

Coolidge Susan

Just Sixteen.



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Just Sixteen

A LITTLE KNIGHT OF LABOR

THE first real snow-storm of the winter had come to Sandyport by the Sea.

It had been a late and merciful autumn. Till well into November the leaves still clung to their boughs, honeysuckles made shady coverts on trellises, and put forth now and then an orange and milk-white blossom full of frosty sweetness; the grass was still green where the snow allowed it to be seen. Thick and fast fell the wind-blown flakes on the lightly frozen ground. The patter and beat of the flying storm was a joyous sound to children who owned sleds and had been waiting the chance to use them. Many a boy's face looked out as the dusk fell, to make sure that the storm continued; and many a bright voice cried, "Hurrah! It's coming down harder than ever! To-morrow it will be splendid!" Stable-men were shaking out fur robes and arranging cutters. Already the fitful sound of sleigh-bells could be heard; and all the world – the world of Sandyport that is – was preparing to give the in-coming winter a gay welcome.

But in one house in an old-fashioned but still respectable street no one seemed inclined to join in the general merry-making. Only two lights broke its darkness: one shone from the kitchen at the back, where, beside a kerosene lamp, Bethia Kendrick, the old-time servitor of the Talcott family, was gloomily darning stockings, and otherwise making ready for departure on the morrow. The other and fainter glow came from the front room, where without any lamp Georgie Talcott sat alone beside her fire.

It was a little fire, and built of rather queer materials. There were bits of lath and box-covers, fence-pickets split in two, shavings, pasteboard clippings, and on top of all, half of an old chopping-bowl. The light material burned out fast, and had to be continually replenished from the basket which stood on one side the grate.

Georgie, in fact, was burning up the odds and ends of her old life before leaving it behind forever. She was to quit the house on the morrow; and there was something significant to her, and very sorrowful, in this disposal of its shreds and fragments; they meant so little to other people, and so very much to her. The old chopping-bowl, for instance, – her thoughts went back from it to the first time she had ever been permitted to join in the making of the Christmas pies. She saw her mother, still a young woman then, and pretty with the faded elegance which had been her characteristic, weighing the sugar and plums, and slicing the citron, while her own daring little hands plied the chopper in that very bowl. What joy there was in those vigorous dabs and cross-way cuts! how she had liked to do it! And now, the pretty mother, faded and gray, lay under the frozen turf, on which the snow-flakes were thickly falling. There could be no more Christmases for Georgie in the old house; it was sold, and to-morrow would close its doors behind her forever.

She shivered as these thoughts passed through her mind, and rising moved restlessly toward the window. It was storming faster than ever. The sight seemed to make the idea of the morrow harder to bear; a big tear formed in each eye, blurring the white world outside into a dim grayness. Presently one ran down her nose and fell on her hand. She looked at it with dismay, wiped it hastily off, and went back to the fire.

"I won't cry, whatever happens, I'm resolved on that," she said half aloud, as she put the other half of the chopping-bowl on the waning blaze. The deep-soaked richness of long-perished meats was in the old wood still. It flared broadly up the chimney. Georgie again sat down by the fire and resumed her thinking.

"What am I going to do?" she asked herself for the hundredth time. "When my visit to Cousin Vi is over, I must decide on something; but what? A week is such a short time in which to settle such an important thing."

It is hard to be confronted at twenty with the problem of one's own support. Georgie hitherto had been as happy and care-free as other girls. Her mother, as the widow of a naval officer, was entitled to a small pension. This, with a very little more in addition, had paid for Georgie's schooling, and kept the old house going in a sufficiently comfortable though very modest fashion. But Mrs. Talcott was not by nature an exemplary manager. It was hard not to overrun here and there, especially after Georgie grew up, and "took her place in society," as the poor lady phrased it, – the place which was rightfully hers as her father's daughter and the descendant of a long line of Talcotts and Chaunceys and Wainwrights. She coveted pretty things for her girl, as all mothers do, and it was too much for her strength always to deny herself.

So Georgie had "just this" and "just that," and being a fresh attractive creature, and a favorite, made her little go as far as the other girls' much, and now and again the tiny capital was encroached upon. And then, and then, – this is a world of sorry chances, as the weak and helpless find to their cost, – came the bad year, when the Ranscuttle Mills passed their dividend and the stock went down to almost nothing; and then Mrs. Talcott's long illness, and then her death. Sickness and death are luxuries which the poor will do well to go without. Georgie went over the calculations afresh as she sat by the fire, and the result came out just the same, and not a penny better. When she had paid for her mother's funeral, and all the last bills, she would have exactly a hundred and seventy-five dollars a year to live upon, – that and no more!

The furniture, – could she get something for that? She glanced round the room, and shook her head. The articles were neither handsome enough nor quaint enough to command a good price. She looked affectionately at the hair-cloth sofa on which her mother had so often lain, at the well-worn secretary. How could she part with these? How could she sell her great-grandfather's picture, or who, in fact, except herself, would care for the rather ill-painted portrait of a rigid old worthy of the last century, in a wig and ruffled shirt, with a view of Sandypoint harbor by way of a background? Her father's silhouette hung beneath it, with his sword and a little mezzotint of his ship. These were treasures to her, but what were they to any one else?

"No," she decided. "Bethia shall take the old kitchen things and her own bedroom furniture, and have the use of them; but the rest must go into Miss Sally's attic for the present. They wouldn't fetch anything; and if they would, I don't think I could bear to sell them. And now that is settled, I must think again, what *am* I to do? I must do something."

She turned over all manner of schemes in her mind, but all seemed fruitless. Sew? The town was full of sempstresses. Georgie knew of half a dozen who could not get work enough to keep them busy half the time. Teach? She could not; her education in no one respect had been thorough enough. Embroider for the Women's Exchanges and Decorative Art Societies? Perhaps; but it seemed to her that was the very thing to which all destitute people with pretensions to gentility fled as a matter of course, and that the market for tidies and "splashes" and pine-pillows was decidedly overstocked.

"It's no use thinking about it to-night," was the sensible decision to which she at last arrived. "I am too tired. I'll get a sound night's sleep if I can, and put off my worries till I am safely at Miss Sally's."

The sound night's sleep stood Georgie in good stead, for the morrow taxed all her powers of endurance, both physical and moral. Bethia, unhappy at losing the home of years, was tearful and fractious to a degree. Sending off the furniture through the deep snow proved a slow and troublesome matter. The doors necessarily stood open a great deal, the rooms grew very cold, everything was comfortless and dispiriting. And underlying all, put aside but never unfelt, was a deep sense of pain at the knowledge that this was the last day, – the very, very last of the home she had always known, and might know no more.

When the final sledge-load creaked away over the hard frozen crust, Georgie experienced a sense of relief.

"The sooner 'tis over, the sooner to sleep,"

she sang below her breath. Everything was in order. She had generalled all ably; nothing was omitted or forgotten. With steady care she raked out the fire in the kitchen stove, which the new owner of the house had taken off her hands, and saw to the fastenings of the windows. Then she tied on her bonnet and black veil, gave the weeping Bethia a good-by kiss on the door-step, closed and locked the door, and waded wearily through the half-broken paths to the boarding-house of Miss Sally Scannell, where Cousin Vi, otherwise Miss Violet Talcott, had lived for years.

No very enthusiastic reception awaited her. Cousin Vi's invitation had been given from a sense of duty. She "owed it to the child," she told herself, as she cleared out a bureau-drawer, and made a place for Georgie's trunk in the small third-story room which for sixteen years had represented to her all the home she had known. Of course such a visit must be a brief one.

"So you're come!" was her greeting as Georgie appeared. "I thought you'd be here sooner; but I suppose you've had a good deal to do. I should have offered to help if the day had not been so cold. Come in and take your things off."

Georgie glanced about her as she smoothed her hair. The room bore the unmistakable marks of spinsterhood and decayed gentility. It was crammed with little belongings, some valuable, some perfectly valueless. Two or three pieces of spindle-legged and claw-footed mahogany made an odd contrast to the common painted bedroom set. Miniatures by Malbone and lovely pale-lined mezzotints and line engravings hung on the walls amid a maze of photographs and Japanese fans and Christmas cards and chromos; an indescribable confusion of duds encumbered every shelf and table; and in the midst sat Miss Vi's tall, meager, dissatisfied self, with thin hair laboriously trained after the prevailing fashion, and a dress whose antique material seemed oddly unsuited to its modern cut and loopings. Somehow the pitifulness of the scene struck Georgie afresh.

"Shall I ever be like this?" she reflected.

"Now tell me what has happened since the funeral," said her cousin. "I had neuralgia all last week and week before, or I should have got down oftener. Who has called? Have the Hanburys been to see you?"

"Ellen came last week, but I was out," replied Georgie.

"What a pity! And how did it happen that you were out? You ought not to have been seen in the street so soon, I think. It's not customary."

"How could I help it?" responded Georgie, sadly. "I had all the move to arrange for. Mr. Custer wanted the house for Saturday. There was no one to go for me."

"I suppose you couldn't; but it's a pity. It's never well to outrage conventionalities. Have Mrs. St. John and Mrs. Constant Carrington called?"

"Mrs. Carrington hasn't, but she wrote me a little note. And dear Mrs. St. John came twice, and brought flowers, and was ever so kind. She always has been so very nice to me, you know."

"Naturally! The St. Johns were nobodies till Mr. St. John made all that money in railroads. She is glad enough to be on good terms with the old families, of course."

"I don't think it's that," said Georgie, rather wearily. "I think she's nice because she's naturally so kind-hearted, and she likes me."

The tea-bell put an end to the discussion. Miss Sally's welcome was a good deal warmer than Cousin Vi's had been.

"You poor dear child," she exclaimed, "you look quite tired out! Here, take this seat by the fire, Georgie, and I'll pour your tea out first of all. She needs it, don't she?" to Cousin Vi.

"*Miss Talcott* is rather tired, I dare say," said that lady, icily. Cousin Vi had lived for sixteen years in daily intercourse with Miss Sally, one of the sunniest and most friendly of women, and had

never once relaxed into cordiality in all that time. Her code of manners included no approximation toward familiarity between a Talcott and a letter of lodgings.

Georgie took a different view. "Thank you so much, dear Miss Sally," she said. "How good you are! I *am* tired."

"I wish you wouldn't call Miss Sally 'dear,'" her cousin remarked after they had gone upstairs. "That sort of thing is most disagreeable to me. You have to be on your guard continually in a house like this, or you get mixed up with all sorts of people."

Georgie let it pass. She was too tired to argue.

"Now, let us talk about your plans," Miss Talcott said next morning. "Have you made any yet?"

"N – o; only that I must find some work to do at once."

"Don't speak like that to any one but me," her cousin said sharply. "There *are* lady-like occupations, of course, in which you can – can – mingle; but they need not be mentioned, or made known to people in general."

"What *do* you mean?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I've never had occasion to look into the matter, but I suppose a girl situated as you are could find something, – embroidery, for instance. You could do that for the Decorative Art. They give you a number, and nobody knows your real name."

"I thought of embroidery," said Georgie; "but I never was very good at it, and so many are doing it nowadays. Besides, it seems to me that people are getting rather tired of all but the finer sort of work."

"What became of that nephew of Mr. Constant Carrington whom you used to see so much of two or three years ago?" demanded Miss Vi, irrelevantly.

"Bob Curtis? I don't quite know where he is. His father failed, don't you remember, and lost all his money, and Bob had to leave Harvard and go into some sort of business?"

"Oh, did he? He's of no consequence, then. I don't know what made me think of him. Well, you could read to an invalid, perhaps, or go to Europe with some lady who wanted a companion."

"Or be second-best wing-maker to an angel," put in Georgie, with a little glint of humor. "Cousin Vi, all that would be very pleasant, but I don't think it is likely to happen. I'm dreadfully afraid no one wants me to go to Europe; and I must have something to do at once, you know. I must earn my bread."

"Don't use such a phrase. It sounds too coarse for anything."

"I don't think so, Cousin Vi. I don't mind working a bit, if only I can hit on something that somebody wants, and that I can do well."

"This is exactly what I have been afraid of," said Miss Vi, despairingly. "I've always had a fear that old Jacob Talcott would break out in you sooner or later. He has skipped two generations, but he was bound to show himself some day or other. He had exactly that common sort of way of looking at things and talking about them, – the only Talcott I ever knew of that did! Don't you recollect how he insisted on putting his son into business, and the boy ran away and went to the West Indies and married some sort of Creole, – all his father's fault?"

"Now, I'll tell you," she went on after a pause. "I've been thinking over this matter, and have made up my mind about it. You're not to do anything foolish, Georgie. If you do, you'll be sorry for it all your life, and I shall never forgive you besides. Such a good start as you have made in society, and all; it will be quite too much if you go and spoil your chances with those ridiculous notions of yours. Now, listen. If you'll give up all idea of supporting yourself, unless it is by doing embroidery or something like that, which no one need know about, I'll – I'll – well – I'll agree to pay your board here at Miss Sally's, and give you half this room for a year. As likely as not you'll be married by the end of that time, or if not, something else will have turned up! Any way, I'll do it for one year. When the year is over, we can talk about the next." And Miss Talcott folded her hands with the manner of one who has offered an ultimatum.

If rather a grudging, this was a really generous offer, as Georgie well knew. To add the expense of her young cousin's board to her own would cost Miss Vi no end of self-denials, pinchings here and pinchings there, the daily frets and calculations that weigh so heavily. Miss Talcott's slender income at its best barely sufficed for the narrow lodgings, to fight off the shabbiness which would endanger her place in "society," and to pay for an occasional cab and theatre ticket. Not to do, or at least to seem to be doing and enjoying, what other people did, was real suffering to Cousin Vi. Yet she was deliberately invoking it by her proposal.

Had it been really made for her sake, had it been quite disinterested, Georgie would have been deeply touched and grateful; as it was, she was sufficiently so to thank her cousin warmly, but without committing herself to acceptance. She must think it over, she said.

She did think it over till her mind fairly ached with the pressure of thought, as the body does after too much exercise. She walked past the Woman's Exchange and studied the articles in the windows. There were the same towels and tidies that had been there two months before, or what seemed the same. Georgie recollected similar articles worked by people whom she knew about, for which she had been asked to buy raffle tickets. "She can't get any one to buy it," had been said. Depending on such work for a support seemed a bare outlook. She walked away with a little shake of her head.

"No," she thought; "embroidery wouldn't pay unless I had a 'gift'; and I don't seem to have a gift for anything unless it is housework. I always was good at that; but I suppose I can't exactly take a place as parlor-maid. Cousin Vi would certainly clap me into an asylum if I suggested such a thing. How nice it would be to have a real genius for something! Though now that I think of it, a good many geniuses have died in attics, of starvation, without being able to help themselves."

When she reached home she took a pencil and a piece of paper and wrote as follows: —

Things Wanted.

1. Something I can do.
2. Something that somebody wants me to do.
3. Something that all the other somebodies in search of work are not trying to do.

Round these problems her thoughts revolved, and though nothing came of them as yet, it seemed to clear her mind to have them set down in black and white.

Meantime the two days' *tête-à-tête* with Cousin Vi produced one distinct result, which was, that let come what come might, Georgie resolved that nothing should induce her to stay on at Miss Sally's as proposed, and be idle. Her healthy and vigorous youth recoiled from the idea.

"It is really good of her to ask me," she thought, "though she only does it for the honor of the family and the dead-and-gone Talcotts. But what a life it would be, and for a whole year too! Cousin Vi has stood it for sixteen, to be sure, poor thing! but how could she? Mother used to say that she was called a bright girl when she first grew up. Surely she might have made something of herself if she had tried, and if Aunt Talcott hadn't considered work one of the seven deadly sins for a lady! She was handsome, too. Even I can recollect her as very good looking. And here she is, all alone, and getting shabbier and poorer all the time. I know she sometimes has not money enough to pay her board, and has to ask Miss Sally to wait, snubbing her and despising her all the time, and holding on desperately to her little figment of gentility. People laugh at her and make fun of her behind her back. They invite her now and then, but they don't really care for her. What is such a society worth? I'll take in washing before I'll come to be like Cousin Vi!"

How little we guess, as we grope in the mists of our own uncertainties, just where the light is going to break through! Georgie Talcott, starting for a walk with her cousin on the third day of her stay at Miss Sally's, saw the St. John carriage pass them and then pull up suddenly at the curb-stone; but she had no idea that so simple a circumstance could affect her fate in any manner. It did, though.

Mrs. St. John was leaning out of the window before they got to the place where the carriage stood, and two prettily gloved hands were stretched eagerly forth.

"Georgie! oh Georgie, how glad I am to see you out, dear! I made Henry stop, because I want you to get in for a little drive and then come home with me to lunch. Mr. St. John is in New York. I am quite alone, and I'll give orders that no one shall be admitted, if you will. Don't you think she might, Miss Talcott? It isn't like going anywhere else, you know, – just coming to me quietly like that."

"I don't see that there would be any impropriety in it," said Miss Talcott, doubtfully; "though – with you, however, it *is* different. But please don't mention it to any one, Mrs. St. John. It might be misunderstood and lead to invitations which Georgie could not possibly accept. Good-morning."

With a stately bend Cousin Vi sailed down the street. Mrs. St. John, I am sorry to say, made a face after her as she went.

"Absurd old idiot!" she muttered. "Such airs!" Then she drew Georgie in, and as soon as the carriage was in motion pulled her veil aside and gave her a warm kiss.

"I am so glad to get hold of you again!" she said.

Mrs. St. John, rich, childless, warm-hearted, and not over-wise, had adopted Georgie as a special pet on her first appearance in society two years before. It is always pleasant for a girl to be made much of by an older woman; and when that woman has a carriage and a nice house, and can do all sorts of things for the girl's entertainment, it is none the less agreeable. Georgie was really fond of her friend. People who are not over-wise are often loved as much as wiser ones; it is one of the laws of compensation.

"Now tell me all about yourself, and what you have been doing this past week," said Mrs. St. John, as they drove down to the beach, where the surf-rollers had swept the sands clean of snow and left a dry, smooth roadway for the horses' feet. The sea wore its winter color that day, – a deep purple-blue, broken by flashing foam-caps; the wind was blowing freshly; a great sense of refreshment came to Georgie, who had been wearying for a change.

"It has been rather sad and hard," she said. "I have had the house to clear out and close, and all manner of things to do, and I was pretty tired when I finished. But I am getting rested now, and by and by I want to talk over my affairs with you."

"Plans?" asked Mrs. St. John.

"Not exactly. I have no plans as yet; but I must have some soon. Now tell me what *you* have been doing."

Mrs. St. John was never averse to talking about herself. She always had a mass of experiences and adventures to relate, which though insignificant enough when you came to analyze them, were so deeply interesting to herself that somehow her auditors got interested in them also. Georgie, used to her ways, listened and sympathized without effort, keeping her eyes fixed meanwhile on the shining, shifting horizon of the sea, and the lovely arch of clear morning sky. How wide and free and satisfactory it was; how different from the cramped outlook into which she had perforce been gazing for days back!

"If life could all be like that!" she thought.

The St. John house seemed a model of winter comfort, bright, flower-scented, and deliciously warm, as they entered it after their drive. Mrs. St. John rang for her maid to take off their wraps, and led Georgie through the drawing-room and the library to a smaller room beyond, which was her favorite sitting-place of a morning.

"We will have luncheon here close to the fire," she said, "and be as cosy as possible."

It was a pretty room, not over-large, fitted up by a professional decorator in a good scheme of color, and crowded with ornaments of all sorts, after the modern fashion. It was many weeks since Georgie had seen it, and its profusion and costliness of detail struck her as it never had done before. Perhaps she was in the mood to observe closely.

They were still sipping their hot *bouillon* in great comfort, when a sudden crash was heard in the distance.

"There!" said Mrs. St. John, resignedly; "that's the second since Monday! What is it *now*, Pierre?"

She pushed back her chair and went hurriedly into the farther room. Presently she came back laughing, but looking flushed and annoyed.

"It's really too vexatious," she said. "There seems no use at all in buying pretty things, the servants do break them so."

"What was it this time?" asked Georgie.

"It was my favorite bit of Sèvres. Don't you recollect it, – two lovely little shepherdesses in blue Watteaus, holding a flower-basket between them? Pierre says his feather duster caught in the open-work edge of the basket."

"Why do you let him use feather dusters? The feathers are so apt to catch."

"My dear, what can I do? Each fresh servant has his or her theory as to how things should be cleaned. Whatever the theory is, the china goes all the same; and I can't tell them any better. I don't know a thing about dusting."

That moment, as if some quick-witted fairy had waved her wand, an idea darted like a flash into Georgie's head.

She took five minutes to consider it, while Mrs. St. John went on: —

"People talk of the hardship of not being able to have things; but I think it's just as hard to have them and not be allowed to keep them. I don't dare to let myself care for a piece of china nowadays, for if I do it's the first thing to go. Pierre's a treasure in other respects, but he smashes most dreadfully; and the second man is quite as bad; and Marie, upstairs, is worse than either. Mr. St. John says I ought to be 'mistress of myself, though china fall;' but I really can't."

Georgie, who had listened to this without listening, had now made up her mind.

"Would you like me to dust your things?" she said quietly.

"My dear, they *are* dusted. Pierre has got through for this time. He won't break anything more till to-morrow."

"Oh, I don't mean only to-day; I mean every day. Yes, I'm in earnest," she went on in answer to her friend's astonished look. "I was meaning to talk to you about something of this sort presently, and now this has come into my head. You see," smiling bravely, "I find that I have got almost nothing to live upon. There is not even enough to pay my board at such a place as Miss Sally's. I must do something to earn money; and dusting is one of the few things that I can do particularly well."

"But, my dear, I never heard of such a thing," gasped poor Mrs. St. John. "Surely your friends and connections will arrange something for you."

"They can't; they are all dead," replied Georgie, sadly. "Our family has run out. I've one cousin in China whom I never saw, and one great-aunt down in Tennessee who is almost as poor as I am, and that's all except Cousin Vi."

"She's no good, of course; but she's sure to object to your doing anything all the same."

"Oh yes, of course she objects," said Georgie, impatiently. "She would like to tie my hands and make me sit quite still for a year and see if something won't happen; but I can't and won't do it; and, besides, what is there to happen? Nothing. She was kind about it, too – "relenting; "she offered to pay my board and share her room with me if I consented; but I would so much rather get to work at once and be independent. Do let me do your dusting," coaxingly; "I'll come every morning and put these four rooms in nice order; and you need never let Pierre or Marie or any one touch the china again, unless you like. I can almost promise that I won't break anything!"

"My dear, it would be beautiful for me, but perfectly horrid for you! I quite agree with your cousin for once. It will never do in the world for you to attempt such a thing. People would drop

you at once; you would lose your position and all your chance, if it was known that you were doing that kind of work."

"But don't you see," cried Georgie, kneeling down on the hearth-rug to bring her face nearer to her friend's, – "don't you see that I've *got* to be dropped any way? Not because I have done anything, not because people are unkind, but just from the necessity of things. I have no money to buy dresses to go out and enjoy myself with. I have no money to stay at home on, in fact, – I *must* do something. And to live like Cousin Vi on the edge of things, just tolerated by people, and mortified and snubbed, and then have a little crumb of pleasure tossed to me, as one throws the last scrap of cake that one doesn't want to a cat or a dog, —*that* is what I could not possibly bear.

"I like fun and pretty things and luxury as well as other people," she continued, after a little pause. "It isn't that I shouldn't *prefer* something different. But everybody can't be well off and have things their own way; and since I am one of the rank and file, it seems to me much wiser to give up the things I *can't* have, out and out, and not try to be two persons at once, a young lady and a working-girl, but put my whole heart into the thing I must be, and do it just as well as I can. Don't you see that I am right?"

"You poor dear darling!" said Mrs. St. John, with tears in her eyes. Then her face cleared.

"Very well," she said briskly, "you *shall*. It will be the greatest comfort in the world to have you take charge of the ornaments. *Now* I can buy as many cups and saucers as I like, and with an easy mind. You must stay and lunch, always, Georgie. I'll give you a regular salary, and when the weather's bad I shall keep you to dinner too, and to spend the night. That's settled; and now let us decide what I shall give you. Would fifty dollars a month be enough?"

"My dear Mrs. St. John! Fifty! Two dollars a week was what I was thinking of."

"Two dollars! oh, you foolish child! You never could live on that! You don't know anything at all about expenses, Georgie."

"But I don't mean only to do *your* dusting. If you are satisfied, I depend on your recommending me to your friends. I could take care of four sets of rooms just as well as of one. There are so many people in Sandypoint who have beautiful houses and collections of bric-à-brac, that I think there might be as many as that who would care to have me if I didn't cost too much. Four places at two dollars each would make eight dollars a week. I could live on that nicely."

"I wish you'd count me in as four," said Mrs. St. John. "I should see four times as much of you, and it would make me four hundred times happier."

But Georgie was firm, and before they parted it was arranged that she should begin her new task the next morning, and that her friend should do what she could to find her similar work elsewhere.

Her plan once made, Georgie suffered no grass to grow under her feet. On the way home she bought some cheese-cloth and a stiff little brush with a pointed end for carvings, and before the next day had provided herself with a quantity of large soft dusters and two little phials of alcohol and oil, and had hunted up a small pair of bellows, which experience had shown her were invaluable for blowing the dust out of delicate objects. Her first essay was a perfect success. Mrs. St. John, quite at a loss how to face the changed situation, gave her a half-troubled welcome; but Georgie's business-like methods reassured her. She followed her about and watched her handle each fragile treasure with skilful, delicate fingers till all was in perfect fresh order, and gave a great sigh of admiration and relief when the work was done.

"Now come and sit down," she said. "How tired you must be!"

"Not a bit," declared Georgie; "I like to dust, strange to say, and I'm not tired at all; I only wish I had another job just like it to do at once. I see it's what I was made for."

By the end of the week Georgie had another regular engagement, and it became necessary to break the news of her new occupation to Cousin Vi. I regret to say that the disclosure caused an "unpleasantness," between them.

"I would not have believed such a thing possible even with you," declared that lady with angry tears. "The very idea marks you out as a person of low mind. It's enough to make your Grandmother Talcott rise from her grave! In the name of common decency, couldn't you hunt up something to do, if do you must, except this?"

"Nothing that I could do so well and so easily, Cousin Vi."

"Don't call me Cousin Vi, I beg! There was no need of doing anything whatever. I asked you to stay here, – you cannot deny that I did."

"I don't wish to deny it," said Georgie, gently. "It was ever so kind of you, too. Don't be so vexed with me, Cousin Vi. We look at things differently, and I don't suppose either of us can help it; but don't let us quarrel. You're almost the only relative that I have in the world."

"Quarrel!" cried Miss Talcott with a shrill laugh, – "quarrel with a girl that goes out dusting! That isn't in my line, I am happy to say. As for being relatives, we are so no longer, and I shall say so to everybody. Great Heavens! what will people think?"

After this outburst it was evident to Georgie that it was better that she should leave Miss Sally's as soon as possible. But where to go? She consulted Miss Sally. That astute person comprehended the situation in the twinkling of an eye, and was ready with a happy suggestion.

"There's my brother John's widdler in the lower street," she said. "She's tolerably well off, and hasn't ever taken boarders; but she's a sort of lonesome person, and I shouldn't wonder if I could fix it so she'd feel like taking you, and reasonable too. It's mighty handy about that furniture of yours, for her upstairs rooms ain't got nothing in them to speak of, and of course she wouldn't want to buy. I'll step down after dinner and see about it."

Miss Sally was a power in her family circle, and she knew it. Before night she had talked Mrs. John Scannell into the belief that to take Georgie to board at five dollars a week was the thing of all others that she most wanted to do; and before the end of two days all was arranged, and Georgie inducted into her new quarters. It was a little low-pitched, old-fashioned house, but it had some pleasant features, and was very neat. A big corner room with a window to the south and another to the sunset was assigned to Georgie for her bedroom. The old furniture that she had been used to all her life made it look homelike, and the hair-cloth sofa and the secretary and square mahogany table were welcome additions to the rather scantily furnished sitting-room below, which she shared at will with her hostess. Mrs. Scannell was a gentle, kindly woman, the soul of cleanliness and propriety, but subject to low spirits; and contact with Georgie's bright, hopeful youth was as delightful to her as it was beneficial. She soon became very fond of "my young lady," as she called her, and Georgie could not have been better placed as to kindness and comfortableness.

A better place than Sandypoint for just such an experiment as she was making could scarcely have been found. Many city people made it their home for the summer; but at all times of the year there was a considerable resident population of wealthy people. Luxurious homes were rather the rule than the exception, and there was quite a little rivalry as to elegance of appointment among them. Mrs. St. John's enthusiasm and Mrs. St. John's recommendation bore fruit, and it was not long before Georgie had secured her coveted "four places."

Two of her employers were comparative strangers; with the fourth, Mrs. Constant Carrington, she had been on terms of some intimacy in the old days, but was not much so now. It *is* rather difficult to keep up friendship with your "dusting girl," as her Cousin Vi would have said; Mrs. Carrington called her "Georgie" still, when they met, and was perfectly civil in her manners, but always there was the business relation to stand between them, and Georgie felt it. Mrs. St. John still tried to retain the pretty pretext that Georgie's labors were a sort of joke, a playing with independence; but there was nothing of this pretext with the other three. To them, Georgie was simply a useful adjunct to their luxurious lives, as little to be regarded as the florist who filled their flower-boxes or the man who tuned their pianos.

These little rubs to self-complacency were not very hard to bear. It was not exactly pleasant, certainly, to pass in at the side entrance where she had once been welcomed at the front door; to feel that her comings and her goings were so insignificant as to be scarcely noticed; now and then, perhaps, to be treated with scant courtesy by an ill-mannered servant. This rarely chanced, however. Georgie had a little natural dignity which impressed servants as well as other people, and from her employers she received nothing but the most civil treatment. Fashion is not unkindly, and it was still remembered that Miss Talcott was born a lady, though she worked for a living. There were stormy days and dull days, days when Georgie felt tired and discouraged; or, harder still to bear, bright days and gala days, when she saw other girls of her age setting forth to enjoy themselves in ways now closed to her. I will not deny that she suffered at such moments, and wished with all her heart that things could be different. But on the whole she bore herself bravely and well, and found some happiness in her work, together with a great deal of contentment.

Mrs. St. John added to her difficulties by continual efforts to tempt her to do this and that pleasant thing which Georgie felt to be inexpedient. She wanted her favorite to play at young ladyhood in her odd minutes, and defy the little frosts and chills which Georgie instinctively knew would be her portion if she should attempt to enter society again on the old terms. If Georgie urged that she had no proper dress, the answer was prompt, – "My dear, I am going to give you a dress;" or, "My dear, you can wear my blue, we are just the same height." But Georgie stood firm, warded off the shower of gifts which was ready to descend upon her, and loving her friend the more that she was so foolishly kind, would not let herself be persuaded into doing what she knew was unwise.

"I can't be two people at once," she persisted. "There's not enough of me for that. You remember what I said that first day, and I mean to stick to it. You are a perfect darling, and just as kind as you can be; but you must just let me go my own way, dear Mrs. St. John, and be satisfied to know that it is the comfort of my life to have you love me so much, though I won't go to balls with you."

But though Georgie would not go to balls or dinner-parties, there were smaller gayeties and pleasures which she did not refuse, – drives and sails now and then, tickets to concerts and lectures, or a long quiet Sunday with a "spend the night" to follow. These little breaks in her busy life were wholesome and refreshing, and she saw no reason for denying them to herself. There was nothing morbid in my little Knight of Labor, which was one reason why she labored so successfully.

So the summer came and went, and Georgie with it, keeping steadily on at her daily task. All that she found to do she did as thoroughly and as carefully as she knew how. She was of real use, and she knew it. Her work had a value. It was not imaginary work, invented as a pretext for giving her help, and the fact supported her self-respect.

We are told in one of our Lord's most subtly beautiful parables, that to them who make perfect use of their one talent, other talents shall be added also. Many faithful workers have proved the meaning and the truth of the parable, and Georgie Talcott found it now among the rest. With the coming in of the autumn another sphere of activity was suddenly opened to her. It sprang, as good things often do, from a seeming disappointment.

She was drawing on her gloves one morning at the close of her labors, when a message was brought by the discreet English butler.

"Mrs. Parish says, Miss, will you be so good as to step up to her morning-room before you go."

"Certainly, Frederick." And Georgie turned and ran lightly upstairs. Mrs. Parish was sitting at her writing-table with rather a preoccupied face.

"I sent for you, Miss Talcott, because I wanted to mention that we are going abroad for the winter," she began. "Maud isn't well, the doctors recommend the Riviera, so we have decided rather suddenly on our plans, and are to sail on the 'Scythia' the first of November. We shall be gone a year."

"Dear me," thought Georgie, "there's another of my places lost! It is quite dreadful!" She was conscious of a sharp pang of inward disappointment.

"My cousin, Mrs. Ernest Stockton, is to take the place," continued Mrs. Parish. "Her husband has been in the legation at Paris, you know, for the last six years, but now they are coming back for good; and when I telegraphed her of our decision, she at once cabled to secure this house. They will land the week after we sail, and I suppose will want to come up at once. Now, of course all sorts of things have got to be done to make ready for them; but it's out of the question that I should do them, for what with packing and the children's dressmaking and appointments at the dentist's and all that, my hands are so full that I could not possibly undertake anything else. So I was thinking of you. You have so much head and system, you know, and I could trust you as I could not any stranger, and you know the house so well; and you could get plenty of people to help, so that it need not be burdensome. There will be some things to be packed away, and the whole place to be cleaned, floors waxed and curtains washed, the Duchesse dressing-tables taken to pieces and done up and fluted, – all that sort of thing, you know. Oh! and there would be an inventory to make, too; I forgot that. Then next year I should want it gone over again in the same way, – the articles that are packed taken out and put into place, and so on, that it may look natural when we come home. My idea would be to move the family down to New York on the 15th, so as to give you a clear fortnight, and just come up for one day before we sail, for a final look. Of course I should leave the keys in your charge, and I should want you to take the whole responsibility. Now, will you do it, and just tell me what you will ask for it all?"

"May I think it over for one night?" said prudent Georgie. "I will come to-morrow morning with my answer."

She thought it over carefully, and seemed to see that here was a new vista of remunerative labor opened to her, of a more permanent character than mere dusting. So she signified to Mrs. Parish that she would undertake the job, and having done so, bent her mind to doing it in the best possible manner. She made careful lists, and personally superintended each detail. Miss Sally recommended trustworthy workpeople, and everything was carried out to the full satisfaction of Mrs. Parish, who could not say enough in praise of Georgie and her methods.

"It robs going to Europe of half its terrors to have such a person to turn to," she told her friends. "That little Miss Talcott is really wonderful, – so clear-headed and exact. It's really extraordinary where she learned it all, such a girl as she is. If any of you are going abroad, you'll find her the greatest comfort possible."

These commendations bore fruit. People in Sandypoint were always setting forth for this part of the world or that, and leaving houses behind them. A second job of the same sort was soon urged upon Georgie, followed by a third and a fourth. It was profitable work, for she had fifty dollars in each case (a hundred for her double job at the Algernon Parishes'); so her year's expenses were assured, and she was not sorry when another of her "dusting" families went to Florida for the winter.

It became the fashion in Sandypoint to employ "little Miss Talcott." Her capabilities once discovered, people were quick in finding out ways in which to utilize them. Mrs. Robert Brown had the sudden happy thought of getting Georgie to arrange the flowers for a ball which she was giving. Georgie loved flowers, and had that knack of making them look charming in vases which is the gift of a favored few. The ball decorations were admired and commented upon; people said it was "so clever of Mrs. Brown," and "so much better than stiff things from a florist's," and presently half a dozen other ladies wanted the same thing done for them. Fashion and sheep always follow any leader who is venturesome enough to try a new fence.

Later, Mrs. Horace Brown, with her cards out for a great lawn-party, had the misfortune to sprain her ankle. In this emergency she bethought herself of Georgie, who thereupon proved so "invaluable" as a *dea ex machina* behind the scenes, that thenceforward Mrs. Brown never felt that she could give any sort of entertainment without her help. Engagements thickened, and Georgie's hands became so full that she laughingly threatened to "take a partner."

"That's just what I always wanted you to do," said Mrs. St. John, – "a real nice one, with heaps of money, who would take you about everywhere, and give you a good time."

"Oh, that's not at all the sort I want," protested Georgie, laughing and blushing. "I mean a real business partner, a fellow-sweeperess and house-arranger and ball-supper-manageress!"

"Wretched girl, how horribly practical you are! I wish I could see you discontented and sentimental just for once!"

"Heaven forbid! That *would* be a pretty state of things! Now good-by. I have about half a ton of roses to arrange for Mrs. Lauriston."

"Oh, – for her dance! Georgie," coaxingly, "why not go for once with me? Come, just this once. There's that white dress of mine from *Pingat*, with the *Point de Venie* sleeves, that would exactly fit you."

"Nonsense!" replied Georgie, briefly. She kissed her friend and hurried away.

"I declare," soliloquized Mrs. St. John, looking after her, "I could find it in my heart to *advertise* for some one to come and rescue Georgie Talcott from all this hard work! What nice old times those were when you had only to get up a tournament and blow a trumpet or two, and have true knights flock in from all points of the compass in aid of distressed damsels! I wish such things were in fashion now; I would buy a trumpet this very day, I vow, and have a tournament next week."

Georgie's true knight, as it happened, was to come from a quarter little suspected by Mrs. St. John. For the spare afternoons of this second winter Georgie had reserved rather a large piece of work, which had the advantage that it could be taken up at will and laid down when convenient. This was the cataloguing of a valuable library belonging to Mr. Constant Carrington. That gentleman had observed Georgie rather closely as she went about her various avocations, and had formed so high an opinion of what he was pleased to term her "executive ability," that he made a high bid for her services in preference to those of any one else.

She was sitting in this library one rainy day in January, beside a big packing-case, with a long row of books on the table, which she was dusting, classifying, and noting on the list in her lap, when the door opened and a tall young man came in. Georgie glanced at him vaguely, as at a stranger; then recognizing an old friend, she jumped up, exclaiming, "Why Bob – Mr. Curtis, – how do you do? I had no idea that you were here."

Bob Curtis looked bewildered. He had reached Sandyport only that morning. No one had chanced to mention Georgie or the change in her fortunes, and for a moment he failed to recognize in the white-aproned, dusty-fingered vision before him the girl whom he had known so well five years previously.

"It is? – why it *is*," he exclaimed. "Miss Georgie, how delighted I am to see you! I was coming down to call as soon as I could find out where you were. My aunt said nothing about your being in the house."

"Very likely she did not know. I am in and out so often here that I do not always see Mrs. Carrington."

"Indeed!" Bob looked more puzzled than ever. He had not remembered that there was any such close intimacy in the old days between the two families.

"I can't shake hands, I am too dusty," went on Georgie. "But I am very glad indeed to see you again."

She too was taking mental notes, and observing that her former friend had lost somewhat of the gloss and brilliance of his boyish days; that his coat was not of the last cut; and that his expression was spiritless, not to say discontented. "Poor fellow!" she thought.

"What on earth does it all mean?" meditated Bob on his part.

"These books only came yesterday," said Georgie, indicating the big box with a wave of the hand.

"I have had to dust them all; and I find that Italian dust sticks just as the American variety does, and makes the fingers just as black." A little laugh.

"What *are* you doing, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"Cataloguing your uncle's library. He has been buying quantities of books for the last two years, as perhaps you know. He has a man in Germany and another in Paris and another in London, who purchase for him, and the boxes are coming over almost every week now. A great case full of the English ones arrived last Saturday, – such beauties! Look at that Ruskin behind you. It is the first edition, with all the plates, worth its weight in gold."

"It's awfully good of you to take so much trouble, I'm sure," remarked Mr. Curtis politely, still with the same mystified look.

"Not at all," replied Georgie, coolly. "It's all in my line of business, you know. Mr. Carrington is to give me a hundred dollars for the job; which is excellent pay, because I can take my own time for doing it, and work at odd moments."

Her interlocutor looked more perplexed than ever. A distinct embarrassment became visible in his manner at the words "job" and "pay."

"Certainly," he said. Then coloring a little he frankly went on, "I don't understand a bit. Would you mind telling me what it all means?"

"Oh, you haven't happened to hear of my 'befalments,' as Miss Sally Scannell would call them."

"I did hear of your mother's death," said Bob, gently, "and I was truly sorry. She was so kind to me always in the old days."

"She was kind to everybody. I am glad you were sorry," said Georgie, bright tears in the eyes which she turned with a grateful look on Bob. "Well, that was the beginning of it all."

There was another pause, during which Bob pulled his moustache nervously! Then he drew a chair to the table and sat down.

"Can you talk while you're working?" he asked. "And mayn't I help? It seems as though I might at least lift those books out for you. Now, if you don't mind, if it isn't painful, won't you tell me what has happened to you, for I see that something *has* happened."

"A great deal has happened, but it isn't painful to tell about it. Things *were* puzzling at first, but they have turned out wonderfully; and I'm rather proud of the way they have gone."

So, little by little, with occasional interruptions for lifting out books and jotting down titles, she told her story, won from point to point by the eager interest which her companion showed in the narrative. When she had finished, he brought his hand down heavily on the table.

"I'll tell you what," he exclaimed with vigorous emphasis, "it's most extraordinary that a girl should do as you have done. You're an absolute little *brick*, – if you'll excuse the phrase. But it makes a fellow – it makes *me* more ashamed of myself than I've often been in my life before."

"But why, – why should you be ashamed?"

"Oh, I've been having hard times too," explained Bob, gloomily. "But I haven't been so plucky as you. I've minded them more."

Georgie knew vaguely something of these "hard times." In the "old days," five years before, when she was seventeen and he a Harvard Junior of twenty, spending a long vacation with his uncle, and when they had rowed and danced and played tennis together so constantly as to set people to wondering if anything "serious" was likely to arise from the intimacy, the world with all its opportunities and pleasures seemed open to the heir of the Curtis family. Bob's father was rich, the family influential, there seemed nothing that he might not command at will.

Then all was changed suddenly; a great financial panic swept away the family fortunes in a few weeks. Mr. Curtis died insolvent, and Robert was called on to give up many half-formed wishes and ambitions, and face the stern realities. What little could be saved from the wreck made a scanty subsistence for his mother and sisters; he must support himself. For more than two years he had been filling a subordinate position in a large manufacturing business. His friends considered him in luck to secure such a place; and he was fain to agree with them, but the acknowledgment did not make him exactly happy in it, notwithstanding.

Discipline can hardly be agreeable. Bob Curtis had been a little spoiled by prosperity; and though he did his work fairly well, there was always a bitterness at heart, and a certain tinge of false shame at having it to do at all. He worked because he must, he told himself, not because he liked or ever should like it. All the family traditions were opposed to work. Then he had the natural confidence of a very young man in his own powers, and it was not pleasant to be made to feel at every turn that he was raw, inexperienced, not particularly valuable to anybody, and that no one especially looked up to or admired him. He scorned himself for minding such things; but all the same he did mind them, and the frank, kindly young fellow was in danger of becoming soured and cynical in his lonely and uncongenial surroundings.

It was just at this point that good fortune brought him into contact with Georgie Talcott, and it was like the lifting of a veil from before his eyes. He recollected her such a pretty, care-free creature, petted and adored by her mother, every day filled with pleasant things, not a worry or cloud allowed to shadow the bright succession of her amusements; and here she sat telling him of a fight with necessity compared with which his seemed like child's play, and out of which she had come victorious. He was struck, too, with the total absence of embarrassment and false shame in the telling. Work, in Georgie's mind, was evidently a thing to be proud of and thankful over, not something to be practised shyly, and alluded to with bated breath. The contrast between his and her way of looking at the thing struck him sharply.

It did not take long for Georgie to arrive at the facts in Bob's case. Confidence begets confidence; and in another day or two, won by her bright sympathy, he gradually made a clean breast of his troubles. Somehow they did not seem so great after they were told. Georgie's sympathy was not of a weakening sort, and her questions and comments seemed to clear things to his mind, and set them in right relations to each other.

"I don't think that I pity you much," she told him one day. "Your mother and the girls, yes, because they are women and not used to it, and it always *is* harder for girls – "

"See here, you're a girl yourself," put in Bob.

"No – I'm a business person. Don't interrupt. What I was going to say was, that I think it's *lovely* for a young man to have to work! We are all lazy by nature; we need to be shaken up and compelled to do our best. You will be ten times as much of a person in the end as if you had always had your own way."

"Do you really think that? But what's the use of talking? I may stick where I am for years, and never do more than just make a living."

"I wouldn't!" said Georgie, throwing back her pretty head with an air of decision. "I should scorn to 'stick' if I were a man! And I don't believe you will either. If you once go into it heartily and put your will into it, you're sure to succeed. I always considered you clever, you know. You'll go up – up – as sure as, as sure as *dust*, – that's the thing of all the world that's most certain to rise, I think."

"Overmastered with a clod of valiant marl," muttered Robert below his breath; then aloud, "Well, if that's the view you take of it, I'll do my best to prove you right. It's worth a good deal to know that there is somebody who expects something of me."

"I expect everything of you," said Georgie confidently. And Bob went back to his post at the end of the fortnight infinitely cheered and heartened.

"Bless her brave little heart!" he said to himself. "I won't disappoint her if I can help it; or, if I must, I'll know the reason why."

It is curious, and perhaps a little humiliating, to realize how much our lives are affected by what may be called accident. A touch here or there, a little pull up or down to set us going, often determines the direction in which we go, and direction means all. Robert Curtis in after times always dated the beginning of his fortunes from the day when he walked into his uncle's library and found Georgie Talcott cataloguing books.

"It set me to making a man of myself," he used to say.

Georgie did not see him for more than a year after his departure, but he wrote twice to say that he had taken her advice and it had "worked," and he had "got a rise." The truth was that the boy had an undeveloped capacity for affairs, inherited from the able old grandfather, who laid the foundations of the fortune which Bob's father muddled away. When once will and energy were roused and brought into play, this hereditary bent asserted itself. Bob became valuable to his employers, and like Georgie's "dust," began to go up in the business scale.

Georgie had just successfully re-established the Algernon Parishes, who arrived five months later than was expected, in their home, when Bob came up for a second visit to his uncle. This time he had three weeks' leave, and it was just before he went back that he proposed the formation of what he was pleased to call "A Labor Union."

"You see I'm a working man now just as you are a working woman," he explained. "It's our plain duty to co-operate. You shall be Grand Master – or rather Mistress – and I'll be some sort of a subordinate, – a Walking Delegate, perhaps."

"Indeed, you shall be nothing of the sort. Walking Delegates are particularly idle people, I've always heard. They just go about ordering other folks to stop work and do nothing."

"Then I won't be one. I'll be Grand Master's Mate."

"There's no such office in Labor Unions. If we have one at all, you must have the first place in it."

"What is that position? Please describe it in full. Whatever happens, I won't strike."

"Oh," said Georgie, with the prettiest blush in the world, "the position is too intricate for explanation; we won't describe it."

"But will you join the Union?"

"I thought we had joined already, – both of us."

"Now, Georgie, dearest, I'm in earnest. Thanks to you, I know what work means and how good it is. And now I want my reward, which is to work beside you always as long as I live. Don't turn away your head, but tell me that I may."

I cannot tell you exactly what was Georgie's answer, for this conversation took place on the beach, and just then they sat down on the edge of a boat and began to talk in such low tones that no one could overhear; but as they sat a long time and she went home leaning contentedly on Bob's arm, I presume she answered as he wished. He went back to his work soon afterward, and has made his way up very fast since. Next spring the firm with which he is connected propose to send him to Chicago to start a new branch of their business there. He is to have a good salary and a share of the profits, and it is understood that Georgie will go with him. She has kept on steadily at her various avocations, has made herself so increasingly useful that all Sandypoint wonders what it shall do without her when she goes away, and has laid up what Miss Sally calls "a tidy bit of money" toward the furnishing of the home which she and Bob hope to have before long. Mrs. St. John has many plans in mind for the wedding; and though Georgie laughingly protests that she means to be married in a white apron, with a wreath of "dusty miller" round her head, I dare say she will give in when the time comes, and consent to let her little occasion be made pretty. Even a girl who works likes to have her marriage day a bright one.

Cousin Vi, for her part, is dimly reaching out toward a reconciliation. For, be it known, work which brings success, and is proved to have a solid money value of its own, loses in the estimation of the fastidious its degrading qualities, and is spoken of by the more euphonious title of "good fortune." It is only work which doesn't succeed, which remains forever disrespectable. I think I may venture to predict that the time will come when Cousin Vi will condone all Georgie's wrong-doings, and extend, not the olive-branch only, but both hands, to "the Curtises," that is if they turn out as prosperous as their friends predict and expect them to be.

But whatever Fate may have in store for my dear little Georgie and her chosen co-worker, of one thing I am sure, – that, fare as they may with worldly fortune, they will never be content, having

tasted of the salt of work, to feed again on the honey-bread of idleness, or become drones in the working-hive, but will persevere to the end in the principles and practices of what in the best sense of the word may be called their Labor Union.

SNOWY PETER

THE weather was very cold, though it was not Christmas yet, and to the great delight of the Kane children, December had brought an early and heavy fall of snow. Older people were sorry. They grieved for the swift vanishing of the lovely Indian summer, for the blighting of the last flowers, chrysanthemums, snow-berries, bitter-sweet, and for the red leaves, so pretty but a few days since, which were now blown about and battered by the strong wind. But the children wasted no sympathy on either leaves or berries. A snow-storm seemed to them just then better than anything that ever grew on bush or tree, and they revelled in it all the long afternoon without a thought of what it had cost the world.

It was a deep snow. It lay over the lawn six inches on a level; in the hollow by the fence the drifts were at least two feet deep. There was no lack of building material therefore when Reggie proposed that they should all go to work and make a fort.

Such a wonderful fort as it turned out to be! It had walls and bastions and holes for cannon. It had cannon too, all made of snow. It had a gateway, just like a real fort, and a flag-staff and a flag. The staff was a tall slender column of snow, and they poured water over it, and it froze and became a long pole of glittering ice. The flag had a swallow-tail and was icy too. Reggie had been in New London and Newport the last summer, he had seen real fortifications and knew how they should look. Under his direction the little ones built a *glacis*. Some of you will know what that is, – the steep slippery grass slope which lies beneath the fort walls and is so hard to climb. This *glacis* was harder yet – snow is better than grass for defensive purposes – if only it would last.

"Now let's make the soldiers," shouted little Paul as the last shovel-full of snow was spread on the *glacis* and smoothed down.

"Oh, Paul, we can't, there won't be time," said Elma, the biggest girl, glancing apprehensively at the sun, which was nearing the edge of the sky. "It must be five o'clock, and nurse will call us almost right away."

"Oh, bother! I wish the days weren't so short," said Paul discontentedly. "Let's make one man, any way; just for a sentry, you know. There ought to be a sentry to take care of the fort. Can't we, Elma?"

"Yes – only we must hurry."

The small crew precipitated itself on the drift. None of them were cold, for exercise had warmed their blood. The little ones gathered great snowballs and rolled them up to the fort, while the big ones shaped and moulded. In a wonderfully short time the "man" was completed, – eyes, nose, and all, and the gun in his hand. A pipe was put into his mouth, a cocked-hat on his head. Elma curled his hair a little. Susan Sunflower, as the round-faced younger girl was called for fun, patted and smoothed his cheeks and forehead with her warm little hands. They made boots for him, and a coat with buttons on the tail-pocket; he was a beautiful man indeed! Just as the last touch was given, a window opened and nurse's head appeared, – the very thing the children had been dreading.

"Come, children, come in to supper," she called out across the snow. "It's nearly half-past five. You ought to have come in half an hour ago. Miss Susan, stop working in that snow, nasty cold stuff; you'll catch your death. Master Reggie, make the little boys hurry, please."

There was never any appeal from Nurse Freeman's decisions, least of all now when papa and mamma were both away, and she ruled the house as its undisputed autocrat. Even Reggie, on the verge of twelve, dare not disobey her. She was English and a martinet, and had been in charge of the children all their lives; but she was kind as well as strict, and they loved her. Reluctantly the little troop prepared to go. They picked up the shovels and baskets, for Nurse Freeman was very particular about fetching things in and putting them in their places. They took a last regretful look at their fort. Paul climbed the wall for one more jump down. Little Harry indulged in a final slide across the *glacis*.

Susan Sunflower stroked the Sentinel's hand. "Good-night, Snowy Peter!" they cried in chorus, for that was the name they had agreed upon for their soldier. Then they ran across the lawn in a long skurrying line like a covey of birds, there was a scraping of feet on the porch, the side-door closed with a bang, and they were gone.

Left to himself, Snowy Peter stood still in his place beside the gateway of the fortification. Snowmen usually do stand still, at least till the time comes for them to melt and run away, so there was nothing strange in that. What *was* singular was that about an hour after the children had left him, when dusk had closed in over the house and the leafless trees, and "Fort Kane" had grown a vague dim shape, he slowly turned his head! It was as though the fingers of little Susan had communicated something of their warmth and fulness of life to the poor senseless figure while working over it, and this influence was beginning to take effect. He turned his head and looked in the direction of the house. All was dark except for the hall lamp below, which shone through the glass panes above the door, and for two windows in the second story out of which streamed a strong yellow light. These were the windows of the nursery, where, at that moment, the children were eating their supper.

Snowy Peter remained for a time in motionless silence looking at the window. Then his body slowly began to turn, following the movement of its head. He lifted one stiff ill-shaped foot and moved a step forward. Then he lifted the other and took another step. His left arm dangled uselessly; the right hand held out the gun which Paul had made, and which was of the most curious shape. The tracks which he left in the snow as he crossed the lawn resembled the odd, waddling tracks of a flat-footed elephant as much as anything else.

It took him a long, long time to cross the space over which the light feet of the children had run in two minutes. Each step seemed to cost him a mighty effort. The right leg would quiver for a moment, then wave wildly to and fro, then with a sort of galvanic jerk project itself, and the whole body, with a pitch and a lurch, would plunge forward heavily, till brought up again in an upright position by the advanced leg. After that the left leg would take its turn, and the process be repeated. There was no spring, no supple play to the joints; in fact, Snowy Peter had no joints. His young creators had left them out while constructing him.

At last he reached the wall of the house, and stood beneath the windows where the yellow light was burning. This had been the goal of his desires; but, alas, now that he had attained the coveted position he could not look in at the windows – he was far too short. Desperation lent him energy. A stout lattice was nailed against the house, up which in summer a flowering clematis twined and clustered. Seizing this, Snowy Peter began to climb!

Up one bar after another he slowly and painfully went, lifting his heavy feet and clinging tightly with his poor, stiff hands. His gun-stock snapped in the middle, his cocked-hat sustained many contusions, even his nose had more than one hard knock. But he had the heart of a hero, whom neither danger, nor difficulty, nor personal inconvenience can deter, and at last his head was on a level with the nursery window-sill.

It was a pleasant sight that met his eyes. No one had slept in the nursery since Paul had grown big enough for a bed of his own; and though it kept its own name, it was in reality only a big, cheerful upstairs sitting-room, where lessons could be studied, meals taken, and Nurse Freeman sit and do her mending and be on hand always for any one who wanted her. Now that Mr. and Mrs. Kane were absent, the downstairs rooms looked vacant and dreary, and the children spent all their evenings in the nursery from preference. A large fire burned briskly in the ample grate. A kettle hissed and bubbled on the hob; on the round table where the lamp stood, was a row of bright little tin basins just emptied of the smoking-hot bread-and-milk which was the usual nursery supper. Nurse was cutting slices from a big brown loaf and buttering them with nice yellow butter. There was also some gingerbread, and by way of special and particular treat, a pot of strawberry-jam, to which Paul at that moment was paying attention.

He had scooped out such an enormous spoonful as to attract the notice of the whole party; and just as Snowy Peter raised his white staring eyes above the sill, Reggie called out, "Hullo! I say! leave a little of that for somebody else, will you?"

"Piggy-wiggy," remarked Harry, indignantly; "and it's your second help too!"

"Master Paul, I'm surprised at you," observed Nurse Freeman severely, taking the big spoonful away from him. "There, that's quite enough," and she put half the quantity on the edge of his plate and gave the other half to Susan.

"That's not fair," remonstrated Paul, "when I've been working so hard, and it's so cold, and when I like jam so, and when it's so awfully good beside."

"Jam! what is jam?" thought Snowy Peter. He pressed his cold nose closer to the glass.

"We all worked hard, Paul," said Elma, "and we all like jam as much as you do. May I have some more, Nursey?"

"I wonder how poor Snowy Peter feels all alone out there in the garden," said Susan Sunflower. "He must be very cold, poor fellow!"

"Ho, he don't mind it!" declared Paul with his mouth full of bread-and-jam.

"Oh, yes, I do – I mind it very much," murmured Snowy Peter to himself; but he had no voice with which to make an outward noise.

"Won't you come out and see him to-morrow, Nursey?" went on Susan. "He's the best man we ever made. He's quite beautiful. He's got a pipe and a hat and curly hair and buttons on his coat – I'm sure you'll like him."

Snowy Peter reared himself straighter on the lattice. He was proud to hear himself thus commended.

"If he could only talk and walk, he'd be just as good as a live person, really he would, Nursey," said Elma. "Wouldn't it be fun if he could! We'd bring him in to tea and he'd sit by the fire and warm his hands, and it would be such fun."

"He'd melt fast enough in this warm room," observed Reggie, while Nurse Freeman added: "That's nonsense, Miss Elma. How could a man like that walk? And I don't want no nasty snow images in *my* nursery, melting and slopping up the carpet."

Snowy Peter listened to this conversation with a painful feeling at his heart. He felt lonely and forlorn. No one really liked him. To the children he was only a thing to be played with and joked about. Nurse Freeman called him a "nasty snow image." But though he was hurt and troubled in his spirit, the warm bright nursery, the sound of laughter and human voices, even the fire, that foe most fatal of all to things made of snow, had an irresistible attraction for him. He could not bear the idea of returning to his cold post of duty beside the lonely Fort, and under the wintry midnight sky. So he still clung to the lattice and looked in at the window with his unwinking eyes; and a great longing to be inside, and to sit down by the cheerful fire and be treated with kindness, took possession of him. But what is the use of such ambitions to a snow-man?

Long, long he clung to the lattice and lingered and looked in. He saw the two little ones when first the sand-man began to drop his grains into their eyes, and noticed how they struggled against the sleepy influence, and tried to keep awake. He saw Nurse Freeman carry them off, and presently fetch them back in their flannel nightgowns to say their prayers beside the fire. Snowy Peter did not know what it meant as they knelt with their heads in Nursey's lap, and their pink toes curled up in the glow of the heat, but it was a pretty sight to see, and he liked it.

After they were taken away for the second time, he watched Elma as she studied her geography lesson for the morrow, while Reggie did sums on his slate, and Paul played at checkers with Susan Sunflower. Snowy Peter thought he should like to do sums, and he was sure it would be nice to play checkers, and jump squares and chuckle and finally beat, as Paul did. Alas, checkers are not for snow-men! Paul went to bed when the game was ended, and Susan, and a little later the other two followed. Then Nurse Freeman raked out the fire and put ashes on top, and blew the lights out and went away

herself, leaving the nursery dark and silent except for a dim glow from the ash-smothered grate and the low ticking of the clock.

Some time after she departed, when the lights in the other windows had all been extinguished and the house was as dark inside as the night was outside, Snowy Peter raised his hand and pushed gently at the sash. It was not fastened, and it opened easily and without much noise. Then a heavy leg was thrown over the sill, and stiffly and painfully the snow soldier climbed into the room. He wanted to feel what it was like to sit in a chair beside a table as human beings sit, and he was extremely curious about the fire.

Alas, he could not sit! He was made to stand but not to bend. When he tried to seat himself his body lay in a long inclined plane, with the shoulder-blades resting on the back of the chair, and the legs sticking out straight before him, – an attitude which was not at all comfortable. The chair creaked beneath him and tipped dangerously. It was with difficulty that he got again into his natural position, and he trembled with fear in every limb. It had been a narrow escape. "A fine thing it would have been if I had fallen over and not been able to get on my feet again," he thought. "How that terrible old woman would have swept me up in the morning!" Then, cautiously and timidly, he put his finger into the nearly empty jam-pot, rubbed it round till a little of the sweet, sticky juice adhered to it, and raised it to his lips. It had no taste to him. Jam was a human joy in which he could not share, and he heaved a deep sigh.

Drops began to stand on his forehead. Though there was so little fire left, the room was much warmer than the outer air, and Snowy Peter had begun to melt. A great and sudden fear took possession of him. As fast as his heavy limbs would allow, he hastened to the window. It was a great deal harder to go down the lattice than to climb up it, and twice he almost lost his footing. But at last he stood safely on the ground. The window he left open; he had no strength left for extra exertion.

With increasing difficulty he stumbled across the lawn to his old position beside the gateway of the fort. A sense of duty had sustained him thus far, for a sentry must be found at his post; but now that he was there, all power seemed to desert his limbs. Little Susan's warm fingers had perhaps put just so much life into him, and no more, as would enable him to do what he had done, as a clock can run but its appointed course of hours and must then stop. His head turned no longer in the direction of the house. His eyes looked immovably forward. The straight stiff hand held out the broken gun. Two o'clock sounded from the church steeple, three, four. The earliest dawn crept slowly into the sky. It broadened to a soft pink flush, a sudden wind rose and stirred, and as if quickened by its impulse up came the yellow sun. Smoke began to curl from the house chimneys, doors opened, voices sounded, but still Snowy Peter did not move.

"Why, what is this?" cried Nurse Freeman, hurrying into the nursery from her bedroom, which was near. "How comes this window to be open? I left the fire covered up a purpose, that my dears might have a warm room to breakfast in. It's as cold as a barn. It must be that careless Maria. She's no head and no thoughtfulness, that girl."

Maria denied the accusation, but Nurse was not convinced. "Windows did not open without hands," she justly observed. But what hands opened this particular window Nurse Freeman never, never knew!

Presently another phenomenon claimed her attention. There on the carpet, close to the table where the jam-pot stood, was a large slop of water. It marked the spot where the snow-man had begun to melt the night before.

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