry, rebellious, fidgety, almost unruly little selves once again to-day.

Miss Roy was almost as merry as her pupils. At breakfast they screamed with laughter; animals, of course, were the subjects of conversation. The virtues of Jack, the vices of Poll the parrot, the exquisite beauties of Lord and Lady and the bad manners of their mother, the good manners of the bull-terrier – all were discussed with animation. Each little point was noted. Nan listened, her eyes growing wider and wider.

"What is the matter? Why do you not talk?" said Kitty at last.

"I am so astonished," answered Nan.

"What about?"

"Why, you speak, you and Honora, as if – as if there were no girls and boys in the world."

"Oh! I suppose there are," answered Honora. "I am afraid there are," she continued after a pause. "They are great worries, are they not?"

"I don't know."

"Compared to animals, I mean. Who would compare them?"

"I don't know," said Nan again.

"You will when you have been here a little longer. – Oh, Miss Roy, Kitty has given Jack to Nan. He is her very own bull-puppy. She has got to train him; and, please, if he does anything naughty you are to blame her."

"Well, now, children," said Miss Roy, "put on your hats and coats and get ready for school. Nan, my dear, Mrs. Richmond has not arranged for your school until next week, so will you please stay in the schoolroom until I come back to you? I will hear you a few lessons then, and we can go out for a walk together."

"And may she take Jack for a little airing?" asked Kitty.

"Yes, if she has a leash – not otherwise."

"Oh! I can lend her a leash," said Kitty. "You will find it hanging up in the passage outside the schoolroom," she added, turning to the little girl; "and there is a collar as well. Now we must be off."

In a moment they dashed away, Miss Roy following them. From intense excitement and vigorous conversation and loud

noise and hearty laughs the schoolroom was reduced to absolute silence. Nan felt a sense of relief. She crept into her bedroom, took Sophia Maria from between the sheets, clasped her in her arms, and sitting down by the fire, called to Jack to come and make friends.

Now, Jack was of the most sociable nature, but it is, alas! true that he was possessed with a petted little dog's invariable infirmity – that of intense jealousy. He had taken to Nan; he had liked the position on her shoulder, and had quite slobbered with bliss when she had kissed him on his little cheek the night before. But Nan was now hugging a hideous object in her arms, and Jack did not see why such a thing should be permitted. He was wary, however, and did not intend to give himself away. He knew by experience that in small puppies mischievousness was reproved by two-footed creatures who had the control of them; but in all the world what could be more delicious than the sort of mischief which meant tearing and rending, using his teeth and puppy paws to some purpose? That horrid thing in Nan's arms could be rent and torn and demolished and worried, and what a time of enjoyment he would have while doing it! Accordingly he raised his dancing eyes to Nan's face, and jumped backwards and forwards, inviting her as bewitchingly as puppy could to a game of romps. She played with him for a little, trying to catch him, which he avoided, for it was quite beyond the dignity of puppydom to repose in the same lap with the hideous doll dressed in crape. The dog was biding his time. Nan looked again at Maria.

She still wore her inane smile. Nan kissed her. She was so cold; she did not seem to take any interest.

"She is not so nice as Jack," thought the little girl, "but of course I like her best. Did not mother give her to me, and have not I over and over and over again cried with her in my arms? She comforted me, then, but not as little Jack does."

Presently Miss Roy came in, bustling and fresh from the outside world.

"Now, get on your things, Nan," she said. "I will take you for a walk first of all, as it may rain later on; it is a beautiful morning, and we will go for a walk in Hyde Park. You had better leave little Jack at home; dogs are not allowed in Hyde Park except on a leash."

Nan got up joyfully. Sophia Maria was put comfortably sitting in the arm-chair in which the little girl had herself reposed, and a few minutes later Nan and her governess went out.

Now was Jack's opportunity. The schoolroom was silent; the mother bull-terrier was sound asleep, with the other pups nestling up to her. Jack, bent on mischief, was practically alone. The Persian cat turned her back upon him with the most lofty disdain in her attitude; the parrot winked at him out of her wicked eye, and said, "Here we are again!" another favourite expression of hers. Jack cared little; with a dexterous leap he secured Sophia Maria, and what immediately followed may be left to the imagination of the readers.

When Nan returned from her walk there were morsels of

crape on the floor, and tiny pieces of coarse black cashmere, and a naked doll, which, rent and torn and injured, lay in a distant corner; but her clothes – alas! where were they? Jack waggled up to his little mistress, coaxing and canoodling, and saying by a thousand pretty motions, "You must forgive me if it was wrong. I am sorry, but I would do it again if I had the chance; only please forgive me." And then Nan uttered a sudden shriek and flew towards the battered remains of her doll, which she clasped in her arms.

"Oh, Miss Roy – oh, Miss Roy!" screamed the little girl.

"What is it, my dear?" said the astonished governess.

"Oh, see what Jack has done!"

"Naughty Jack!" said Miss Roy. "But really, Nan, it was a very ugly doll; if you wish to dress it again I will find some pieces for you some half-holiday. Put it in the cupboard now and forget about it. Come to me in a few minutes for your lessons."

CHAPTER VII. – THE FALL

Nan had gone about for the remainder of the day with a lump in her throat. It was not the least like the heavy weight of sorrow which pressed on her yesterday – but nevertheless it was a curious and strange sensation. To all intents and purposes Sophia Maria no longer existed; that battered and torn and disreputable doll in the cupboard could not be the darling whom she had pressed to her heart and loved and worshipped during all the sorrowful days when her mother lay dead in the lodging-house in Bloomsbury.

But although the lump was there, and the sorrow and the dismay there also, Nan's day was one rush, one continued succession, of excitement; there was literally no time in Mrs. Richmond's happy house for brooding or grieving.

"I must try and forget Sophia Maria for the present," thought the child; "there is such a lot to be done! But when I get into bed to-night, oh! won't I have a good cry?"

She made up her mind also not to tell either Nora or Kitty what had happened to her dear baby.

"As for Jack," she said to herself, "I shall hate him all the rest of my days."

But when he came up to her, and sprang with great appreciation into her lap and cuddled down there, and licked her hand with his little red tongue, she found that, far from hating him, she was loving him better and better each moment. At last

bedtime came, and Nan as she laid her head on her pillow and said "Good-night" to nurse, who had come in to put out her candle, whispered to herself:

"Now I *must* have a tremendous cry for my darling Sophia Maria."

But, behold! the very next instant she was sound asleep. So Maria lay neglected in the cupboard. Some day, of course, Nan would dress her, and make her a pet and an idol once more, but meantime she was too busy.

As the days flew on she grew busier and busier, for on the following Monday she went to school with Nora and Kitty. It was discovered at school that she was a very clever and well-informed little girl for her age, and she was put into quite a high-up class for a girl of eleven, and had many lessons to learn, and much to attend to. And as Nan had not only school-hours to live through, but private lessons in music to work for at home, and walks to take, and romps to enjoy, and the animals one and all to idolise, she had not been a month in Mrs. Richmond's house before she became a very merry and a very happy little girl. Not that for a single moment she forgot her mother; but she was wise enough and sensible enough to know that if she would really please that mother she would do it best by being happy and contented. Once she saw Mr. Pryor; and when Mr. Pryor said to her, "Are you trying to be the best girl?" Nan coloured, and squeezed his hand, and said:

"Oh! but I have got such a darling little puppy – all my very,

very own – and his name is Jack. And I do love Kitty and Nora! And Mrs. Richmond is very kind."

Then Mr. Pryor looked straight into the dancing, dark eyes of Nan, and he laid his hand for a moment on her head and said:

"I think you are going to be the best girl."

"I wonder what he really means," thought Nan. "It is nice to be happy; even in mother's time I was never as happy as I am now. In mother's time there was always the pain – her pain – to remember, and the empty purse, and Mrs. Vincent, who was so cross, and – Oh! lots and lots of such things. But now nothing seems sad, and no one seems sorry; and the animals alone would make any girl happy."

But as it is not appointed in this life for any one to pass from the cradle to the grave without anxiety and troubles and temptations and fears, so was Nan Esterleigh no exception to the general rule.

She had been two months at Mrs. Richmond's, and in that time had grown strong and healthy, and a pretty rose colour had beautified her dark little face, and her eyes were very bright, and her whole appearance that of an intelligent and happy child. During those two months the spring had advanced so far that it was now the daffodil and primrose time, and the children had arranged to go to the nearest woods to gather baskets of primroses on a certain Saturday, which was of course a whole holiday. Saturday was the most delightful day of the seven in Nan's opinion, for there was no school and there were no classes

of any sort. It was the animals' special day, when extra cleanings had to be given and extra groomings gone through; when the cages and baskets had to get fresh flannels and fresh gravel; when the mice and the rats had in especial to be looked after. Nan always enjoyed Saturday best of all, and this special Saturday was to be indeed a red-letter day, for Miss Roy had decided to take the children to the country by a train which left Victoria at one o'clock. They would get to Shirley Woods in half-an-hour; there they could pick primroses to their hearts' content, and bring them back in basketfuls. Nan was very much excited. She had never been to Shirley Woods, and the thought of some hours in the country filled her with the wildest glee.

"Why, you dance about and make more fuss even than we do," said Nora, looking at her as she skipped up and down the room.

"Yes; I am in very high spirits," said Nan, "and I am ever so happy."

"I wonder how you will enjoy it when our cousin Augusta comes."

"Who is your cousin Augusta? I have never heard of her."

"I dare say not; but she is coming for a couple of months, either to-night or to-morrow morning – to-night, probably. Mother had a letter from our aunt, and she wants mother to take care of Augusta until she comes back from the Riviera. Her name is Augusta Duncan. She is a very handsome girl, and has a lot of spirit. She is the fashionable sort, and thinks a lot of her dress and her appearance. What fun we shall all have together!"

"But is she coming to school with us? How will she spend her day?" asked Nan.

"No, she is not going to school, for she has not been quite strong, and is to have a complete holiday. I expect she will stay here a good bit and amuse herself."

"How old is she?" said Nan again.

"She is a year and a half older than me," replied Nora, "so she is going on for fourteen. She is a very big girl for her age. I am quite curious to see her."

"Well, don't let us bother about her now," said Nan. "Let us get ready to go off for our happy day in the country."

Kitty looked at the clock.

"I had not the least idea it was so late," she said. "What is to be done? Mother wants us to get some flowers for the drawing-room before we start. Cannot you go, Nan? Just run and ask Susan the housemaid to go with you. You have very nice taste, and can choose just the flowers mother would like. Get them at Johnson's at the corner. I know mother wants heaps of violets, and as many yellow flowers as you can put together. You had better select about five shillings' worth, for some people are coming to tea with mother this afternoon."

"Very well," said Nan, in high good-humour. "I'll be off at once."

She put on her hat and jacket and ran downstairs, calling to Susan to accompany her. Susan, however, was very busy, and grumbled when the little girl made her request.

"Dear me, Miss Nan!" she said; "nurse has given me a lot to do, and I am very late as it is. Cannot the flowers wait?"

"Oh! it does not matter," answered Nan.

A daring idea rushed through her mind. Why should she have Susan, to keep her company? It was only a step from the Richmonds' house to Johnson's shop; she could easily go there alone. The fact that she was forbidden ever to go out by herself was completely forgotten. In her mother's time she had constantly been sent on messages, and surely she was just as sensible a little girl now. So, calling Jack the puppy to accompany her, she started on her mission. She arrived at the shop in good time, and there she saw two girls standing by the counter. They were ordering flowers too, and talking to each other in a somewhat excited manner. Their accents were not the accents of London girls; they had a high-pitched note in them, which Nan at first thought very disagreeable, and then considered fascinating. The girls were beautifully and extravagantly dressed. They were taller and older than Nan. They wore velvet frocks of a rich blue, and fawn-coloured jackets, and they had blue velvet hats which drooped over their faces. The hats were trimmed with enormous ostrich-feathers, also a deep royal-blue. The girls had quantities of very thick and very bright golden hair, which hung in curly masses down their backs and over their shoulders. They had each of them deep-blue eyes – very deep and very dark – and long, curly black lashes. Nan considered them quite the most lovely human beings she had ever looked at. They would not have taken

the least notice of the quiet, grave-looking little girl who had come into the shop but for the fact that Jack suddenly made a dive at one of their dresses, and catching it in his teeth, pulled at it, as much as to say, "Now for a game of play!"

The girl whose dress was attacked immediately tried to shake the bull-terrier off; but the bull-terrier would not let go. It was the mission of all bull-pups never to let go, and here was his opportunity. He hung on as if for grim death, and the girl's face got red and her eyes flashed with temper. She turned to Nan and said in an imperious voice:

"Do take your dog off, please. What a horrid little beast he is!"

"He is not horrid at all," said Nan, very cross at anything disparaging being said of Jack; but she caught the pup in her arms, and stood red and panting, waiting for the girls to leave the shop.

The elder girl, whose dress had been the subject of Jack's attack, found that it was slightly torn, and she turned to her sister and said:

"What an insufferable little dog, and what a still more insufferable girl!"

"Oh, hush, Flora!" said the girl so addressed.

"Where shall I send the flowers to, miss?" asked the man who was serving the girls, bending over the counter as he did so.

"Send them to Mrs. Aspray, Court Mansions," was the elder girl's reply. "Be quick, please," she added; "you had better send a man round with all those flowers in pots. We are expecting

company this afternoon, and mother says the flowers must arrive before two o'clock."

The man promised; and the girls, the elder one still very cross and angry, left the shop.

Just as she was doing so she flashed her handsome blue eyes in Nan's direction, and Nan gave her back quite as indignant a glance.

"Well, miss, and what can I do for you?" said the shopman, now turning to Nan.

Nan gave her order; the man promised to attend to it immediately, and the little girl returned home.

Now, how it happened she never knew, but going back, she trod suddenly on a piece of orange-peel. The next moment she was lying on her face, white and sick and dizzy with pain. She had sprained her ankle. For a moment or two she lay still. Then a man rushed up and raised her to her feet. She made a frantic effort, and leaning on his arm, got as far back as Mrs. Richmond's house. When the door was opened for her, great was the astonishment of Caroline the parlour-maid.

"Why, Miss Nan," she cried, "how white you are! What has happened?"

"I have sprained my foot. I fell when I was out; I trod on a piece of orange-peel."

"And you were out, miss, all alone?"

"Yes, yes; Susan was not able to come."

"My mistress will be angry, miss."

"I am ever so sorry; but please don't tell her – please don't, Caroline."

"She will find out when she discovers that you have sprained your foot."

"Please don't tell her; I will manage somehow," said the child; and she limped upstairs.

In consequence of her escapade, however, she could not possibly go to the country that day. Kitty and Nora decided that they would not tell about her naughtiness in going out alone. They were really fond of Nan. They said that she was very silly to have disobeyed their mother, and very wrong, but they would make some excuse about her not going into the country; and as Mrs. Richmond was extremely busy, what with Augusta's expected arrival and her visitors of that afternoon, it was unlikely that she would miss Nan or say anything about her. Accordingly, at half-past twelve Miss Roy and the two little Richmonds started alone for their country expedition, and Nan was left in the schoolroom.

CHAPTER VIII. – PIP

The sunshiny morning brought a still more lovely afternoon in its train. Nan felt cross and discontented. She had looked forward for long to that happy day in Shirley Woods; she had a passionate love for all flowers, and for primroses in especial. She had gone primrose-hunting when quite a little child with her mother in the happy, happy days when they were not so poor, and mother was not so ill, and their home had been in the country. As she lay in bed at night for the past week she had thought of the intense joy of picking primroses.

"Even if mother is dead," she had said to herself, "I shall love to hold them in my hands; and if it is true that mother is in a beautiful country where there are spring flowers that never wither, perhaps she is picking primroses too."

But now everything had come to an end. She had been good-natured although disobedient, and her punishment had come. Her foot did not ache very badly except when she walked on it; still, she felt very impatient alone in the schoolroom – forgotten, doubtless, by every one else in the house, for even nurse had taken the opportunity to go and visit an old friend, and Susan the housemaid just peeped in once to see if there were enough coals to put on the fire. But the day was too warm for Nan to need much fire. Her book did not interest her; she knew her lessons already by heart. She did not care to practise on the piano. Even

Jack tired her by his constant and officious attentions.

"Oh dear!" she said to herself, "was there ever such a long afternoon? How I wish Phoebe would come to see me! How I wish that I had my darling Sophia Maria again! I might make some more clothes for her; there are all kinds of odds and ends in nurse's basket, and she would not mind my rummaging in it. But there! I really have not the energy. How dull it is! I wonder if Kitty will bring me a special bunch of primroses, and if they will be big ones with long stems, the sort mother used to love. Oh dear! I am tired."

She yawned, shut up the book which she had already read, and taking Jack into her arras, kissed him on his little round forehead.

Just then a memory came to her. Kitty had been anxious about one of the white rats that morning. It was her favourite rat, Pip. Pip had not been well; he had refused his breakfast – an almost unheard-of thing in the annals of the rat world. Even a nut did not tempt him, and he had turned away from a piece of cheese. Kitty adored Pip. He was a large, rather dangerous rat. Nan as a rule kept a wide berth when she was asked to visit the rats and mice, for Pip had very sharp teeth, and a vicious way of darting at you and giving you a sharp bite. But Nan now thought of him with much interest. The very last thing Kitty had said before she went out was this:

"I sha'n't enjoy myself very much after all, for Pip is not well. I cannot think what is the matter with him. I should just break my heart if anything happened to my darling Pip."

Nan had asked one or two questions, and Kitty had turned round and looked at her.

"Oh! you can do nothing," she said. "I have put him away from Glitter and Snap. I think he looks very bad indeed; he must have eaten something poisonous. No, please, do not go near the room, Nan, whatever you do, for you know you have not the slightest control over the rats and mice."

Now Nan thought of the sick rat, and a curious and ever-increasing desire to go and look at him, to find out if he were better, if he had eaten the cheese which Kitty had last tried to tempt him with, took possession of her.

"It can do no harm," she thought. "I will just go and have a peep; it certainly can do no harm. I shall be very careful; I will just open the door and look in."

Notwithstanding the pain in her foot, Nan contrived to limp up to the attics. There were five or six attics on the next floor – large rooms, all of them. The smallest one, that facing the stairs, had been given over to the girls for their pets. They owned several boxes of mice, different kinds of breeds – harvest mice, dormice, Japanese mice, white mice. Nan considered all the mice most fascinating. At the opposite side of the room were the cages where the rats reposed.

Nan knew Pip very well by appearance. He was snowy white, had a long, hairless tail, and a little patch of black just behind his left ear. It was a tiny patch of black, and Kitty considered it one of his beauties. Nan opened the door softly now and went

in. She had left it a little ajar, not thinking much of what she was doing. When she entered the room her dullness vanished on the spot. She could examine one cage after the other; could poke in her hand and draw it away again when the mice tried to bite her. There were a lot of little baby mice in one cage. She thought it would be nothing short of bliss to examine them, to count them, and to see what they were really like. But of course the sick rat, Pip, must have her first attentions. He was in a cage all alone – by no means a perfect cage, for it was broken at one side. Kitty, however, had secured it against the chance of the rat's escape by leaning a bit of board up against the broken side. Nan knew nothing of this; she moved the cage so as to get it into a better light, and peering down, looked at the sick rat. He was lying curled up in the bottom of his cage, but the sudden movement and the sight of Nan's comparatively unfamiliar face gazing at him caused Pip to become wide awake. At that instant a thrill of fear shot through his rodent heart. Nan, without knowing it, had caused the piece of wood to slip. The very next instant the rat was out of his cage, and was scuttling as fast as ever he could rush across the floor.

Now, this was bad enough – for nothing would induce poor Nan to catch him – but worse was to follow; for Jack, grown a large pup now and full of spirit, had followed his little mistress, unknown to her, into the attic. The next moment there was a cry, a scuffle, and Jack had caught the sick rat by the neck. Nan screamed, rushed at the dog and rat, and tried to separate them.

Alack and alas! the spirit of his ancestors was in Jack's veins at that moment; his hairs bristled in excitement. It did not take him long to shake the life out of poor Pip, who lay dead and torn on the floor of the attic.

Nan's consternation exceeded all bounds.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" she exclaimed.

She said the words aloud. A light, low laugh falling on her ears caused her to turn quickly, and she saw, standing in the doorway, a fair-haired girl with large blue eyes and an exceedingly amused expression on her face.

"Oh!" said Nan, giving a jump.

"What is the matter?" said the girl.

"Who are you?" said Nan.

"I am Augusta Duncan. But what have you been doing? You are a funny girl, ratting up here all by yourself."

"Oh! you don't know what it means. It is perfectly awful! I came up to see Kitty's sick rat, Pip. She just worships Pip. She has had him almost since he was born; and he was ill to-day, and she put him into a separate cage, and while I was looking at him he escaped, and my bull-terrier killed him. – Oh Jack! oh Jack! what have you done?"

The smile on the strange girl's face became a little broader; she slowly crossed the room, looked at the rat, and then going away, came back with a pair of tongs. With the tongs she lifted the rat and laid him on a shelf.

"He does not look bruised," she said; "at least not much – a

little perhaps. His fur is wet, but I do not suppose Kitty will know what has killed him. Have you courage to put him back into his cage?"

"Why should I do that?" asked Nan.

"Well, have you courage? I could not touch the horror."

The laughing, curious eyes were fixed on Nan's face. She did not know why – she often wondered afterwards what had ailed her during that miserable day – but the next instant she had slipped the rat back into his cage.

"That is all right," said the girl. "You need not tell; I will not. Come, let us lock the door. Have you done any further mischief in the room? I see not. Come downstairs to the schoolroom and amuse me."

Nan followed the girl as though she were mesmerised, Jack trotting behind her heels. They went into the schoolroom; the girl turned full round and looked at Nan.

"Now, who are you?" she said.

"I am Nan Esterleigh."

"Oh! And has my aunt adopted you?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that I am tired? I have had a very long journey; I have come all the way from France. Aunt Jessie is very busy, and said that I might come up to the schoolroom and amuse myself. She did not know that you were here; she said nothing about you. Now, what I want to say is this: if I keep your secret, will you make things pleasant to me?"

"But – but," said Nan, "I don't know that I want it to be kept a secret."

"Oh! you would like Kitty to know that you had stolen into her preserves when she was out, and that your dog had killed her pet rat? It would be so pleasant for you, would it not?"

"It would not be pleasant at all," replied Nan. "Why are you speaking in that tone?"

"I only thought that perhaps you were going to enjoy it. And what good would it do making Kitty unhappy? The rat was ill when she left; she would take its death as a matter of course. She would not know that Jack had killed it."

"But suppose – oh, suppose she ever finds out!"

"How can she find out if you do not tell and I do not tell?"

"You tempt me," said Nan; "but it does not seem right."

"Never mind whether it is right or not; do it."

"Very well," said Nan.

She sat down on the hearth-rug and began poking up the fire.

"That is right. If I do it, you must do things for me. Build up that fire to begin."

Nan looked round at the insolent young figure stretched out in the easiest chair which the room contained. She built up the fire without a word.

"That is right; you can make yourself very useful. Now, run downstairs and ask one of the servants to bring me up some tea and toast, and a new-laid egg, and a little marmalade. Do not forget – toast, butter, tea, new-laid egg, and a little marmalade.

I must say I think it was very thoughtless of Aunt Jessie not to order any food for me when I arrived."

"Oh! did not she? Of course I will go and order the tea," said Nan in a good-natured voice.

She left the room. Her heart was beating loudly. She did not like the position of things a bit, but she seemed to be whirled along by an influence stronger than her own.

"I am not even trying now to be one of the best girls," she said under her breath.

When she came back to the schoolroom, Augusta was curled up close to the fire with Jack in her lap.

"What a nice little dog!" she said. "I should rather like to have him for my own."

"Oh! but you can't," said Nan. "He is mine."

Augusta gave her a quizzical glance.

"You can call him yours," she said. "While I am here he is to be my dog – hey, you little beauty?" and she caught up Jack and pressed his head against her cheek.

Presently Susan appeared with the tea, which was nicely prepared, Augusta's instructions being carried out to the letter.

"Here, Jack," said Augusta; "stand on your hind-legs and beg. You shall have some sugar."

"Oh! please, sugar is not good for him at all," said Nan in a tone of entreaty.

Augusta laughed, picked out the largest lump, and presented it to Jack. He crunched it with appetite; when he had finished

she gave him another, and another.

"You will ruin him. He will get to be a horrid dog at this rate," said Nan.

"Well, when I leave here you can do what you like with him. While I am on the spot it is my will and pleasure to treat little Jack exactly as I think best."

Nan turned away. She felt a strange, sick sensation round her heart.

"I cannot allow myself to get into the power of this horrid girl," she said to herself. "It would be better to have Kitty quite furiously angry with me for an hour or two; yes, it would be much better than to have that girl spoiling Jack, and ordering me about just as though I were her slave."

"I wish you would get me something to read," called out Augusta.

"There is a shelf full of books there," replied Nan. "You can choose which one you like. I am not allowed to walk much because I have hurt my foot."

"How did you hurt it?"

"I was out to-day getting flowers for Mrs. Richmond, and I fell."

"Oh, how stupid! Did you go out by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Hum! Where did you go?"

"Not very far off; just round the corner. There is a beautiful florist's shop just at that corner."

"I dare say; but you are rather young to go out alone. Did Aunt Jessie say you might?"

Nan coloured and bit her lips. Augusta noticed the expression on the little girl's face.

"Perhaps you would rather I did not say anything about this either," she remarked. "I won't, you know, if you tell me not. I never make mischief. I would not do so for all the world."

"Well," said Nan, "I did disobey Mrs. Richmond; but I was in such a hurry because we were all going to the country – we were to have such a lovely, lovely afternoon! I was very sorry afterwards that I did not insist on Susan's coming with me."

"We are mostly sorry when we do wrong things," said Augusta. "I am; but then, you see, I do not get into scrapes. I would not for all the world. I am the sort of girl who gets other girls out of scrapes. I sometimes think that is my mission in life. What a lot of wrong things you have done to-day! Gone out without permission, and been the cause of poor Kitty's favourite rat's death. I would not be in your shoes for a good deal – that is, unless I had a girl like me to help me. Now, like a good child, bring me the least objectionable of the books on that shelf."

"Augusta," said Nan.

"What a portentously solemn voice! Well? Augusta is listening."

"I think it is better to say that – that I do not want you to keep secrets for me."

"Oh! all right, my dear – all right; you can please yourself

exactly. I'll be able to explain just how I saw you with the dog in the room, and the dead rat. Kitty will think you did it on purpose."

"She could not think such a thing."

"Well, you must admit that it looks like it; you up there, and the rat dead, and Jack —*your* Jack – having done it. However, please yourself. We will see when the time comes what you will choose. We will not decide at present. Now then, which is the best of the books?"

"I don't know. Here is *The Fairchild Family*."

"Never heard of it. It sounds goody-goody."

"It is rather nice," said Nan. "And here is *Ministering Children*."

"Oh! I do not want anything of the religious order."

"And here is – oh! here is a charming book —*The Heir of Redclyffe*, by Miss Yonge."

"I have read it before, but I will glance through it again; just toss the volume across to me."

Nan brought it in a meek fashion to Augusta, who took it, raised her eyes to the little dark face, and smiled.

"You are not a bad sort," she said; "and you can be useful to me. I mean to make you useful. Now sit down, Nan, and do not make a noise. Read anything you like, only don't disturb me."

Augusta buried herself against some comfortable cushions, opened her book, and was lost in its contents. Nan, feeling sick and miserable, her ankle aching terribly, took the next most

comfortable chair.

By-and-by there came a message for Augusta to go downstairs to Mrs. Richmond.

"That is right," she said, jumping up. "How do I look, Nan? Hair tidy – eh?"

"Oh yes," said Nan; "it is pretty well."

"Pretty well! If you talk in that tone I shall send you for a brush and comb and glass. Let me look at myself through your eyes. What big, dark eyes you have! They are very pretty. You will be a handsome girl by-and-by."

"Shall I?" replied Nan, much comforted, not to say charmed, by these words.

"Of course you will. And you are a nice little thing – quite nice. Now, keep the fire alive, and look after *my* Jack until I return."

CHAPTER IX. – UNDER HER THUMB

Augusta Duncan was considered by her elders to be one of the best girls in existence. She was always neat and nice to look at; she had refined, gracious, gentle manners. At school she learnt her lessons correctly, and took place after place in form, rising by slow but sure degrees to the head of the school. But Augusta was not a favourite with her companions. Even they themselves did not always know why this was the case. The fact is, they were a little afraid of her; she had a way of getting them under her thumb, as she expressed it. Augusta was never happy in any house until she had got the other girls into this position. She had no special reason to make Nan Esterleigh's life a misery; but the moment she saw the little girl she grasped the opportunity, and her favourite passion being immediately fed, her appetite grew greater every moment. She was now resolved to have complete power over Nan, who, she felt certain, could be very useful to her.

"My dear Gussie," said her aunt, coming forward and kissing her affectionately as she entered the room, "you must have thought me terribly rude on your arrival to send you upstairs; but I was expecting some special friends, and was anxious to finish a lot of letters. My friends will be with me in about half-an-hour, and meantime you and I can have tea cosily together. How is your

mother, dear?"

"She and father are very well indeed. Is it not hard lines that I cannot be with them?"

"Well, I hope you will be happy with me. We will all do what we can to make you so."

"Thank you, Aunt Jessie; I am always happy when I am with you and the girls."

"That is right, my love. You have grown a good deal, Augusta. I see you are going to take after your father's family; you will be tall."

"I am glad of that," said Augusta. "I would rather be tall than short; it gives one more power in the world."

"You silly child," laughed her aunt; "what do you want with power?"

"I love to feel that I have power, Aunt Jessie. I always like to exercise it when I can."

"Well, the time may come when it will be useful, but at present your lot in life is to obey your elders, and to be happy with your young companions."

"Of course, Aunt Jessie – of course. May I sit on this little footstool at your feet, and may I hold your hand?"

"Indeed you may, my darling child. I am so happy to have you with me for a little!"

"Thank you, Aunt Jessie."

"It must be lonely for you, dear, up in the schoolroom at present, but the three girls will be in to supper; they have gone

to Shirley Woods – a long-promised treat."

"The three girls!" said Augusta, raising her calm blue eyes. "Then there are four girls now in the house?"

"Counting you, there are."

"But I mean without me."

"I do not understand you, dear."

"Well, Aunt Jessie, there is a girl up in the schoolroom. She says her name is Nan – Nan Esterleigh."

"Little Nan," cried Mrs. Richmond. "Did not she go with the others?"

"No; I found her in the schoolroom when I arrived."

"I wonder what can be wrong with the child."

"I don't think much; she has slipped and hurt her foot, but it is nothing."

"I must go up to see about her."

"Oh! please, not now, just when you have sent for me, and I am longing to have a talk with you. Nan was as happy as possible when I came down here. I left her playing with her little dog, and seated by the fire."

"If you can assure me she is not in pain I will not go to her till after tea," said Mrs. Richmond; "I am rather tired, having had a lot of running about this morning. But what a pity the poor child never told me of this! How strange of Miss Roy to have gone off without her!"

"I know nothing about that, of course," replied Augusta. "But tell me about her, Aunt Jessie. Is she any relation? Does she live

here now? I never heard of her before."

"She does live here, Augusta, and I hope she will continue to do so."

"How mysterious you look, Aunt Jessie! Is there any story about her?"

"In one sense there is, Augusta; but I do not care to talk about it. The dear child is a great pleasure to me. We all love her very much."

"But do tell me, please, Aunt Jessie – do. I so love to hear anything mysterious!"

"There is nothing mysterious, darling; but perhaps, as you have asked me, I may as well tell. Nan is the dear little daughter of a great friend of mine, a Mrs. Esterleigh, who died about three months ago. At her death Nan came here."

"Oh!" said Augusta.

She was silent for a minute, thinking.

"And is she no relation?" she asked then.

"No; only the daughter of a very great friend."

"Is she, Aunt Jessie, a – rich little girl?"

"Rich in friends, I hope, Augusta; but rich, poor darling, in nothing else. Her mother did not leave any money behind her. But it is a great pleasure to have Nan, and I hope she will live here always."

"Then you have adopted her."

"Practically; only the matter cannot be fully arranged for a time."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"There are some other people – friends of her father's – who have also the right to adopt Nan."

"What a curious, romantic story! People do not as a rule want to adopt little penniless girls."

"I want to adopt her; and I do not quite like that tone in your voice, Augusta. Nan is not under the slightest obligation to me, and I wish you to understand that. Her mother once on a most important occasion in my life did me a kindness which I can never, never forget, and for her sake nothing that I could do for her child would be too much."

"And you will not tell me what it is?"

"I have told no one yet. When Nan is older she shall know."

"And these other people?"

"The Asprays. I hope Nan will not go to them. They have quite another reason for wishing to have her as one of the family. Now, do not ask me any more. I hear our guests arriving. Will you stay with me, or go upstairs to Nan?"

"I think I will stay if you do not mind; I can go up to Nan later on. What an interesting story! And what a dear aunty you are!"

Augusta rose as she spoke, and kissed Mrs. Richmond on her cheek.

Several ladies came into the room, and one and all admired Augusta; for her manners were good, and she had an attentive, thoughtful way which stood her in excellent stead with her elders. By-and-by she went upstairs of her own accord, and then the

ladies turned to Mrs. Richmond and praised her, saying what a very nice girl they considered her.

When Augusta went back to the schoolroom she found that Nan's foot was really very painful.

"I must not walk any more," she said. "What have you been doing, Augusta? Have you had a good time?"

"I have been listening to a story about you," said Augusta in a marked voice.

She looked full at Nan, who felt her heart beat, and who coloured uncomfortably. Just then there came the sound of laughter and of voices, and the next instant the two little girls and their governess entered the room. They brought big baskets of violets and primroses. The air of the schoolroom was full of the sweet scent of the violets. Kitty rushed up to Nan and kissed her: then they both saw Augusta, who was standing in the background, and uttered a shout of delight. Augusta went up to them, kissed them both, and stood close to Nan.

"I must run up at once to see how Pip is," cried Kitty. "I have been thinking of the darling all the time I have been coming home. I wonder if he is better. Do not keep me, please, Nan. I won't be a minute, but I want just to see how he is."

She was dashing out of the room when Nan's voice came faintly – very faintly – on the air:

"Kitty, one minute first!"

"Little fool!" said Augusta. She bent down close to the child and laid her hand across her mouth.

Nobody else had heard Nan's low tones. Nora followed Kitty out of the room; she also ran upstairs to see the sick rat.

"You are too late now," said Augusta. "Just keep your own counsel. Pretend that your foot is aching; that will account for your queer looks. And, by-the-bye, I let Mrs. Richmond understand that you had slipped on the stairs and strained your foot, and you must stick to the story when she asks you about it. Now then, just keep your courage, hold your tongue, and all will be well."

There came a piercing cry from poor Kitty, who rushed into the room, her face white, and tears in her big eyes.

"Pip is dead!" she said.

She flung herself into a chair, panting slightly. It was not her nature to cry, and she did not cry now; but her face looked white and startled. Augusta gave her a quick look. Nan shivered all over with sympathy for Kitty and longing to speak; but Augusta's eyes met hers, and there was such a world of warning and determination in their glance that she succumbed.

"Why, what is the matter," said Miss Roy, who at that moment entered the room. "What a tragic group! Nan looking as though the world were coming to an end, and Kitty – Why, my darling, what is wrong?"

"It is Pip," said Kitty. "He is dead. He died when I was out. He must have had a fit or something, for he looks so queer; and nothing could have got at him, for the cage is firmly fastened, and just as I left it. I will never love another rat. I want to go away

by myself for a little. Do not talk to me. Oh! I will not make a fuss, but I cannot be very cheerful to-night."

She went sadly out of the room.

"And Nan, what is wrong with you?" said her governess. "You were not well when we left, and you look worse now."

"It is my foot," said Nan. "I said that I had hurt it – don't you remember? And it has got worse; it hurts very much indeed."

"Poor little girl! You must let me look at it."

Nan pulled down her stocking and showed a much-swollen ankle.

"My dear child, this will never do. I must bandage it immediately. You have given yourself quite a nasty sprain; for the next few days you must keep your foot up. Have you been using it much this afternoon?"

"Only a very little."

"I am afraid I have been to blame," said Augusta, speaking at this juncture in her most amiable voice. "I did not know that poor little Nan was suffering from a sprained ankle, and asked her to go a few messages for me. I am ever so sorry!"

"But why did you go, Nan? Why did you not tell Augusta?"

"I did not want to," replied Nan.

"Well, you were very silly. Now, dear, I am going to bathe your poor ankle and bind it up."

This was done very skilfully. Nan's foot was supported on a chair; and soon, had it not been for the dead rat, and for the fact that she was concealing the truth, she might have been almost

happy.

CHAPTER X. – A MYSTERY

All in good time Nan's foot got better, but for a week she was kept away from school, and during that week Augusta contrived to rivet her chains. At the end of that time she was able to walk again, and, to her own infinite relief, she went back to school. She learnt her lessons just as carefully as ever; she was pronounced by her teachers to be a remarkably clever and intelligent child; but there was a change in her face. It had not the look that it had worn when first she had come to the Richmonds', but in some respects its expression was even sadder. Then it was just grief, absolute and terrible, for the loss of her mother; now there was a new expression in the frank eyes and sensitive lips, which puzzled those who looked at her. In process of time Kitty had got over the death of Pip. Her affections were deep, and nothing would induce her to talk about the rat; but she was a merry and happy child in other respects. She would not have a rat again, she said – at least, not for a very long time; but she attended to her mice, and looked after Nora's rat, and saw that the dogs and kittens were comfortable, and that Polly had a good time in her cage. Not the faintest gleam of suspicion attached itself to Nan. Jack's share in the death of Pip was likely to remain a secret to the end of time; so also was the true story of Nan's sprained foot. But what ailed Nan herself? Kitty remarked on the change in her one day to Nora.

"She is not a bit the same, and I cannot make out what is wrong with her," she said. "Do you think by any chance, Noney, that Augusta has anything to do with it?"

"Oh no!" replied Nora. "Augusta is a very nice girl, and she is extremely fond of Nan: she often says so."

"Well, I am not quite so sure," replied Kitty. "I saw her two days ago" —

"Yes; what did you see two days ago?"

"I do not like to tell tales, but I came into the schoolroom quite unexpectedly. I slipped away, and no one saw."

"Well, go on; you always are so mysterious, Kitty."

"Nan was crying."

"Yes."

"And Augusta was scolding her. I heard Augusta say, 'If you tell you will be the biggest little fool that I ever heard of.' Now, why should she say that?"

"Are you sure you heard those words?" asked Nora in a tone of great astonishment.

"Yes, I am certain she said them; and she meant them. And Nan's face was – oh, so miserable! I got out of the room, and no one knew that I was listening; but I have a great mind to speak to Nan about it."

"I wish you would. If Nan has a secret on her mind she had much better tell us. She is looking so pale! She seems to have no life in her – no interest in anything."

"Very well; I will. I will tell her what I overheard."

Nora and Kitty were as downright and honest as Augusta was the reverse. But Augusta was very clever; she knew well what sort of characters she had to deal with in the two little sisters; and whereas she secretly bullied Nan, held her secret for her, and had her absolutely in thrall, she was careful not to pursue any such methods with the sisters. With them she was open and above-board, delighting them with her apparent frankness, telling good stories, taking their parts, laughing with them – making the schoolroom party a very merry one indeed.

On the evening of the very same day that Kitty had made her small confidence to Nora, Nora and Augusta were walking home together. In consequence of Augusta's superior age they were allowed to go as far as the Park by themselves, and they were hastening home now to be in time for the schoolroom tea.

"How nice it will be when I am grown-up," said Augusta. "I shall be fifteen before very long, and then it will not take many years before I am out and enjoying myself. I mean to get mother to take me a great deal into society. I should love balls and parties, and gay frocks, and – and admirers."

"Oh dear! it is more than I would," said Nora. "I do not a bit want to be grown-up."

"You will when the time comes; and of course you are too young to think of it at present. I expect you will look very nice when you grow up, Nora."

"I don't care whether I do or not. I don't care twopence about my looks. I want to do my lessons well, and to learn a good bit,

and then to devote myself to natural history. I shall never care for human beings as I care for animals. I want some day to own a complete menagerie or a sort of Zoo. If ever I have money in the future I will buy a great big garden, and have high – very high – walls round it; and I will keep all sorts of animals in great cages – wild creatures, you know – leopards and tigers and pumas. Oh! and wild-cats. And I will have a deep, deep sunken pond with alligators. I suppose I must not venture on a crocodile. I'll have a snake-house, too. And of course I'll have lots of domestic animals. I think Kitty will share what money she has with me, so we will make it quite a big thing. We will not want to have anything to do with men and women; we will live alone with our darlings. Oh! I think they are so sweet – so very, very superior to men and women."

"You are an extraordinary girl," said Augusta; "but of course you will change when the time comes. You cannot be different from the rest of the world. When I am married, and have a beautiful carriage, and a very rich husband, and heaps and heaps and heaps of money, I will come and see you, and drag you out of your Zoo, and take you about and show people what a pretty face you have; and then a prince will come along and make love to you, and – and you will forget your animals because of the beautiful words of the prince, and the poor animals will be neglected and they will die off because you will have married the prince and have gone away with him. That will be the end of your day-dream, my dear, funny Nora."

Nora laughed.

"We will see," she answered. "But, talking of pretty girls, do you not think that Nan will be very, very pretty when she is grown-up, Augusta?"

"Hum!" said Augusta. "Well, yes, if she is happy I suppose she will. Don't you think there is something funny the matter with Nan, Nora? Can you account for it?"

"I cannot," said Nora, startled and amazed at Augusta's words. "I wish you could tell me. Can you throw any light on the change in her?"

"Oh! you have observed the change?"

"Of course I have. And, do you know, it all began the day you came here. Of course, dear little Nan was very sad when first she came to live with mother, but she had got over it, and we were all so fond of her; we thought her such a darling! And she was so merry; she used to laugh so heartily. And she was quite comforted because we gave her Jack as her own special little dog; but now it seems to us that Jack is more your Jack than hers, and Nan is very sad."

"Poor Nan! I have noticed it myself. I am anxious about her."

"Then you do not know what is the matter?"

"I think I do partly, but I must not say; perhaps she will tell you herself."

"Oh! but won't you say? It does seem unkind to have a weight of care on her dear little mind and not to have it relieved."

"Why do you always talk about her as though she were such a

tiny creature? She is nearly as old as you."

"She is the same age as Kitty, but somehow she looks and feels younger."

"Well, if I were you I would not take much notice," said Augusta. "She will come right all in good time. Of course, you know, it is not as if she had been brought up with you; she was brought up by her mother, who was a very poor woman."

"It is not poverty that makes Nan so strange and queer at present," answered Nora.

"I know it is not. I cannot make her out myself, poor child; I am afraid she is naturally of a very melancholy disposition."

The girls chatted a little longer. Nora had obtained no light whatever on Nan's trouble, and went into the house feeling worried and distressed.

Augusta managed to rush into the schoolroom before the sisters appeared.

"You must try to be cheerful, Nan," she said; "they are both suspecting that there is something amiss. You must really rouse yourself or the whole thing will be discovered, and where would you be then?"

"What would happen if it were?" said Nan.

"Happen! I suppose they would forgive you; but, seeing the peculiar circumstances under which you live in this house, I should not like to be in your shoes. Whoever could think well again of a girl who is deceitful?"

"But I am not. Oh! I would tell now – I would tell gladly were

it not for you."

"It certainly would not be very kind of you to get me into a scrape when I did what I could to get you out of one," was Augusta's answer. "But come! cheer up – do. We will have some jolly games after dinner; and, if you are an awfully good girl, I have something rather exciting to tell you to-morrow. No, not to-day – to-morrow."

The girls came in; Miss Roy followed. They had all high tea together at half-past six, and immediately afterwards Augusta proposed games.

She was a splendid leader when there was anything of that sort for her to do, and soon the children – even Nan – were laughing merrily and enjoying themselves to their hearts' content. It was not until bedtime that Kitty ran up to Nan, put her arms round her neck, looked into her eyes, and said in her sweetest, most coaxing voice:

"Nancy, I am coming into your room early tomorrow morning – quite early. When I come, may I creep into your bed, and put my arms round your neck, and kiss you a lot of times?"

"I should like it ever so much," said Nan.

"I will come. Good-night, Nan darling."

Augusta was standing near when Kitty made her petition of Nan.

As Augusta herself was going to bed she went up to Nan and kissed her.

"What did Kitty say to you?" she asked in a whisper.

"Nothing."

"Nonsense! Tell me at once."

"She said that she was coming to see me to-morrow morning early, to get into my bed."

"Oh," said Augusta, "that sort of thing means confidences. Be careful, Nan; be careful what you are doing."

Nan said nothing, but went away to her room. When she got there she fell on her knees by the open window and looked out.

It had been a lovely day in spring, and the night was clear, fine, and balmy. Nan opened her window and let the soft air blow on her hot little face.

"It is four months since mother died," she said to herself; "a great, great deal has happened, and I scarcely know myself. I have learnt to love Mrs. Richmond and the two girls. As to Jack, I think he is the dearest little thing in the world; and I have forgotten Sophia Maria. I have almost forgotten Phoebe; but I still love Mr. Pryor. And, oh! mother, mother, up in heaven, do you see Nan now, and are you pitying her, and are you telling me what is right to do? For I am not a good girl; and as to being the best girl that Mr. Pryor speaks about – oh I – I am more like the worst. And I am so afraid of Augusta! I think I do really, out and out, hate her. I do not know what she means by frightening me and making me so unhappy. Oh! I wish I had never yielded to her. I wish I had the courage to tell Kitty the truth."

As Nan knelt at the window it came into her head that she might ask God to give her the necessary courage, but then a wild

sensation of terror swept over her.

"If Augusta were not in the house I might tell, but Augusta would make it out to be so bad; she told me she would. She told me that if I ever told what I had done she would say that I implored of her not to tell, and she said that her word would be believed before mine; and I know it would, of course, because she is quite old beside me. What a miserable girl I am!"

Nan went to bed, and after a time, wretched as she felt, she fell asleep. But her sleep was haunted by dreams, and it was with a cry that she woke on the following morning when Kitty touched her.

"Here I am, Nancy," said Kitty. "Just push over to the left side and let me get into your bed."

Nan made room, and the two little girls lay side by side.

"Now, this is quite cosy," said Kitty.

"Isn't it?" replied Nan.

"You are very fond of me, are you not, Nancy?"

"Oh yes; very – very."

"And of Nora too?"

"Very; I love you both most dearly."

"And you love mother?"

"Not as I love you two, but I do love her."

"And you love Augusta?"

Nan was silent.

"I thought you did; you are so much together, and you do such a lot of things for her. Sometimes Nora and I are rather angry

when we see you trotting here and there, up and down stairs, fetching and carrying for Gussie. It is all very well, but Gus ought not to put things on you. If you do not like her, why do you do it?"

"Oh! never mind, Kitty. I do it because" —

"Well, because of what?"

"Because I do."

"That is a very silly reason – and for such a clever girl to give!"

"I cannot help it; that is why I do it."

"Then let me tell you why you do it," said Kitty: "because you are afraid of her."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.