



Neighbours

Mrs. Molesworth



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"THEN YOU MUST OFTEN COME," SAID VANDA.

NEIGHBOURS

BY

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“CARROTS,” “THE PALACE IN THE GARDEN,” “FIVE MINUTES STORIES,”
“THAT GIRL IN BLACK,” “THE THIRD MISS ST. QUENTIN,” ETC., ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY M. ELLEN EDWARDS

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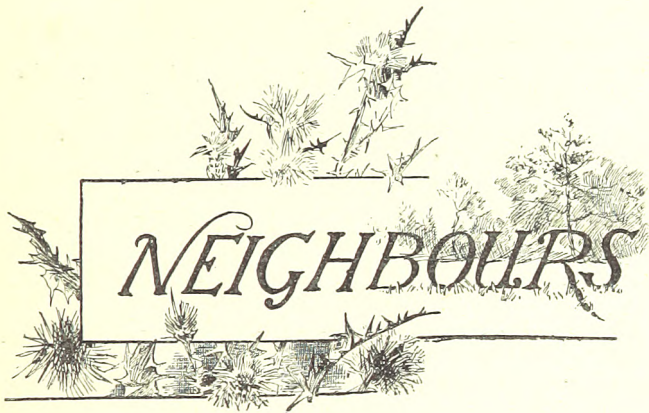
Baby Betty

17th May, 1889.

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NEIGHBOURS

CHAPTER I.

THE Thickness family had always lived at Leaford. It was their world, and on the whole they were satisfied with it. And to many, if not all of the other inhabitants of the place, it would scarcely have seemed itself without the brass plate on the door of the red-brick house at the end of the High Street, bearing the familiar name—the brass plate

which had served the present Mr. Thickness's father as well as himself, and which bid fair to last out another generation. For Martin Thickness was turning out a model young man, and it was far from improbable that in time to come he might succeed to his father's shoes as managing partner of the County Bank.

They had had their troubles, of course, like other people. Still, these had not come to them in very tragic or acute form. Mrs. Thickness's death had been sad certainly, very sad. But it had been preceded by a long and gentle illness, during which her husband and children had grown, as it were, accustomed to what must be its end. And the sympathy felt for them all in the town and in the neighbourhood had been, as Lavinia herself expressed it, "most gratifying."

Lavinia was the eldest—she was four years older than Martin even, and to the younger members of the family, Martin had always seemed grown-up. Lavinia's position among them even surpassed this in dignity. She had not only always seemed grown-up, she had always seemed middle-aged! And yet even now she was not really so; Lavinia's age was a subject seldom alluded to in the family. Not that it was a sore point with her, quite the contrary; but there was a tacit feeling that, preserving a faint flavour of mystery as to this and some other personal concerns of the eldest Miss Thickness, was but treating her with the respect she had an undoubted right to.

In point of fact she was now thirty. Martin came next her; then followed George, a curate, and a hard-working one, but seldom at home; Catherine, Susie, a

couple more brothers, thus down to fifteen-years-old Emily, the baby of the family, though in her own esteem and in the unexpressed judgment of Lavinia, the worthiest to rank after herself. For Emily had been of her own making and moulding. The mother's ill-health had begun while she was yet a very tiny damsel, and on her Miss Thickness had expended all her powers of training and education, those powers which doubtless would have surrounded her with model sons and daughters of her own, had it been her fate or her choice to marry. There were legends in Leaford that the latter of the two expressions was the more correct.

The Thicknesses dined at six. There had been a feeble attempt on the part of Catherine and Susie to make it half an hour later, on the plea that six came so very near afternoon-tea time, but it had never gone further. And

twice a week—but *if* this state secret were known in Leaford it was at least never alluded to—they did not “dine” at all. That is to say, luncheon took an extra importance on those days, practically and materially speaking, but without having the credit of it, like an active but unrecognized partner in a firm; afternoon tea was ignored, and “late tea”—the Thicknesses objected to the expression “high tea”—replaced the usual six o’clock dinner. There were reasons for this arrangement, reasons culinary and domestic, but into these we need not pry. We may rest satisfied that as they originated with Miss Thickness, they were the best of their kind.

Into the somewhat old-fashioned looking, scrupulously neat, slightly faded drawing-room at the back of the house, whose windows overlooked, indeed opened into, the

brick-walled garden, came Susie Thickness one late September afternoon. It was hot



“SHE FANNED HER CRIMSON FACE WITH HER HAT.”

weather still, and Susie had been walking fast. She fanned her crimson face with her hat as she crossed the hall, hesitating for an

instant at the drawing room door as if half-inclined to put her hat on again before entering, but yielding finally to some irresistible influence that dictated haste.

“If I put it on in a hurry, without a glass, it will only look untidy and crooked, and if I go up stairs it will be such a time before I can tell them,” she decided, as she turned the handle.

“Susie!” exclaimed her sister Catherine, “how late you are!”

“And how over-heated,” added Miss Thickness looking up from her work. “You should really be more careful. You look as if you had been—*running!*”

“So I——” began Susie, but stopped short; “I know I am late,” she went on, “but I met Mrs. Vyner, and she begged me to walk part of the way home with her. She wanted me to stay to tea, but I wouldn’t.

Have you had tea? Oh! I forgot. It is Wednesday, and I am so thirsty."

"You should not walk so fast," said Emily.

"I was so excited," said Susie.

They all looked up at this with expressions varying between reproof, surprise, remonstrance, and sympathy, but with one underlying sentiment common to all, that of curiosity.

"So *excited*, Susie?" said all three voices.

"Yes—I know, sister, you don't think one should ever be excited," said Susie half apologetically, "and I know it's not a good thing, but sometimes—one can't quite help it, can one?"

"No," murmured Catherine, but no one else spoke, though Emily's rather sharp, bright eyes looked as if she would gladly have

shaken Susie to make her go on, had such a proceeding been conceivable.

Silence however in many circumstances gives a kind of permission as well as consent. Lavinia had said nothing more, so Susie took courage and continued.

“It is,” she went on, “about what I heard when I was out. Just fancy, sister,” and she turned to Lavinia, “*The Dell* is taken.”

In spite of herself, Miss Thickness looked up eagerly.

“The Dell taken,” she exclaimed, “after all these years! And at this season—it seemed so much more likely to let in spring or summer. I am glad for the Saviles’ sake; it must really have been a considerable loss to them. I suppose,” she went on slowly, though not as if taking any strong personal interest in the matter, “I suppose you did not hear, Susie, who the new tenants are?”

“Oh, yes,” said Susie, opening her eyes, “that is the—the point of it. It would not have been at all, at least not nearly *so* interesting if it had been only old people, or—or humdrum sort of people who had taken it. But it isn’t—it’s Lord William Jerome and his family who are coming.”

She stopped a moment.

“Lord William Jerome’s family!” repeated Catherine and Emily. “What does the family consist of? Do you know anything about them, sister?”

Lavinia sighed faintly.

“I have heard of the family,” she said. “He is a very distinguished soldier. But—I am rather sorry to hear it. It will make me wish for the Saviles back again more than ever.”

“Why?” asked Susie. “Mrs. Vyner seemed to think it would be rather nice to

have some new people here, and there are young people, sons and daughters—she said so, particularly. And they may be very nice. We cannot possibly tell what they *won't* be.”

“We cannot possibly tell what they *will* be,” said Miss Thickness; “and though it would be both wrong and unchristian to be prejudiced, still, young people brought up in the world as they must have been—no doubt they have both travelled a good deal and been a good deal in London—*cannot* be all I should wish for companions for you. You have been very fortunate, unusually fortunate in your surroundings, and you will realize this more and more as you grow older.”

“Yes,” said Catherine, “it is a great comfort to think that we have not been exposed to the kind of temptations many are thrown among. You mean, sister, that a family like

these Jeromes *cannot*, one may almost say, but be worldly and—and—frivolous.”

“I should be afraid to contradict you, certainly, Catherine,” said Lavinia.

“But, sister—,” began Susie, her face flushing a little.

“Well, Susie?”

“If you put it that way, I mean if you say they cannot help it, then it’s no fault of theirs, and I don’t see that we’ve any right to be down upon them for it,” Susie blurted out, her pretty eyes glancing up at her eldest sister half mischievously, half defiantly, only however to droop again instantaneously on meeting Miss Thickness’s steady, slightly reproachful look.

“What silly things you do say, Susie,” said Emily rather pertly; “don’t you see what confusion one would get into if one put things that way? You might as well say that we

shouldn't look down upon those dirty people at the Cross Roads for being dirty and drunken just because they've been brought up to it, as they have. But all the same it wouldn't be right for us to make friends of them and pass our time among them, as if they could teach us any good."

"And worldliness and frivolity are far more insidious than almost any other form of temptation," said Lavinia, in her calm, measured voice.

"Only," said Catherine gently, "might we not perhaps do them—I mean girls such as these Jeromes are likely to be—good, sister?"

Lavinia shook her head.

"If opportunities for doing good come distinctly in our way, I hope we should not neglect them," she said. "But I am no advocate for going *out* of our way to seek them. I

dislike any appearance of pharisaism or interference with others. Susie, do leave off swinging your hat about—and your hair is so untidy.”

Susie gave a pat to her rebellious locks.

“It’s all coming down, I know,” she said, “but I really can’t be troubled to do it twice a day in this hot weather—and what does it matter, when there’s no one to see it? I suppose you mean then, Lavinia,” she went on, “that you won’t call on them—on the Jeromes? There’s a Lady William—and two or three daughters, but I don’t fancy they’re very rich. They’re only going to have one gardener, and Mrs. Welsh at the lodge has got orders to find them quite a young girl as kitchen-maid, and—”

“You haven’t been gossiping about them with Mrs. Welsh, I hope,” interrupted Lavinia severely.

Susie looked rather indignant.

“ Really, sister, I think you’re too bad,” she said. “ I *never* talk to Mrs. Welsh or to any of the poor people about, except the people in our own district, and we never gossip with them. We just change their books and put their names down for the club money, and speak to the mothers whose children don’t come to school and that sort of thing. No, indeed. It was Mrs. Vyner who told me all I’ve been telling you. She’s full of it—just the way she always is, you know. She’s going to call at once, next week I believe. They’re coming next Tuesday, though they only took the house the day before yesterday—or if they’re not coming themselves, they’re sending down servants to get it in order.”

“ That will be it, you may be sure,” said Miss Thickness. “ It is most unlikely that

they would see to practical things themselves—they must be far too fine ladies for that! As if any real woman's work was beneath real ladies"—and again she sighed with a touch of superior pity for the follies of others.

"Yes, indeed," Catherine agreed. "Then you will not call on them, Lavinia?" she added.

Miss Thickness turned on her rather sharply.

"I never said so. I shall do whatever is due to our—to papa's position," she said.

"And perhaps—if they are not *very* rich and luxurious," said Susie, "we may know them a *little*, sister; may we not?"

"It is really extraordinary that you should still be so childish, Susie," was all the answer her eldest sister vouchsafed. "Surely you have enough duties and interests in your

own life without always needing to be running after novelties."

"That's all the thanks I get for bringing in a real piece of news for once," said Susie, in a low voice, as she turned to leave the room, followed by Catherine and Emily.

"*You* wouldn't come in for much of the acquaintance in the first place, any way," answered Emily in the same tone. "If Lavinia took any one, it would be Catherine, not you. *I* might have a chance of going to wait for them in the pony-carriage, but certainly not you, Miss Susie."

"Keep your remarks till they are asked for," retorted Susie, snappishly.

Emily laughed, and her laugh sounded mocking.

"How thankful I am not to have your temper, my sweet Susie," she said, as she pushed past her sister, and ran up stairs.

For the habit of politeness and consideration in small things for each other was not a characteristic of the Thicknesses, notwithstanding their undoubted family affection, and the almost exaggerated *esprit de corps* with which they resented the slightest insinuations from outside that they were, in any respect, open to criticism.

CHAPTER II.

“IT never rains but it pours,” seems to me a saying much more figuratively than literally true.

The first announcement of the advent of new tenants at the Dell was quickly followed by the same piece of news from half a dozen other sources. That very evening, as the Thicknesses were assembled together at the Wednesday “late tea,” Martin looked up from his plate of cold ham with a sudden gleam of interest in his somewhat impassive face.

“ Did my father tell you, Lavinia,” he said, “ that the Dell is let at last ? ”

“ No,” Miss Thickness replied, “ papa has not told us, but we heard it—Susie heard it this afternoon from Mrs. Vyner. I am glad of it for the Saviles’ sake. I hope they have let it well ? ”

“ Very well, I should say,” said Mr. Thickness, from his end of the table. “ I have not heard the rent they are getting, but it is to people of good standing. Some of the Jerome family. You did not hear that, I suppose, Lavinia ? ”

“ Yes,” Miss Thickness replied; “ you may be sure Mrs. Vyner would not rest satisfied without knowing all the details. I wanted to speak to you, papa, about the kitchen boiler,” she went on. “ Cook feels almost sure it is leaking again, and I think Smithson should be spoken to sharply about having done it so

imperfectly. He really should be made to do it again at his own expense."

There was no mistaking her tone. It said as plainly as words to her father that the subject of the new neighbours was not to be discussed except in the smallest of "small committees"—that is to say, by herself and him, and Martin perhaps, when the other members of the family were safely disposed of.

"I will send for Smithson to see about it," Mr. Thickness replied. But he gave a little inaudible sigh. "Lavinia is really a wonderful woman," he said to himself, "quite extraordinarily above the ordinary weaknesses of her sex."

Weaknesses with which now and then poor Mr. Thickness had an unacknowledged sympathy. For like most elderly gentlemen who have spent by far the greater part of

their lives in one place, he was by no means devoid of interest in all local concerns, and but for the influences which hedged him round, there is really no saying but that this genial spirit of his *might* have degenerated into a love of mild gossip. But he was a very well-trained papa—save on the very rarest occasions he had never been known to oppose his eldest daughter. And seriously speaking, she was devoted to his interests and to those of the rest of the family. What he would have done without Lavinia, how he would ever have “brought them all up,” Mr. Thickness would have shuddered to think of.

So the conversation faded into the unexciting topics, not unfrequently the only ones discussed in the Thickness family circle. The demoralization among plumbers and workmen in general was regretfully alluded

to ; the prospects of a hard winter naturally suggested by the mention of the men of pipes were touched upon. Martin threw in a hope that there might be better skating than last year, but as his sisters did not skate, their interest in the possibility was limited. And no word, no syllable even, was let fall which might have shed light upon the question which Susie was burning to ask, which Catherine too, and even Emily at the bottom of her really childish heart, were, though unacknowledged to themselves, longing to have answered : “ Will sister call on the Jeromes ? Shall we know them ? ”

The Dell was really a pretty place, and in some respects a more important one than its name might suggest. The grounds were not very large, but the house was roomy. It was just the place for a family accustomed to live

comfortably and gracefully, though not necessarily at great expense, and it was so near Leaford that for housekeeping considerations, questions of parcels and packages fetching from the station and so on—a more convenient situation could not have been desired.

One bright afternoon, about a week after the interesting news of the advent of the Jerome family had reached their future neighbours, a young girl was standing at the open door of the till recently uninhabited house. Standing, that is to say for the moment, for she had been spending the last hour or two in most restless fashion, running to and from the lodge gates, then rushing indoors to throw a last glance of inspection round the various rooms, to make sure that nothing had been forgotten, looking at the timepiece in the drawing-room every five

minutes, and nearly driving the servants out of their minds by dashes into the kitchen to remind them to have the kettle "quite, *quite* boiling," the moment the carriage was heard coming up the drive.

"Oh dear, dear, Miss Betty, you'll wear yourself out before her ladyship and Miss Jerome and all of them come. Couldn't you sit down just for five minutes, quietly? I'll warn you, so that you may be at the door. You see, Miss Betty, I feel rather responsible. I don't want her ladyship to think I've let you knock yourself up, or she'll never trust us again."

The speaker was a very respectable-looking, very small, middle-aged woman. She had begun her career in life as nursery-maid in the family before Betty was born, and had remained with them as "useful sewing-maid" ever since, though the term

but feebly expresses the hundred and one helpfulnesses of which little Fryer was capable. The sorrow of her life was her unusually diminutive stature, which had made it impossible for her to become regular "lady's maid" to her dear young ladies. But the lines had fallen in pleasant places, nevertheless, for Fryer. She had accompanied her master and mistress and their children through many journeyings and shared many of their joys and sorrows. And next to their mother there was no one whom the young Jeromes trusted more fully. It had been greatly owing to Fryer's advocacy that Betty had got leave to come down to Leaford some days before the rest of the family, on the, to her, delightful mission of getting the house in order for the others, and making everything as pretty and home-like as possible in their new quarters.

“ You needn’t be afraid, Fryer,” said Betty ; “ no one *could* say that I look anything but well, and I’m as strong as a horse always ; and I do think mamma will say we’ve got it all into very nice order, really. I should be *so* pleased if she were to say I’d done nearly as well as Vanda would have done.”

“ I’m sure she will,” said Fryer. “ It’s a nice little place in many ways. I only hope there’ll be some pleasant neighbours about. It wouldn’t do to be dull for Mr. Alex.”

“ No, of course not,” said Betty. “ But there are sure to be nice neighbours, Fryer. We’ve never been anywhere where we didn’t find some ; and people are always so pleased to know mamma and Vanda, because they’re so pretty and charming, and—people are always nice to me too, Fryer. I do think

it's such a mistake to make out that the world's full of selfish, horrid people."

"Miss Vanda will be looking out for some poor people to visit, too," said Fryer.

"Of course I don't mean only rich ones when I speak of nice neighbours," said Betty. "It isn't only Vanda that likes poor people, Fryer. It's just as much me, though I don't say I know how to look after them as well as she does. Won't it be nice to have a regular country Christmas of our own—not merely visiting in relations' houses? We must have a Christmas-tree for the poor children and another for the old people—no, I mean a tea-party for the old people, and——"

"Miss Betty," said Fryer, "I hear the carriage coming."

"Oh," said Betty with a scream of delight, "and I meant to have been at the lodge gates

if not out in the road. Oh, you horrid old woman, to have beguiled me into chattering so! I believe you did it on purpose."



"MISS BETTY," SAID FRYER, "I HEAR THE CARRIAGE COMING.

So Betty did not get further than the hall door after all. But a very charming picture

she made as she stood there, her bright face and pretty figure in its light dress thrown into relief by the darkness of the wainscoted hall within, her wavy brown hair fluttering over her forehead, her eyes dancing with eager delight.

“Mamma, papa, Vanda, Alex,” she cried, as she caught sight of the dear home faces, nearly as bright and eager as her own; “no, Alex is not here. What’s become of Alex?” she went on, as she kissed them all in turn.

“He’s walking up from the station because of Woolly Bear. The poor thing was so unhappy at being separated from us, that Alex wouldn’t leave him,” said Vanda.

“The darling,” Betty ejaculated. “He had to travel in the guard’s van, then. But he’ll soon be at home here. Isn’t it a lovely

place, Vanda? And oh, mamma, do come inside, I have made it so nice already. You'd hardly know the drawing-room again. It did look so stiff. And papa, dear, I've unpacked everything of yours I could get hold of—pipes and all—and put them out in your little room."

"And not broken anything, Betty?" Really, old woman, you are becoming a second Vanda," said Lord William as he kissed her.

Then they all made a tour of inspection together, and Vanda, who had not before seen the Dell, was as delighted as even Betty could have desired. Alexis and Woolly Bear, a beautiful, mild-eyed St. Bernard, arrived in the meantime; and Betty, between welcoming her brother and her pet, retailing all her adventures during the last few days, and doing the honours of

the tea-table, which on this occasion she felt to be pre-eminently *her* duty, was well-nigh distracted.

“Come out into the garden for five minutes, Van and Alex,” she said, when tea was over. “I’m so hot and fussy. And we can look at the kennel for Woolly Bear—he must have a kennel, for the name of the thing, though Woolly Bear’s kennel is only a *piéd-à-terre*, isn’t it, darling? Now Alex, you’re never enthusiastic, I know, but isn’t the Dell perfection?”

Alexis, a tall, good-looking young fellow, with a face pleasant in expression, though occasional quick contractions of the brows and certain fidgety lines about the mouth told of a temper by no means under perfect control, stood still and glanced about him.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s not a bad place. Still—”

Vanda glanced at him.

“Alex, dear,” she said gently, “you’re *not* to say you regret the Cromers’ invitation. You have made papa and mamma so happy by giving it up. And after all, it isn’t very long you have to be with us—only till April.”

The young fellow’s face relaxed.

“I know,” he said. “I don’t mean to grumble. Especially when my father’s been so good to me. But it was rather a tempting idea, you must allow.”

“It would have been horrid for *us*,” said Betty. “Cesar won’t be here till December, and poor Van and I would have had nobody to go about with.”

“Where do you want to go about to?” said Alex. “That’s the worst of taking a place even for a few months in a perfectly new part of the country—you just get to

know the people when it's time to be leaving."

"But there are sure to be some nice neighbours," said Betty hopefully, "and any way, Alex, you're sure of plenty of shooting at Farnham, thanks to Cesar."

"Yes," said Alex, his face clearing, "*I* shall do very well, I dare say. It's more you girls I was thinking about," he went on with the superiority of his one-and-twenty years. "Farnham's no good, except for the shooting, as it's shut up. And it's all very well for you to look after poor people, and that sort of thing, in moderation, but mamma agrees with me, you shouldn't take up that line too strongly."

Vanda smiled.

"Not to the extent of making ourselves disagreeable bores, certainly," she said. "But I don't think there's much fear of that.

And you know, Alex, we've really had a great deal of society and travelling and variety in our lives. Betty and I don't mind in the least even if we have what some people would call a dull winter. Besides, there are sure to be some nice people about."

"You must look them up then," said Alex. "That's to say, they must call on you in the first place, of course—I keep forgetting I'm not in India—but you might let it be understood, through that Mrs.—Mrs.—what's her name?"

"Mrs. Vyner," said Betty.

"That you won't object to making some decent acquaintances if there are any," said Alex.

It was one word for them and two for himself, as Vanda knew, but she answered pleasantly. She knew well that in no way could she better help her father and mother

than by making home bright and attractive to Alexis for the remaining months of his leave. He had been of necessity more separated than his elder brother from his family, and though there was much good in him, the sisters knew that he had given his parents some cause for anxiety. This very invitation—"the Cromers' invitation"—had been the subject of some rather painful discussion, and the refusing it had called on Alex's part for real self-denial.

"We must manage so that he shall not regret it, Betty," Vanda had said. And with this motive, Vanda went on to talk brightly about the best way of "spying the land," as she called it, with a view to collecting about them some young companions.

"We might make a glee club," she said—for Alex sang beautifully—"if there are any voices to be had. Of course we can have

tennis for some weeks still. And later, possibly, we might get up some carpet dances. In the country one can manage such things so inexpensively."

For the Jeromes were scarcely what is called "rich."

Betty gave a sudden exclamation.

"Oh, by the by," she said, "I was forgetting to tell you. I did see such a very pretty girl the day before yesterday in Leaford. There were two of them—both pretty, but *the* one was lovely. Very fair, and a rather frightened expression in her eyes—the sort of girl that would get all rosy if you looked at her. They were very badly, at least, untastefully dressed, and they were walking along rather primly. But they were *very* pretty all the same."

"How interesting!" said Vanda. "I wonder who they can be?"

“Were they both fair?” asked Alexis.
“They’d contrast with you two.”

For Vanda’s hair was such dark auburn as to look in certain lights almost black, though her skin was fair. And Betty was brown altogether—brown hair, brown eyes, even slightly sun-burnt as to complexion. “Brown Bess” had been a nursery nickname for her, which in old days had caused her much indignation, and even some tears!

They had made the tour of the Dell grounds by this time—they had seen to Woolly Bear’s comfortable installation in a kennel which a groom of a sympathetic turn of mind had already, as he showed them, cleaned out and provided with fresh, sweet-smelling hay. And now they turned to go in again, Woolly Bear, having sniffed at his nominal habitation, calmly preparing to follow them, with an air which seemed to say, “Ah,

yes, for the respectability of the thing it's all very well to pretend I've got a kennel, but *you* know, and *I* know, and we both know each other knows, that I don't intend to honour it with more than very flying visits indeed."

"Woolly, darling," said Betty, much in the tone with which a rather weak-minded young mamma tells a six-year-old tyrant that he "really should go to bed," with faint, if any, hopes of being obeyed—"Woolly, sweet, you'd much better stay out here to-night. You know, dear, we've only just arrived and we're rather unsettled still, and we have to fix which rooms you're to be allowed to walk in and out of and which not."

"For it's a question of other people's hearthrugs to roll yourself on, and arm-chairs to repose yourself in, nowadays, my good friend," said Alexis. There was a

legend that Woolly had been found one day in Lord William's own particular arm-chair,



“THERE NOW—” SAID BETTY, HUGGING WOOLLY BEAR.

not asleep, but looking about him as grave as a judge. “No, Betty,” he went on,

“there’s not the slightest use in talking to him in that fondling tone if you want to be obeyed. There now——” for Woolly Bear had taken to rubbing his big head against Betty’s skirts in such an irresistible way that she was now on the ground beside him hugging him rapturously.

“I’ve not seen him for four days,” she said apologetically. “He’ll have to stay in the house just this one evening—but you mustn’t expect to come further than the hall, you poor old Bear.”

“Mustn’t I indeed !” Woolly Bear seemed to say, as he rubbed his nose against Betty’s hand in acknowledgment of her caresses.

CHAPTER III.

“WE met those pretty girls again this morning,” said Betty Jerome at luncheon two days later. “Alex was with me, and he quite agreed with me.”

“No,” said Alexis, “begging your pardon, I don’t. I think the *other* one decidedly the prettiest.”

“The little meek-looking one?” said Betty. “Oh, Alex, how *can* you?”

“They must be rather mild young women, I should say,” said Vanda, laughing. “One is frightened-looking and the other meek. Are they Quakers?”

“As far as their clothes are concerned it’s

a pity they're not," said Alexis, "they're so badly dressed."

"Yet, I always thought Quakers' costume very becoming, but one scarcely ever sees it now," said Lady William. "By the by," she went on, turning to her husband, "Miss Vyner said yesterday that a Mr. and Mrs. Thickness are coming to call—probably to-day. I hope you will be in, for Mr. Thickness is some sort of local magnate, and I suspect he would be disappointed only to see women."

"I'll be about," said Lord William; "I know who he is. He's managing partner of the Bank for one thing, but besides that he's one of the leading men of the place, and he has a good deal of political influence in the county." For since Lord William had given up soldiering he had rather taken to politics, and was not altogether without some idea of

“standing” for some congenial borough himself. “The Thicknesses have been institutions in Leaford for long, I believe,” he went on “but I think some one said the mother was dead.”

“Oh then perhaps it is the daughter,” Lady William replied.

“I wonder if she is young, and if there are any more of them,” said Betty. “We’re so badly off for tennis-players, mamma.”

“And they are such near neighbours,” added her father. “They live in the last house at this end of the town—that is, the nearest to us.”

“Let’s find out about them,” said Betty. “It would be very nice to have companions so near. And they might join us in other things—in a Christmas-tree for the poor children when the time comes.”

“Yes,” said Vanda. “It is so difficult to find out, at first.”

That afternoon, at the orthodox hour for paying calls, Lavinia Thickness and her father were to be seen walking up the Dell drive.

“Should we not take Catherine or Susie?” Mr. Thickness had suggested. “There are young people among them, I hear.”

But his daughter had shaken her head.

“That is just why I think it better not,” she said. “Young people accustomed to the whirl of fashionable society, who have lived in Paris and Vienna and even Petersburg, Mrs. Vyner thinks. They are not likely to be profitable companions, papa.”

“Perhaps not,” Mr. Thickness agreed.

They, the much-to-be-dreaded young people, were playing tennis, as best they could among themselves, with Charley Vyner,

a boy of twelve, as a not very efficient fourth, when their new neighbours appeared, walking solemnly up the drive. Alexis stopped playing to gaze after their retreating forms; the tennis-ground was at some little distance from the house.

“Alex,” said Vanda, “how you are staring! I hope the lady—Mrs. or Miss Thickness, I suppose—didn’t see you. If it had been your meek beauty it might have been pardonable, though even then—What’s come over your manners?”

“That’s just it,” Alexis replied, ignoring the last sentence. “I mean I believe they’re the same people. That’s to say—”

Vanda began to laugh.

“How explicit you are, Alex,” she said. “What in the world do you mean?”

But Alex only answered her with a question to his other sister.

“Betty,” he said, “do you remember, when we saw those two girls, two days ago,



“ALEX,” SAID VANDA, “HOW YOU ARE STARING!”

they were with an older one? That’s her,” he went on eagerly, throwing grammar

to the winds. "They must be her younger sisters."

"Oh!" said Betty and Vanda together, "that would be very nice." Then a sudden thought struck Vanda. "Charley," she said, turning to their little companion, "are there several Miss Thicknesses?"

"Lots," said the boy laconically.

"And are they pretty?" added Betty.

"The littlest is—that's Emily. She's——" and he hesitated, looking from one sister to the other, "no, she's not like either of you, though *I* think you're both pretty. She's—she's something like a doll."

"Fair hair and blue eyes—that must be Alex's one," exclaimed Betty.

"No—she's got dark eyes, very bright. She's really rather jolly, but she always makes out she's not," said Master Charley, enigmatically.

The young Jeromes looked at each other. They were rather nonplussed. Just then a footman came out, sent by her ladyship to summon them. Alex, moved by more curiosity than he would have cared to acknowledge, followed his sisters. An elderly man, stout and ruddy, with pleasant light-blue eyes was talking with their father at one end of the room, and beside Lady William, upright and rather stiff, sat a young lady—for Lavinia, save for her bearing, did not look her age—who, the girls felt conscious, eyed them closely as they came in.

“My daughters, Miss Thickness,” said their mother in her gentle voice. “I have been putting Miss Thickness through a fire of cross-questioning,” she went on laughingly, “in your behalf, and you will be delighted to hear that she has ever so many young brothers and sisters. I have been telling

her you were on the look-out for companions."

"I am so glad," said Vanda, in her pretty gracious way.

"*How* nice!" Betty exclaimed. "I think I've seen two of your sisters already. Aren't they awfully pretty, Miss Thickness?"

Lavinia looked increasingly stiff. Still a slight smile flickered about her mouth at the sight of Betty's bright face and the eager questioning in her beautiful brown eyes.

"What would I not say to Susie if she came in with her hair in such a state?" Susie's sister was thinking to herself, while aloud she replied, not unkindly but in a guarded tone which Betty in her unsuspectingness scarcely perceived.

"I really don't know as to that, Miss Jerome. And—I don't think mere outward

appearance is a matter we—I—give much thought to.”

“How nice!” said Betty again. “I love pretty people, but they are twenty times nicer and prettier when they don’t think themselves so! I am sure we shall be great friends with you all—won’t we, Vanda?”

“I hope so,” said Vanda in her way as heartily as Betty. “Do you—do your sisters play tennis, Miss Thickness? And are they fond of music—do they sing and play? We have all sorts of plans in our heads for this winter—for you see we have one brother with us and our other brother will be coming later. We can very seldom have them both.”

“And are you all fond of dancing?” put in Betty.

Miss Thickness froze at once.

“No,” she replied quietly. “My sisters

almost never dance. They have *learnt* dancing, for I thought it good for them. But here in the country we are happily placed—we lead what I may call sheltered lives. You would scarcely understand—having been so—so differently placed.” Lavinia faltered a little under the mild but slightly perplexed eyes of Lady William. “I feel so grateful not to be exposed to the ever-increasing worldliness of the day,” she went on, rather confusedly.

“Yes,” said Lady William gently, “but do you think, dear Miss Thickness, that the *spirit* of that worldliness is altogether confined to one sort of life? It is so easy to ‘judge’ others in one way, so very, very difficult in another.”

Lavinia flushed.

“It is the last thing I should wish to do,” she said. “In similar circumstances—where

the graver side of life comes less before one—I would never dare to say how I myself might not have often failed.”

“That is a right feeling certainly,” Lady William replied. “But still as to the circumstances—” and a look stole into her eyes which to one wiser than Miss Thickness might have told of deeper knowledge by far than any Lavinia could aspire to of “the graver side of life”—“no, I must not enter upon those questions just now. You must bring your sisters to see us, as soon as possible. Let me see, this is Thursday.”

“They do play tennis,” ventured Betty.

“Yes, though not very much,” answered Lavinia.

“Nor do we,” said Vanda. “We can’t give enough time to it to be very great proficient. We have so many other things to do.”

“Of course,” murmured Lavinia, “in London—in the season, I have always understood.”

“Oh, it isn’t only in London we are busy,” began Betty, “nor only in the season. We had—”

But her mother gently interrupted her.

“Shall we say Saturday?” she said, turning to Lavinia. “As many of you as possible—come early, about four at latest, and stay till nearly dinner-time. That will give time for a good game or two.”

Then a little movement towards them on the part of the two fathers made Lavinia rise. She found herself accepting the invitation and saying good-bye all together, in a confused sort of way, and before she quite realized what she was doing. And her feeling of helplessness was still further increased by hearing her father warmly seconding Lady

William's proposal and expressing his satisfaction at the pleasant prospects before his "young folk."

"Charming people, are they not, my dear?" said Mr. Thickness when he and his daughter found themselves on the drive again, quite out of earshot of their new friends. He half turned as he spoke, waving his hand in farewell to Betty, kneeling on the doorstep with her arm round Woolly Bear, who had suddenly manifested a most unamiable desire to "speed the parting guest" by galloping down the avenue, barking at the top of his voice. "What a pretty picture she makes—just look at her, Lavinia," he went on, and Miss Thickness in spite of herself being obliged to turn round and admire had perforce to join in the friendly gestures.

"Be quiet, naughty Bear," Betty was saying. "If you go scampering after them,

you'll roll them both over, the nice round-about old gentleman and the stiff-starched lady. What manners that would be !”

“What manners those *are*, Betty !” said Vanda. “You shouldn't laugh at people who have just been our guests.”

“I didn't mean to,” said Betty penitently, “but I can't make her out, Van, can you ? Still I'm sure we shall love those pretty sisters. And the papa's a dear, isn't he ?”

“Charming people,” Mr. Thickness was repeating as Lavinia and he passed out into the road, and Miss Thickness found herself obliged to say something in reply.

“Ye—es,” she said, then after a moment's consideration repeating it more unhesitatingly, “yes, papa, you are quite right—‘charming’ is just the word for them.”

But there was a reserve in her tone, very clear to Mr. Thickness's ears.

“Well,” he said, “and what then? You don’t mean to say that you don’t think they would be pleasant companions for Cathie and Susie?”

“Pleasant up to a certain point they would certainly be. Only too pleasant. But that is just it—they are entirely and completely worldly and frivolous. What else can one expect from such a life and training? And the worldly, frivolous spirit is terribly insidious, papa. And hitherto our life has been so free from it.”

“I shouldn’t like the children to be made discontented and longing for things they can’t have, assuredly not,” said Mr. Thickness, rather startled. “You must see that the intimacy does not go too far, my love.”

“I wish there was no question of its *beginning*,” said Lavinia. “You must have

heard, papa, from first to last after these girls came into the room there was not one word but of amusements and frivolity—their mother is evidently completely under them. Ah well, it is an experience and a test. Now is the time for Catherine and Susie to show their real principle. For Emily I have no misgiving, young as she is. She would never be afraid to set her face sturdily against any approach to the fastness and folly of the day.”

“Fast” or “fastness,” were words which worthy Mr. Thickness held in peculiar horror. His uneasiness increased.

“Dear, dear,” he exclaimed. “I had no idea they were that style of young lady. I did not hear any of the conversation after the daughters came into the room, I was busy talking to Lord William about—”

“There is one comfort,” interrupted Lavinia, “the brother is a mere boy—too

young to be putting any silly nonsense into the girls' heads—that would have been too much, though to that kind of young man, no doubt, it would seem a piece of legitimate amusement, to turn the head, or the heart of a soberly brought up girl like Catherine, for instance.”

“I should be more afraid for Susie, and she is certainly the prettiest of them,” said the father. “But come, my dear Lavinia, you are carrying your—maternal, I was going to say, and upon my word you are more a mother than a sister to the younger ones—your sisterly anxiety too far—the young fellow is a mere boy, and for the matter of that, Cathie and Susie are children still.”

“I am afraid they scarcely think themselves so, Susie especially,” said Miss Thickness, rather lugubriously. “You like Lord William, then, papa?”

“Very much—very much. I have heard of him before. There is a possibility of his going into Parliament, he tells me.”

“Oh,” said Lavinia. “That explains some things,” she said to herself, being one of those wise people who know a very great deal more about other people’s business than they do themselves. But to her father she just then said no more.

They were met near their own house by Susie and Emily.

“I wish you had been with us, my dears,” said Mr. Thickness genially. “Such a pleasant visit, such very—” but here suddenly catching Lavinia’s eye, “very agreeable people.”

Her sisters glanced at Lavinia ; there was no answering expression on her face.

“Something has put her out,” thought Susie. “I wonder if the Jeromes were not

civil to her. I certainly don't want to have anything to do with them if they give themselves airs. And Lavinia looks so nice." A quick feeling of sympathy shot through her at the idea of the imaginary slights her sister had received.

"Will you come for a turn in the garden, sister, before dinner?" she said. The door at the back, seen across the hall, stood invitingly open. "Cathie is there."

Lavinia hesitated. Something in Susie's manner was very winning: she looked at the girl. Yes, it was true what Miss Betty Jerome had said, Susie was very pretty.

"If she were dressed like them in all those fashionable—" but here Lavinia suddenly stopped. After all, nothing could have been simpler than the Jeromes' attire; she could not honestly, and Miss Thickness was very honest, find any objection to any

part of it, except indeed that their dresses fitted well, and that there was care and finish about them altogether.

“Susie,” she said rather sharply, “you are not getting to stoop, I hope. You do look so round-shouldered somehow, and your collar is quite crooked.”

Susie gave a half impatient, half indifferent shake. It was very irritating, just when she had been feeling vaguely sorry for Lavinia.

“It is only because this dress is made that loose, old-fashioned way—it’s all right when it’s in its place,” she said. “You know Miss Higginson wanted to make them better fitting, but you wouldn’t have it. And what does it matter about my collar being crooked? You always tell us not to think about our clothes.”

“I have *never* approved of your being untidy, Susie,” said Lavinia.

Susie did not answer. It was true that her untidiness was a constant source of annoyance —“ But after all,” she said to herself, “ if we were allowed to dress a *little* more fashionably, one would feel ever so much more interest in it. And Lavinia has such a horrid way of pulling one up, just when one wants to talk or hear about something else.”

Lavinia sighed.

“ It is very strange,” she reflected, “ that Susie and I never can get on for five minutes without some rub. Those girls seemed so perfectly happy with their mother and each other, but then of course one does not see behind the scenes.”

CHAP IV



CATHERINE

was sitting in the garden. She looked up as she heard her sisters' steps.

“Oh, you've come back,” she said. “Do tell me, Lavinia, is one of the Miss Jeromes very pretty and bright-looking, with lots of brown hair, and a sort of brown-pink complexion, and—”

“ Really, Catherine, I did not look at her as if I were going to take her portrait,” Miss Thickness replied with some asperity. “ I do wish—I really cannot understand the interest you girls take in mere outward *looks*. You will be asking me next to describe exactly how they were all dressed.”

“ Yes,” said Susie bluntly, “ I should like to know ; but it would not be much use asking you, sister.”

Catherine, who really hardly deserved the snub she had received, considering that her description of Betty Jerome had been principally for the purpose of identifying her, replied more gently :

“ I’m very sorry, sister,” she said. “ I know how frivolous that way of talking sounds. And you have always so warned us against it.”

“ You will soon have an opportunity of

judging for yourselves about the Jeromes," Lavinia resumed. "Papa has—I have—I don't quite know how it was, they are the sort of people that make one do things without realizing them—but somehow the invitation was accepted. It is for you all to go there on Saturday afternoon to play at lawn-tennis."

Miss Thickness made the announcement as if she were retailing some most regrettable catastrophe. Catherine and Susie positively dared not show any elation, scarcely even interest. Emily, who had joined them while Lavinia was speaking, was the only one who made any remark.

"Next Saturday," she said, "Ned will be at home. Is he to go, too?"

"All and any, as far as I understand," said Lavinia. "They are taking the line of making themselves very popular evidently. They have their own reasons for doing so,

no doubt, though of course I don't wish to impute selfish motives. But I feel very anxious about it altogether. Not about this one afternoon's invitation, but because I fear it may lead to intimacy, the very thing I have always been afraid of for you with—with young people brought up so differently."

"Then you are still of the same opinion about them," said Catherine gently. "You really think them thoroughly worldly and trifling, sister?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'the same opinion.' I could not have had an 'opinion' of people I had never seen," said Lavinia. "Of course I knew it was, one may say, *impossible* that in such an atmosphere they could be other than what they are, if that is what you mean."

Catherine murmured some half apology, and "Would it not—would it not perhaps

have been better to have refused at once—showing from the first?” she added, rather incoherently.

“Oh, Cathie,” exclaimed Susie, reproachfully, “how *can* you?”

“Susie,” said Lavinia, sharply, “I am pleased to see that Catherine feels the difficulty so seriously. I wish you were more like her.”

“But, sister,” said Emily, eagerly, “I don’t see that our being different from frivolous, empty-headed girls, is much use if we can’t be trusted when we *are* put in the way of that sort of thing. I mean I don’t see much use in your having taught us as you have if we’re just to run out of the way of everything. Indeed, I think it’s rather cowardly—of course as long as it’s not anything really wrong.”

Miss Thickness did not answer at once.

“Perhaps you are right, Emily,” she said,

with unusual gentleness. But it was well known in the family that Emily's opinion was, next to her own, the one which carried most weight with Lavinia.

A few moments later Miss Thickness went into the house and the three girls were left by themselves. Susie seemed buried in thought. Suddenly she looked up.

"Cathie," she said, "what shall we wear on Saturday?"

Catherine seemed rather startled.

"I don't know I'm sure," she said, "and I don't think it matters—what we usually wear, I suppose."

"No," said Emily, "*I* think we should wear extra plain things, and that in that way it does matter. You may be sure that in their hearts those girls will look down on us and laugh at us, however charming they are to our faces, and I think we should show clearly

that we are above caring for fine clothes and all such folly."

"Then I'd much rather not go," said Susie. "I don't say that Lavinia isn't right, but if we're to hold ourselves aloof in that sort of way, I'd rather keep out of it altogether. I don't pretend to be so very high-minded and all that kind of thing."

"I don't agree with Emily that we need make ourselves *remarkable*," said Cathie. "We can wear our light grey grenadines, just the same as on Sundays, and our summer hats are quite nice still."

"Quite nice!" repeated Susie. "And just think of the way that little Miss Jerome, it must have been one of them, was dressed the other day when we saw her in the High Street. You agreed with me then, Cathie, that it wasn't the least too much; she was really plainly dressed, but her things fitted



“ THEN I’D MUCH RATHER NOT GO,” SAID SUSIE.



her so well, and all seemed to match each other, and had such a different look from ours. I can't help it if you and Emily do despise me for it. I suppose you're much better than I—but I hate the thought of going among them just to be looked down upon, or laughed at.”

Catherine sighed.

“I don't know what to say, I'm sure,” she replied. “I don't want to go, unless—perhaps—we may be the means of doing them any good.”

“Nonsense,” said Susie, and then she in turn went into the house, walking fast and with something in her way of moving that told of her being thoroughly put out.

“What's the matter with Susie, I wonder?” said Catherine. “She has been quite eager to know the Jeromes, and now she

seems so vexed about it. I do wish they had never come here."

"You are very weak-minded, Cathie," said Emily. "I am very glad of the opportunity of showing how differently *we* have been brought up."

But Emily's self-confidence seemed to depress Catherine as much as Susie's discontent. Altogether things did not at present look as if the arrival of the new tenants at The Dell was likely to be the source of much satisfaction to their neighbours in Leaford High Street.

Saturday afternoon turned out beautifully fine. Susie had been saying to herself she hoped it would rain, but in her heart, I think, she would have felt anything interfering with their visit as a very considerable disappointment. And attired in the pale grey grenadines, and the summer hats which

in Catherine's opinion "still looked quite nice," the three sisters, escorted by their brothers Martin and the schoolboy Ned, set forth.

"It is no party, of course," said Catherine, as they drew near The Dell gates. She made the remark as if merely stating an incontestable fact, but in reality to raise her own failing courage by having her statement endorsed.

"Of course not," said Susie, more energetically than what was apparently called for; "if it had been we shouldn't have been asked without sister, and certainly *Emily* wouldn't have been invited."

"I don't know that," said Emily. "I believe girls ever so much younger than me go to garden-parties—regular grand garden-parties, you know, not little humdrum affairs like there are here."

Susie looked at Emily with astonishment. Where did the child get all her information?

“If Lavinia hadn’t brought her up so strictly, I really don’t know but that Emily would have been as ‘fast’ as lots of the girls one hears about,” was the reflection that passed through her mind, and in some curious way Emily seemed to read her thoughts.

“Of course I think it’s very wrong,” she hastened to add. “I wouldn’t wish to go to parties even if Lavinia would let me, especially as I know I do look older than I am,” and Emily shook her pretty curls out of her eyes and gave her head a little toss which would rather have disconcerted Lavinia, had she been there to see.

The Dell gates were thrown open, and there was an air of subdued excitement about Mrs. Welsh as she stood at the door

of her lodge, and curtsyed good-day to the young ladies, looking very spruce and smart in her clean apron and neat cap.

“I wouldn't advise you to be sure of its being no party. There are the marks of ever so many wheels on the gravel,” said Ned, with schoolboy mischief. “I say, Emily, don't you think you and I had better cut and run?”

But Emily only walked on, like Leonora of old—“her head a little higher than usual.” Ned's shaft, if it was Emily he meant to hit, had missed its mark, but it had gone home only too well elsewhere. Catherine and Susie glanced at each other in dismay, which increased to something very like anguish when the next turn of the drive brought them in sight of what looked like a whole crowd of people assembled on the lawn.

“It is too bad,” exclaimed Susie. “I have—I really have more than half a mind to turn straight round and go home, haven’t you, Cathie? only it would look as if we were afraid of them.”

There was no time for retreat. While they stood there—even Martin whom nothing ever was known to put out, looking rather taken aback—two figures detached themselves from the group and came rapidly towards them, inspired by the same desire to welcome the strangers, though their manner of doing so was somewhat diverse. For the two were Betty Jerome and her beloved St. Bernard.

Betty had intended, on receiving her mother’s instructions to “run and meet the Miss Thicknesses,” for “it must be they,” Lady William had said, “and they may be surprised to see so large a party,”—Betty,

as I said, had intended to approach her stranger guests in young-lady-like and orthodox fashion. But Woolly Bear with his quick dog intelligence had divined her intention almost before she had quite realized it herself.

“I’ll go too,” said the bright glance of his eyes, and off he set, in his hospitable eagerness breaking into a run which threatened to become a gallop, and alarmed Betty to the extent of forcing her too to run as fast as she could to keep up with him.

“He’s so rough, though he means well—but he does sometimes knock people over. I hope he didn’t startle you?” she said apologetically and quite out of breath, when, Woolly Bear having after all won the race by some seconds, she found herself beside the Thickness girls.

Her apprehensions did not seem alto-

gether uncalled for; Catherine and Susie had shrunk back in some natural trepidation at the great creature's boisterous greeting, and Martin was eying his walking-stick. But Emily and Ned had recognized in Woolly a kindred spirit; quite forgetting her superiority and sobriety of demeanour, Emily was on her knees hugging the "darling," while Ned was patting his forehead with more manly but equally fervent admiration.

"He's a beauty and no mistake," said the boy. "I say, Em, don't you wish we had one like him?"—while "No—no thank you—we're not afraid of him," said Catherine and Susie nervously.

"He's only rough," repeated Betty. "I'm so sorry. We saw you coming and mamma told me to run and meet you. She was afraid you would be surprised to see such a

lot of people; we didn't know till this morning they were coming. It's some cousins of ours who are staying at Windless for a few days, and they came over, a whole troop of them, to luncheon, and it's so long a drive, you know, we had to ask them to stay. And some neighbours of theirs—of the Herveys' I mean—were dining there last night and settled to come over too. So we've got quite a large party—enough for two or three sets."

"Oh, yes," said Catherine, vaguely.

"And I've not introduced myself," the brown-eyed girl went on; "I'm Betty; Vanda is Miss Jerome. I hope we shall be great friends—we're such near neighbours, you know. It's very good of your eldest sister to spare you—you all," she went on, glancing at Martin with some little perplexity.

"Yes," said Susie, following her eyes,

“you’re quite right, Miss Jerome. We are all brothers and sisters. This is my eldest brother Martin,” on which Martin calmly bowed, “and Ned—where’s Ned?” she went on, looking round, and then perceiving Ned and Emily a few paces off still occupied with Woolly Bear.

“Your little sister is very brave,” said Betty, speaking, unluckily, loudly enough for Emily to overhear her—“Little sister, indeed,” muttered the youngest Miss Thickness—“she wasn’t the least afraid of Woolly Bear. But shall we go and speak to mamma?”

Her presence felt like some sort of protection, still to Catherine and Susie it was no trifling ordeal to have to cross the lawn to where Lady William, graceful and gracious, stood among her guests. They were all talking and laughing, perfectly at ease evi-

dently with each other. And no one save their hostess took any particular notice of the new comers—"Some dowdy girls from Leaford that Aunt Elizabeth and my cousins have taken up; they are so absurdly Quixotic and good-natured, you know," was the way in which Augusta Hervey described them afterwards. True, Lord William marched off Martin to discuss politics, as Mr. Thickness *père* had proved so satisfactory on that score, and Ned was almost at once "pressed" into the party of tennis-players. But, Betty being summoned to the other side of the lawn, the three sisters stood by themselves, rather disconsolately, not having enough self-confidence or experience to throw themselves in any natural and easy way into the general circle.

"If this is fashionable society and these are fashionable manners, I'm sure I don't

want to have anything to do with them. How wise and right Lavinia has been," said Catherine to Susie in a low voice.

But Susie did not respond in the same spirit.

"On the contrary," she said with a kind of eager bitterness, "I think she has done very unwisely in sending us, unless—unless she had taught us differently. I don't feel at all high-minded and superior; I feel horribly mortified and unchristian. It is a good deal the way we are dressed. Now *think* how different we should look if we had neat little tennis jackets and round hats like those girls over there, or complete white serge dresses like the Miss Jeromes, instead of these dowdy draggley grenadines and these odious little mantles. Oh, dear! They all look happy and good-natured and I'm sure they feel much more benevolent and charitable than I do."

“How weak you are, Susie,” said Emily. “I think you should be very glad to feel that we are *not* at home in such frivolity.”

“I begin to think there may be worse things than frivolity—” said Susie. “I know I feel as spiteful as if I were old Miss Catterby herself. I *hate* to see people looking pretty and happy and all that, when we’re out in the cold. And—yes, I agree with you about manners, certainly, Cathie.”

But after all they had not been standing alone more than three minutes; minutes during which Lady William had been inextricably occupied with her old aunt who had come all the nine miles from Windless to have a good talk with her, and did not see but that she had a right to it; and Betty had deserted her partner at tennis to run to meet them. A little readiness and absence of self-consciousness would have helped to steer

through the momentary awkwardness. For but momentary it really was. Cathie had not time to reply to her sister, before a voice beside them made all three girls start.

“Oh, Susie, I hope she didn't hear you,” whispered Catherine to her sister on the first opportunity of her doing so unheard. “You *shouldn't* use such strong expressions.”

But Susie's April face was already bright again as she moved, flushing with mingled pleasure and shame, to reply to the newcomer. She was taller than Betty, fairer-skinned and darker-haired, and more recognizedly lovely. But, though so different, there was sufficient likeness, at first sight at least, to show that they were sisters, and quiet Vanda no less than sparkling Betty possessed that indescribable “charm” of manner and person without which the most perfect beauty, is comparatively speaking,

worthless. And beside Miss Jerome stood another personage, a young man, with a quiet but pleasant face : not handsome, but with a certain likeness to both Vanda and Betty nevertheless.

“ I must introduce myself,” said the girl smiling a little. “ We are all rather in a confusion to-day with these unexpected arrivals,” she went on. “ I am Betty’s elder sister, and this,” she turned to the man beside her, “ this *is* one of the unexpected arrivals, and the one that has upset us the most. My brother, Cesar, Mr. Jerome—may I introduce him to you, Miss Thickness ? ”

She was speaking to Susie, for Susie was often taken for older than Catherine, being taller and rosier and generally more noticeable.

“ I’m only Susie, thank you,” she replied,

awkwardly, but looking so pretty that neither Vanda nor her brother felt disposed to be critical. "Catherine" and Miss Jerome instantly turned to the sister thus introduced, "Catherine is older than I; not that there is much difference."

"Don't you play tennis?" said Mr. Jerome, speaking for the first time. "Shall we see if we can't make up a set?"

"I—we—don't play at all well," said Susie, "and—we didn't think of it—we can't play very well in these dresses."

Vanda glanced at the grey grenadines, but so swiftly that their wearers did not feel conscious of being inspected.

"I dare say one is more comfortable in flannels," she said. "But if you don't care much about it—I am not *very* enthusiastic myself—suppose we walk about a little. You have known this place always, haven't

you? You could tell us a few things we want to know about the garden, I dare say." Only—" and she glanced at Emily, "won't you tell me your Christian name?" she said, winningly, "Emily is it? Emily does look as if she would like to play. Let us stroll over to Alex's set, and see if it can't be managed."

And in another moment she and Catherine were leading the way, with Emily beside them, while Susie, frightend out of her wits of the slight, fair, almost boyish-looking man beside her, whose blue eyes seemed to take in every detail without looking, yet in very much better spirits than previously and quite ready to change her opinion of "fashionable manners" on the spot, followed.

"So you don't care very tremendously for tennis?" was Mr. Jerome's first remark. "I think I'm rather glad. I play atrociously

myself and so of course I don't like it. That's human nature, you know."

Susie looked up quickly. Was he laughing at her?

"I don't play very well," she said. "But —" as a sudden remembrance of Emily's reproaches crossed her mind, "it isn't on that account we don't care much for it. It —it is such waste of time to do nothing but that kind of thing—amusing one's self," she went on confusedly.

Mr. Jerome glanced at her inquiringly. But there was a touch of fun in his glance too.

"Are you such *very* busy people down here?" he said. "I wonder what makes you so? Do tell me now, if it isn't impertinent—how do you spend your time, if you abjure tennis and all such frivolities *en masse*?"

Susie stared at him. What *did* she and her sisters, Lavinia of course excepted, spend their time in doing, that they should be so "down" on the assumed frivolity of others? A confused series of pictures rose before her mind's eye—Sunday school teaching; some visiting, performed unlovingly enough, of their poorer neighbours; a certain amount of "practising"—these stood for her more serious occupations, and as a background to these, a good deal of time wasted in local small talk and gossip; a still greater amount in chatter, not always of the friendliest, with her sisters; some desultory attempts at very "*un-scientific*" dressmaking and trivial shopping expeditions in Leaford High Street. It was not a very edifying or impressive list, and Susie's conscience pricked her as she remembered how really overworked Lavinia often was and how many a time she might

have helped her, had she cared to do so! Cesar Jerome little guessed what a train of thought, not of the pleasantest, his half-laughing question had fired in his companion's mind, as she looked up to reply with a perplexed expression in her pretty, honest eyes.

"I really can't quite tell," she said. "It's not easy to answer all at once. But I didn't mean to—I've no right to call other people frivolous."

Mr. Jerome raised his eyebrows.

"Is that an apology?" he said. "Am I to thank you? I confess I didn't quite understand—"

His slightly ironical tone made Susie furious.

"Horrid, stuck-up man! how dare he mock at me like that?" she thought.

"I don't suppose you *can* understand," she

said with what she thought withering sarcasm. "Your ways and ours are as—as different as they can possibly be. We are not fashionable or aristocratic or anything like that."

He saw she was vexed, and he tried to hide his amusement, though it is still flickered in his eyes.

"I beg your pardon, seriously," he said, "for having asked you such a question. I was thinking of my sisters. They are really very busy people, and no one *who knows them*, could call them frivolous. They often long for the greater leisure of a more retired life. And from your tone I began to fear that even here in this delightfully sleepy-looking Leaford, there is no leisure either. It would be disappointing."

Susie looked up again.

"I dare say I am not really very busy," she said, "I—I sometimes wish I had more

real things to do. I wish I knew what sort of things your sisters do—if—if it is as you



SUSIE LOOKED UP AGAIN.

say, that they are not always taken up with—”

“Frivolity,” he said, smiling. “Ah, well you must get to know them and my mother

better. But don't tempt *me* to speak of them," he went on, his voice taking a very soft intonation. " I should feel ashamed afterwards."

CHAPTER V.

IT was nearer seven than six o'clock that Saturday evening, when the young Thicknenses came home from The Dell. Lavinia had waited tea for them as it happened to be a "late tea" day, but her face was very grave, as she got up from her writing-table in the drawing-room to meet them as they all hurried in. She had been suffering from real anxiety and depression on her sisters' account, poor thing. Had she done wrong in not influencing her father to refuse all overtures from their new neighbours? All overtures, that

is to say, which could lead to intimacy or friendship among the younger members of the families.

“ We might have been civil to them without that, perhaps,” she thought. “ Papa could have asked Lord William to one of his gentlemen dinner parties, and I might have just called formally from time to time. But it would have been very difficult to have kept aloof without seeming actually rude with people like that, so pleasant-mannered and such thorough women of the world.”

Her depression increased as six o'clock came and went, bringing no sign of the truants.

“ It is just what I might have expected,” she said to herself; “ just the first little symptom of what I dread. But I wonder at Martin, he knows how I dislike unpunctuality.”

It was just at this point in her meditations that they were interrupted.

“Oh, sister,” exclaimed Catherine’s voice, “we are so sorry to be so late. I’ve been wanting to come home, but of course I couldn’t come alone, and I didn’t know where Martin was.”

“You might have told me,” said Emily. “I have no watch. *I* shouldn’t have minded coming with you.”

“No, I am sure you wouldn’t,” said Lavinia. “But Susie, where was she?”

“Oh, Susie went off with Miss Betty Jerome, after the other people left,” said Emily. “We had some difficulty in finding her.”

Miss Thickness looked up sharply. Susie did not speak, but there was a flavour of covert defiance about the way in which she turned to leave the room.

“What other people were there?” the eldest sister asked. “I understood you were to be quite alone.”

“There were lots of other people,” said Susie. “The Holmes of Windless, and the Bendovers from Over, and a lot of people staying at Windless.”

“The Holmes,” repeated Lavinia. “Dear me, can they have made friends with them already? And they are such a very noisy racketing family? I must say I am very disappointed. And if the Jeromes have so many friends already, I do not see what they want with us, unless—”

“Unless what, sister?” said Susie, stopping short and facing Lavinia with a peculiar expression.

“I prefer not to finish my sentence, and you should not speak so sharply, Susie.”

“ I think it is all quite natural,” Martin interposed. “ All these people came unexpectedly. And the Holmes are old acquaintances, in fact a sort of connection. Sir Jessop Hervey is a brother of Lady William’s, and the Holmes are cousins o his wife. I think Lady William was rather annoyed at their all coming, though she is too kind and hospitable to show it. And what’s more, I don’t think, if you ask my private opinion, that the Jeromes *do* care about the Holmes; they’re not at all their style.”

“ No, indeed,” Susie burst out. “ Any one with half an eye might see that. I’m so glad you do, Martin. *I* could tell you more; I could tell you as a fact that Lady William would not like her daughters to go on as the Holmes do. But Lavinia is so prejudiced; she forms a certain opinion

of people all of herself and then she will listen to nothing that goes against it."

"Susie!" ejaculated Catherine in horror-struck remonstrance.

And "What a turn-coat you are, Susie," added Emily, contemptuously. "If you had only heard her, sister, abusing the Jeromes like anything, because she thought they neglected us at first. And then just because that dancing Betty made a fuss about her, and the brother walked across the lawn with her—"

"You must indeed have had your head easily turned, Susan," said Lavinia, coldly. "The brother struck me as the emptiest-headed and most affected of them all; but he can't be more than nineteen."

"Oh dear, yes," said Martin. "He's as old as I am, Lavinia, and—well, one can't exactly call a man empty-headed who dis-

tinguished himself at college as he did. Besides the line he has taken up now shows—”

“Is there *another* brother? You can't be speaking of the one I saw the other day,” said Miss Thickness, quickly.

“You must have seen the younger one; he's in the army, I think,” said Martin, “and quite a different sort of man. But whatever the Jeromes are or are not, Susie, I think you spoke very disrespectfully to Lavinia just now.”

Susie's colour rose. It was not often that Martin interfered. Considerably to everybody's surprise she turned again to her sister.

“I am sorry I spoke rudely, Lavinia. I beg your pardon,” she said, frankly.

“Come now, that's all right,” said Martin, while Miss Thickness murmured something

in token of forgiveness, though not too graciously. "Now hadn't you better take your hats off and get ready for tea, young people?"

And when he and Lavinia were left alone for a moment, "I don't think," he said, with some little hesitation, "I don't think you need be uneasy about the acquaintance with the Jeromes. They seem to me thoroughly good sort of people."

Lavinia did not at once reply.

"So papa evidently thinks too," she said. "I confess for my part I prefer to reserve my opinion. They are taking trouble to make themselves pleasant to us, but—there may be reasons for that."

"What—what do you mean?" asked Martin, looking puzzled.

"Never mind just now—we can talk about it afterwards. But Martin, we must be

careful about Susie ; she is so childish and impressionable."

" I wonder what Betty Jerome would have thought of Lavinia if she had heard what she said," Susie was at that moment saying to herself. " It is true sister is very good, but she is dreadfully prejudiced. And to think how sweetly Betty was speaking of her, saying what a devoted sister she must be ; I never in my life had thought of it so much before. And then for Lavinia to begin abusing them the moment we came in ! It did seem too bad. Betty says she herself has a quick temper—I wonder if she finds it as hard as I do to keep it in ! How I should like to talk more to her—but I *don't* like Mr. Jerome. I hope he won't stay long. He has such a horrid way of making one feel one's self a fool. I wonder if we shall be allowed to go soon to The Dell again.

Betty said there were such lots of things she wanted to talk about to me."

Catherine's impressions of the new neighbours were apparently less delightful than Susie's, or else she was afraid of appearing to take a different line from Lavinia. But Emily had no notion of silence on any subject which happened to be uppermost in her brain, and under cover of discussing the whole from the outside she managed to indulge in a fair amount of gossip and chatter.

"Which of the Miss Jeromes do you think the prettiest?" she asked of all the others in turn, giving her own vote, as the casting one of course, in favour of Vanda. "She is ever so much statelier and *grand* somehow," she said. "I heard Betty telling somebody—oh, it was you, Susie, wasn't it? how beautiful she looked in her court dress."

“Yes,” said Susie, calmly; “Mr. Jerome took me to see a large photograph of her. I told them I had never seen a court dress.”

“And I hope you never may,” said Lavinia, and had it been any one else, one would certainly have called her tone snappish.

“It would be rather difficult not to be spoiled if one were as lovely and well-dressed as Miss Jerome,” said Emily, simply.

Miss Thickness looked at her approvingly.

“Yes,” she said, “I am glad you feel it so. We should not *judge* in such a case, we should *pity*.”

“I don’t feel as if it would be easy to pity those girls. I would like to—I’d rather pity people than envy them. But I’m not quite sure—” and for once in a way Emily found difficulty in finishing a sentence.

“Is my father out?” asked Martin, suddenly.

“No,” Lavinia replied. “He is writing in his own room. He was annoyed,” she went on, “by a letter from Gregory this afternoon. I’m afraid, Martin, he’s not working as he should.”

Martin said nothing, but his face looked grave.

“I’ll go and speak to my father,” he said in a few minutes. “You will excuse me, Lavinia?” and so saying he left the room.

The sisters and Ned spent the rest of the evening by themselves. It was dull enough! Lavinia seemed pre-occupied and annoyed, and when Susie addressed her once or twice directly, the elder sister’s manner made it plain that the scene in the drawing-room, though nominally forgiven, was not forgotten. Catherine was as usual afraid of appearing to interfere, and Emily was openly cross. The

habits of self-forgetfulness and consideration for each other had not been cultivated in the inner family life of the dwellers in the old red-brick house.

“It’s deadly slow here,” said Ned at last, when he had fidgeted about for some time, disturbing everybody and not amusing himself. “I’m sure those girls at The Dell aren’t so surly to their brothers. Susie, you look the best-tempered this evening, won’t you play for me and let me practise my flute a bit?”

For Ned loved music, and rightly or wrongly imagined himself to have talent. But he had never had proper lessons, and to accompany his flute on the piano called for patience, to say the least.

“Oh, bother, Ned,” rose to Susie’s lips, but she repressed the words. “Come along then,” she said, “we must practise in the

schoolroom. Lavinia and the others couldn't stand our squeaking."

"Pray don't consider *me*," said Lavinia, icily.

"'Pon my word, sister," Ned began, but Susie hurried him out of the room.

"You're really very cross to Susie, sister," remarked Emily the privileged.

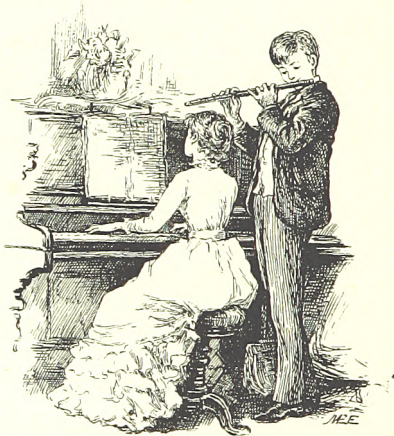
"Emily," said Miss Thickness. That was all, but it was with difficulty that Lavinia controlled herself to say no more. Emily's accusation aroused in her a sort of "*Et tu, Brute*," sensation, and she mentally laid the blame of her discomfort at most innocent doors.

"To think that one afternoon's intercourse should already bear such fruit," she said to herself, bitterly.

Ned meanwhile was favouring Susie with his flute and with his conversation.

“What has put sister in such a bait?” he inquired in an interval of soft sounds. “She was saying something about Gregory.”

“So I heard,” Susie replied. “But I



NED MEANWHILE WAS FAVOURING SUSIE WITH HIS FLUTE AND WITH HIS CONVERSATION.

know no more than you do. It's very seldom sister tells us young ones anything. I sometimes wish she would, it makes us seem unsympathizing and selfish when we

don't mean to be. I suppose Gregory's idling, but I dare say it doesn't matter much. He's plenty of time, hasn't he?"

"None too much," Ned replied. "And it costs an awful heap of money at that place. I heard some of our chaps talking about it, and I don't know that I'd care about going there. I think they're rather a racketsy set."

"But Gregory's always been so steady," said Susie, comfortably.

"Well, but a chap may be steady at school and quite change afterwards if he gets among a bad set. I know I wouldn't like to be tried," said Ned, sagely. "Besides, even if he's no worse than idle—think of the waste of money, and papa's not so rich as all that."

"I never thought of it that way. No wonder poor Lavinia is anxious," said Susie,

penitently. "I haven't written to Gregory for a long time."

"It's a good thing to get letters from home, it keeps one up to the mark," said Ned. "Do you know, Susie," he went on, "I won't say it before Lavinia, for she's taken a grudge at them I can see, but I do believe those Miss Jeromes are right down good sort of girls. Their brother—the young one—was saying they never miss writing to him once a week, wherever he is. He's got a queerish temper, I fancy, but he's awfully fond of them; there's a sort of nice way between them."

"Yes," said Susie, "I know what you mean. I noticed it. I wish we were more like that, Ned. We seem so often to squabble, or to be indifferent to each other," and she sighed.

"Well, I'll say this much for you," said

Ned, magnanimously, "no one can be jollier for a sister than you when you choose, Susie."

"Thank you," said Susie, meekly enough.

"And," Ned went on, "as for you and the others getting any harm from those girls, for that's what Lavinia's afraid of, I know—bless you, that's all—well, humbug, not to use a stronger expression."

"I'll write to Gregory," said Susie after a moment's silence; "I'll say some little thing about hoping he's working, of myself as it were."

"It won't do any harm," said Ned.

So the day ended peacefully for Susie, but a good many new and vivid ideas were fermenting in her head when she laid it on her pillow that evening.

Coming out of church the next morning the Thicknesses were met by the party from The Dell. This was precisely what Lavinia

had not wished, but in spite of some manœuvring on her part it was precisely what happened. And the Jeromes seemed so pleasantly unconscious of the possibility of any such feeling existing towards them in anybody's mind, they seemed, like children, so happily "sure of their welcome," that anything like stiffness or awkwardness melted unconsciously away, and before Lavinia knew what she was about she found herself walking down the church path by Lady William's side, agreeing sweetly with her pleasant remark that it was "so nice their roads lying together so far," and that being such near neighbours would make it easy for the girls to meet frequently.

"We were quite a large party after all yesterday," the lady of The Dell, with a touch of apology in her tone, went on to explain. "My relations are staying at Wind-

less and they came over quite unexpectedly, and the people from Over, too. I had never met them before. They seem very nice."

"Yes," said Lavinia, recovering herself, "the Bendovers *are* nice people. The girls are older than my sisters and it is a long drive, otherwise I think them very nice companions. You know the Holmes, too, I suppose?" she went on more coldly. "We know them very slightly."

Lady William hesitated.

"I have known them a good many years," she said, "but Vanda and Betty don't know them very well. I think they are good-hearted girls, but it has been a disadvantage to them to be so very rich, I think."

Lavinia looked rather surprised. She murmured something about "great riches being a heavy responsibility."

"Yes," said Lady William, "they are

indeed, and in more ways than people often realize. At the same time," she added with a little sigh, "I confess it is difficult not to wish to be richer sometimes. Just not to have to think quite so much about it, and to be able to do more for others."

Lavinia's surprise increased. This was scarcely what she expected, scarcely fine-lady talk. And yet it was said so simply and naturally that even she found her prepossessions staggered.

"It is good discipline however I suppose, and after all, *one's self*, one's love and sympathy are the best gifts, are they not?" Lady William went on. Lavinia was silent, but her companion did not seem to notice it.

Betty in the meantime had got hold of Susie.

"You will be at the Sunday-school this

afternoon, won't you ?" she said, eagerly. " Mr. Vyner's going to find me a class, or half a class. But I've got *such* a lovely plan in my head, and I do so want to talk to you about it. It was Fryer who thought of it first."

" Fryer ?" said Susie, inquiringly.

" Yes, our sewing-maid. She sews and cuts out beautifully. She has taught Vanda and me nearly all we know, and we do know a good deal. These jackets aren't bad, are they ?"

Susie stared.

" You don't mean that you made them ?" she said.

" Indeed we did," said Betty, laughing. " Why do you look so astonished ? But never mind about our jackets. It's about my plan. Mamma says I may, if you, some of you, any way, will join. She says it wouldn't

do for us to begin things entirely on our own account, as we're strangers here. It would seem interfering. But I was beginning to feel quite dull at not having enough to do, and Fryer has found out ever so much about the place already; only I do so want to consult you, as of course you must know more. Will you come home to afternoon tea with me after school, or may I go home with you?"

Susie stammered confusedly and glanced at Lavinia. But Lavinia was at that moment occupied by Lady William's introducing her elder son, who had overtaken them with his father and Mr. Thickness. The latter overheard Betty's last words. "Come home with us, my dear young lady?—to be sure. We should be only too honoured. Lavinia, my dear, Miss Jerome is making some arrangement with Susie here about the after-

noon, and it might be a convenience to her to lunch at our house."

But Lady William, whose soft eyes were very clear-sighted, interposed.

"Betty is a little feather-pate," she said. "She forgets that it is Alex's birthday, and he would be sadly hurt if we weren't all at home."

"Just for luncheon, mamma?" coaxed Betty.

"No, dear, not even for luncheon. But if you are so anxious to finish your talk with your friend, why shouldn't she come home with us?"

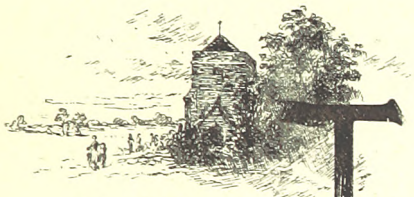
"Certainly, certainly, but remember you must come to us another day instead, Miss Betty," said old Mr. Thickness, gallantly, while Susie blushed all over with pleasure.

And Lavinia, poor Lavinia, had to smile like the Spartan boy, while she saw her sister led off in triumph to the very heart of

the enemy's camp; the most insidious, the most to be dreaded of them all, the eldest son of the house, at her side, doing his best apparently to make himself agreeable to the unsophisticated, self-willed maiden.

Lavinia all but groaned.

“The one thing I was thankful for,” she said to herself, “was that there was no son old enough to be afraid of.”



CHAP:VI

THAT Sun-
day was a
perfectly lovely
day, a day not

to be forgotten. A few yards up the road Susie Thickness and her companions overtook Vanda and her brother Alex who had been a little in advance of the rest of the party.

“We have stolen Susie, Vanda,” Betty exclaimed as soon as they were within hearing. “Isn’t it delightful? She’s com-

ing to luncheon with us and then we'll go back together to the Sunday school and afternoon service. Isn't it a heavenly day? I feel perfectly wild, do you know. If it wasn't Sunday I'd like to run races."

"Miss Thickness looks rather startled, Betty," said Mr. Jerome. "You see she's not used to you as we are."

He turned to Susie with the laughing expression in his eyes which had already aroused her indignation.

"I am not startled," she said, colouring. "I think it's very nice to see anybody so happy."

"But when it comes to the point of running races," continued Mr. Jerome in the same tone, "and on the Queen's highway!"

"I was just thinking," said Susie, "if you don't mind a stile or two"—she looked round doubtfully, growing still redder—"we

might go through the wood to The Dell. It's rather a round, but it's so pretty."

"Charming," said Vanda. "Alex, run back and tell papa and mamma we are coming another way."

And in a minute or two the brothers and sisters and Susie found themselves, as she had promised, in the copse that lay to the back of the Thickness's house, sloping upwards and skirting the fields beyond The Dell grounds.

The leaves had already fallen thickly, but the air had an almost spring-like freshness, though the richer fragrance of the autumn was there too. And the notes of the birds were softened and chastened, or so at least it seemed to the fancy.

"It's a very Sunday-feeling day," said Betty. "Ever since I was quite little I have always thought that if I shut my eyes and

just listened, I should know it was Sunday, by the kind of hush, especially in England, of course. I can't bear the noisy Sundays abroad."

"It would be perfect if one could hear some church bells in the distance," said Cesar, standing still as he spoke. "This way through the wood is a grand find, Miss Thickness, we are greatly indebted to you for it."

"You would have found it for yourselves immediately," said Susie, rather ungraciously. She could not divest herself of the idea that Mr. Jerome was in some way making fun of her even in his most innocent observations.

"Which season do you like best, Miss Thickness?" asked Vanda. "People think that a very commonplace question, but I think it so interesting. Mamma says that very young people like autumn best, and old

ones spring, but I don't think that's always the case."

"No," said Susie, "I like the spring best."

"I think I would if one were in the country," said Vanda; "it would be a perpetual excitement to watch the different buds and blossoms beginning to appear. Even in town it's very interesting. There's something to me quite touching and pathetic in the way the little shoots try so manfully to come out in spite of the most adverse circumstances."

"And the birds," added Mr. Jerome; "it really almost makes the tears come to my eyes to hear how the London sparrows get up a chirp on the *very* smallest provocation—a breath of milder air or the merest blink of sunshine is quite enough for them."

Susie's eyes turned from one to the other of the speakers with a kind of soft glow in

them, though she did not speak. Such talk, simple and almost childlike as it was, was new to her, and in words she could not respond. But as she caught the girl's expression Vanda for the first time agreed with enthusiastic little Betty, that there was a great charm about Susie Thickness, in spite of her stiff self-consciousness and the want of "finish" in her appearance. And some one else besides Betty had already found this out.

"But, good people," said Alexis, "if we're not quick it will be winter, Christmas, before we get home. And it's my birthday, and my mamma promised me an extra good luncheon, because unfortunately it's fallen on a Sunday, and on Sundays we have no dinner."

"No dinner?" said Susie, unable to help laughing at the way he spoke.

"No, isn't it dreadful?" he said, making

a wry face. "We have cold supper, to give the servants less to do."

"So do we," said Susie, ready enough to own to the "cold supper" in such good company, though the twice a week "late tea" would have made her blush; "but I didn't think you—I didn't know that fash—I mean—I fancied only quiet sort of people like us ever thought of things like that. Lavinia always says—" but here she stopped, and though Betty exerted all her arts of coaxing, in which it must be allowed she was an adept, not another word would Susie say, till at last Cesar interposed with a decided—

"Betty, my dear, teasing *may* approach very near the limits of good-breeding," which had its effect, though Betty received it with perfect good-nature.

The day altogether was like a sort of delightful dream to Susie; the lovely autumn

sunshine seemed inside as well as outside the house at The Dell. The prettiness and graciousness of everything, the cared-for look of the table, with its perfectly kept silver and glass and beautifully arranged flowers, though not in one sense new to her—for the Thickesses' dinner parties were quite excellent of their kind though a trifle old-fashioned—were yet, as a possible part of every-day life, a revelation. For Lavinia, who prided herself and with reason on her capacities as a housekeeper, yet saw no necessity for this sort of delicacy and care in ordinary home arrangements. And of a piece with this were the gentle tones and pleasant courtesies of the family group, the regard on each one's part for the others, shown even in the choice of subjects of conversation, in the absence of contradiction or interruption, too often a matter of course

among near relations "when we're only by ourselves;"—all arising from the fatal mistake that politeness is a suit of best clothes to don for "company," and get rid of as soon as possible when in one's own interior.

"I suppose they are all very sweet-tempered by nature," thought Susie, "and that, we certainly as a family are not. Still Betty says she is hasty, and I don't know that Alexis *does* look exactly good-tempered, only they have learnt to master it," and here she sighed so audibly that Vanda, who was just opposite her, could not help smiling.

"I *beg* your pardon," exclaimed poor Susie, covered with hot confusion. "I was thinking of something; I suppose I am rather absent at times, it's a very bad habit, I know."

"I'm afraid we are all too great chatter-boxes to indulge in brown studies," said

Vanda. "I can understand any one living much alone getting into the habit, but we always seem to have so much to tell each other and talk over when we are together."

"I think it's ever so much nicer," said Susie, eagerly. "We are sometimes so dreadfully silent at meal-times, and it's very dull. And when one comes to think of it, I don't see why people should not try to entertain their relations as well as strangers."

"That's what mamma has always said to us," said Betty. "Mamma, dear, Susie is a girl after your own heart."

"No," said Susie, candidly, "I'm afraid I am not. The truth is I don't think it ever struck me much before."

"I hope it doesn't strike you too much," said Mr. Jerome. "I mean I hope our conversation is not quite appallingly frivolous. You must allow for its being Alex's birthday ;

it has gone a little to our heads, as it were."

Cesar was seated at her right hand. He turned slightly, so as to address her specially when he spoke, thus, though he did not exactly lower his voice his words were less clearly heard by the rest of the party. With a look of extreme reproach, Susie turned her eyes upon him.

"I think you are very, very unkind," she said, simply, and as he glanced at her in surprise he could almost have fancied the tears were not far off.

"You quite misunderstand me, Miss Thickness," he said, hurriedly, "quite. Can you imagine I would say anything to annoy you, at my—our own table, too?"

No one heard what he said, for the question of drinking Alex's health was beginning to be discussed. But Susie turned

resolutely away and till they left the dining-room she spoke no more to Mr. Jerome. And this was the only cloud in her happy day.

After luncheon Betty seized her for a good talk.

“Shall we go out into the garden,” she said, “or up into our room? Vanda and I have a tiny sitting-room for ourselves here, isn’t it nice?”

“It would be very nice in the garden, I think,” said Susie, “and from there we can hear the church clock strike. We should not be later than three in leaving.”

“Oh, how good you are!” said Betty, warmly. “I can see you are so careful about punctuality and things like that. I wish I were—I so often keep people waiting, and I know it’s so wrong, but I am getting better, I do think.”



HER PRAISE HUMBLED SUSIE MORE THAN ANY OF LAVINIA'S
SHARPEST REPROACHES.



Her praise humbled Susie more than any of Lavinia's sharpest reproaches.

"Don't, please don't say that I'm good, or think it," she said, earnestly. "I am just the opposite of what I should be about nearly everything, and somehow I have never felt it so plainly as the last two days. But don't talk about me, please. What was it you were going to tell me?"

"Oh, my plan," began Betty. "It's Vanda's too, only perhaps I thought of it first. It's about the girls in the village here—or town, I suppose it is a town?"

"Oh, *dear*, yes," said Susie.

"Well, I was wondering what I could get to do this winter, and talking to Fryer the idea struck me, or her—perhaps after all it's *most* Fryer's plan—" said Betty, honestly; "it is this. You see so many girls here go so young to the lace manufactories at Tenning-

ham, that they never learn how to sew properly. And then they get in the way of buying things ready-made, badly made too and dearer in the end, Fryer says, and it makes them dress flashily and messily."

"Yes," said Susie, "they are very messy looking but I never thought why."

"Didn't you?" said Betty. "Fryer knows all about it. She lived on the other side of Tenningham when she was a girl, and there it was just the same thing. But she was brought up quite differently, for she sews and cuts out splendidly, as I told you. And our plan is to have a sewing class once a week—it would have to be on Saturday afternoons—for as many of the girls as would come. Some of them are at the Sunday school, I dare say, or some of them may have younger sisters there whom we could tell about it. But we're counting on

you and your sisters to tell us most. You must know so many of the people with living here so long."

Susie hesitated.

"I'm afraid," she said, "we don't know as many as you'd think. Lavinia doesn't like us to go *much* among the poor; they're so dirty, some of them in Leaford, and some of them drink even, and then there may be illnesses among them."

"Of course," said Betty, quickly. "If they weren't dirty and—not always sober, and if they were never ill or in trouble, there'd be no need for us to go to them. We don't go where there's distinctly any infectious illness, but that's the exception. Infectious illnesses are not always about."

"But indeed," Susie went on, her tone sounding slightly on the defensive, "I don't think you know how bad Leaford is. There's

one part which is called the Cross Roads, which is really dreadful. The people there are so low and degraded and so terribly poor. They say there are little children playing about in the gutters sometimes, with hardly any clothes on at all, and with dreadful little wizened-up faces, quite unnatural-looking, like old fairies."

"Have you seen them?" said Betty in a rather strange tone.

"Oh, no," replied Susie, innocently. "It was my brother James who told me about them. He's a curate, you know—not *here*, but when he comes down here he goes poking about. He makes Lavinia quite angry, sometimes, she says she's sure he'll bring back small-pox and diphtheria and I don't know all what. But when he's with us he does take care, though at his own place I don't believe he thinks about the risk at all.

And it is dreadful certainly to know that there is such misery so near one."

Betty did not speak for a moment or two, but Susie looking at her saw that she was very grave; indeed she could almost have believed there were tears in the bright brown eyes.

"Yes," said Betty at last, "it is *very* dreadful. And is nothing done—does no one try to do anything for these wretched people? The little children, oh, to think of the poor little children!"

"You don't mean," said Susie, uneasily, "you don't think that we should—that it would be right for girls like us to go to places like that? I know Lavinia would never let *us* go."

"I don't think mamma would let us go either," said Betty, "and of course we are too young to decide such things for ourselves.

I must talk about it to mamma. And about my plan—the sewing class—you will join in that?”

“I should like to come very much,” said Susie, “and so would Cathie, I think. I’ll tell her about it, and we’ll ask Lavinia. But,” she went on with a little shamefacedness, “we are not very clever at sewing. Cathie is better than I, but we never made anything to be compared with those pretty jackets of yours.”

“Never mind,” said Betty. “I am sure you will be able to help. But it isn’t only that part of it. We want you to give us the names of some of the girls you know who you think would come, and then perhaps we could go together to their houses, and speak to their mothers about it.”

Again Susie hesitated, and this time her face grew very red.

“Lavinia has a district, I think,” she said. “I—I can ask her about the girls in it.”

“Yes,” said Betty, “I should be glad if you would ; but you must know a good many yourself. Vanda and I want to manage it by ourselves as much as we can, not to trouble mamma, nor your sister who must be quite as busy.”

“Betty,” said Susie with a little effort, “you will be disappointed in us—in me I am afraid, but I can’t pretend. We have not been taught to think about poor people the way you do. I do go to see a few, but I don’t know much about them, and I have never thought much of things like that. But I would like to do more, and I think your plan is a very good one. I do hope Lavinia will let me. It will do me good as well as the girls you were thinking of.”

Betty's eyes rested approvingly on Susie's earnest face.

"I see," she said. "But it is not your fault, I am sure, and I like you for being so frank. I do hope your sister will let you join in it. I know some mothers, and perhaps Miss Thickness is extra anxious because you have no mother—some mothers are very much afraid of things like that. But there *couldn't* be anything to mind in this, could there?"

"I don't think there could," said Susie. "Any way I'll do my best."

"Well then, I'll do what I can in the meantime. I'm going to see some girls' mothers this week, some that Fryer has found out about. And I'll let you know how many we get the promise of."

"Tuesday is Lavinia's day for her district," Susie said, consideringly. "It would be a

very good chance for her to tell us which of them would come. I'll try and ask her to-night."

"Thank you," said Betty, "that would be nice." Then with a sudden light in her eyes, "Susie," she went on, "wouldn't it be a good plan if we were to work part of the time, or perhaps one Saturday in three or something like that, for the poor children at the Cross Roads? Compared with them, the other Leaford people can't be called poor, can they? And the girls of our class would, I hope, be pleased to do something for some poorer than themselves."

Susie's face brightened too.

"Yes," she said, "I think that would be very nice. I am sure it would be a good idea. Oh, I do hope Lavinia will let me help you."

Just then there sounded over the fields the

tones of the old church clock, "One, two, three."

"We must go," said Susie, starting up.

"I will call Vanda," said Betty.

And the three girls set off together.

"I have been so happy," said Susie. "I don't think I have ever been so happy."

The sisters smiled, pleased, but a little surprised.

"Then you must often come," said Vanda. "We are sure to see you again in a day or two. I know mamma is going to call on Miss Thickness. We have seen you all now, haven't we? Four sisters and two brothers?"

"No," said Susie, "there are two more brothers; James, whom I have been telling you about," she added to Betty, "and Gregory."

With the mention of his name the un-

easiness about Gregory, which had been awakened by her talk with Ned, recurred to her, and quite unconsciously it gave a slight tone of depression to her voice.

“And how old is Gregory?” asked Betty. “Older or younger than the one you were telling me of?”

“Oh, younger,” Susie replied. “Gregory comes next to me. He is eighteen. He is going into the army; just now he is working at Mallinger’s.”

“At Mallinger’s,” both Vanda and Betty repeated. “Is he working very hard?” Vanda added. “I suppose he is very steady. All your brothers seem so.”

Susie looked up quickly.

“He’s not very fond of work,” she said. “He’s very nice—almost the nicest of us all,” she added, naïvely. “But I think he’s fond of amusing himself. I’m going to

write to him to-day, by the by; I mustn't forget."

"You write to him often, I suppose?" said Vanda. "I think it's a good thing, it keeps brothers and sisters together."

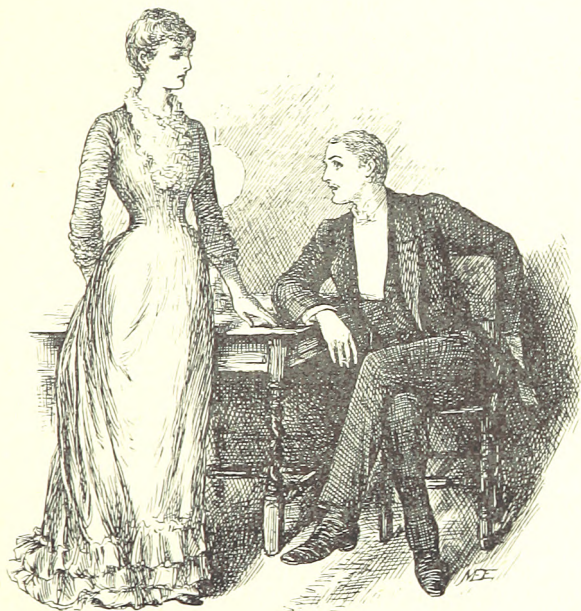
Late that evening when Vanda and her elder brother happened to be alone she said to him quietly, "One of the Thicknesses—a younger brother of eighteen or so, is at Mallinger's I find."

Cesar glanced at her quickly.

"What sort of a fellow is he, do you know? If he's like that eldest one," and here Mr. Jerome could not help smiling at the remembrance of Martin's solid, square face and figure, "it will do him no harm."

"I don't know," said Miss Jerome, hesitatingly. "From the little the sister, Susie, said about him, I rather fear he's inclined

to be idle. Do you think we could say anything to warn them, Cesar ?”



CESAR GLANCED AT HER QUICKLY.

“ Scarcely ; not, at least, unless we had reason to think they were uneasy about him.

And for Alex's sake I should dislike saying anything. It was some time ago now, and it would be rather hard upon Alex to revive an old story. Still, if we hear more of this boy, if there is any cause for anxiety, it might be one's duty to warn them."

"Yes," Vanda agreed. "We must see."

CHAPTER VII.

BETTY JEROME saw and heard nothing more of Susie for some days after the Sunday they had spent together. On Wednesday Lord and Lady William called on the Thicknesses, but did not find Miss Thickness at home, in consequence of which a verbal message, which Betty had entrusted to her mother for Susie, remained undelivered.

“ I must really manage to see Susie to-day or to-morrow,” said Betty at breakfast on Thursday morning. “ Mamma, would it do

for Vanda and me to call there on our own account?"

"Why not?" her mother inquired.

"I don't exactly know, but I think I am a little frightened of their sister," said Betty. "She is rather alarming, don't you think? So very cold and stiff."

"A little old-maidish, perhaps," said Lord William, "though in reality she can't be old. But the circumstances of her life may have made her seem so. She must be a truly excellent person. Vyner was telling me she has been really mother to all her brothers and sisters since she was nineteen."

"And she gave up all thoughts of marrying, Mrs. Vyner told me, though she was very nice-looking," said Lady William.

"She is handsome still," remarked Mr. Jerome.

“But not nearly, oh, not *nearly* so pretty as Susie,” said Betty.

“All Betty’s pet geese are swans,” said Alexis, teasingly.

“And who was it that discovered the two very pretty girls in Leaford High Street the very first day he came, if you please?” replied Betty.

“My dear child, I never said they weren’t pretty. There are certainly such things as beautiful swans, and even, I dare say, pretty geese. You needn’t defend your friends. Only I have always admired the fairest one the most,” said Alexis.

“But,” said Vanda, “about the calling there. We do want to get the class started.”

“I wonder Susie hasn’t written to me if she couldn’t come,” said Betty. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Vanda—I’ll write

to her this morning and tell her what we have done, and I'll say we'll call there to-morrow—or, no—Saturday would be better, wouldn't it? You boys are going to shoot on Saturday, aren't you, and you won't want us?"

"But we do want you to-day and to-morrow," said Alexis. "To-morrow, you know, we are all going to Over, and this afternoon I want you to help me with my photographs."

"Very well, then," said Betty, good-naturedly. "I'll not do any more recruiting to-day—I'll wait till Saturday morning, for to-morrow will be all taken up with Over, but I'll write to Susie to-day.—Dear me, how busy we seem! I can't understand people finding the country dull. It's partly, I suppose, with you boys being here."

“You’ll be relieved of half of that burden before long, my child,” said Cesar. “I must be leaving you in——”

“Hush, hush,” said Betty, putting her fingers in her ears. “I don’t want to hear. Let me enjoy the present. I hate to anticipate evil.”

“My being here at all just now is so much to the good,” Cesar replied, laughingly. “I had no hopes, you know, of getting to you before Christmas.”

“But now you are here, you will stay as long as you can, won’t you, dear?” said his mother. “Things are going on quite satisfactorily at Saxby, aren’t they?”

“Oh, yes—but there is really a great deal to do, and to do it as it should be done will keep me a poor man for two or three years;” and Mr. Jerome sighed a

little. "I should have liked to be of some use to all of you," he added.

"You had no choice," said his father, decidedly. "It was a clear case of duty. And you will never regret it in the future, never."

"Yes. I am sure of that. Indeed, I don't see that I could have—taken it—without the responsibility too," said Cesar, half dreamily.

That evening saw a brightly-written, eager, enthusiastic note despatched from The Dell to Susie Thickness.

"We have got eight girls promised," wrote Betty. "Is not that a good beginning? And the mothers were all *so* nice about it. We hope to begin the class on Saturday week. On Saturday morning I am going to recruit again, and we are writing out little invitations to leave for the girls who have

already promised. We are wondering if you and your sisters have got any. I was half expecting a letter from you, and I would have gone to see you, but we have been very busy the last day or two. Vanda and I hope however to go and see you on Saturday afternoon."

This letter was read with very different feelings from those with which it had been written.

"It is too bad—really *too* bad of Lavinia not to let us join them," said Susie, her face burning with vexation, her eyes smarting with the tears she had already shed over her disappointment. "I wish you cared about it, Catherine. I don't believe you do at all."

"I do indeed. I was quite delighted when you came home and told us about it. You know I was," said Catherine. "But of course Lavinia knows best. I haven't seen

as much of the Jeromes as you have, but



THIS LETTER WAS READ WITH VERY DIFFERENT FEELINGS FROM
THOSE WITH WHICH IT HAD BEEN WRITTEN.

I don't want to make friends with affected,
fashionable girls who just take up benevolent

work, as Lavinia says, as "a new sensation to amuse themselves." We should be so laughed at too! People would say we had just taken it up because we thought the Jeromes grand, for you know we have never gone in for that sort of thing ourselves."

"No, indeed," said Susie, bitterly.

"I wouldn't care a straw for what people *said*," observed Emily. "I think that's a very low idea, Cathie. But I quite agree with Lavinia in thinking the whole thing a piece of absurdity. The Leaford girls have done very well without being taught dress-making hitherto. It would only turn their heads. And as sister says, if the Miss Jeromes are so shocked at the state of the Cross Roads babies, let them make pinafores for them quietly themselves, without setting the whole town talking about it."

"Emily," said Susie, "I am obliged to

listen to what Lavinia says, but I am not obliged to listen to your pert, second-hand edition of it.'

And so saying she left the room. But her heart was very sore. She was more than disappointed, she was chilled and discouraged, and now, in addition, she was vexed with herself for her sharp biting words to Emily, for, hasty-tempered and undisciplined as Susie was, she was yet very sensitive and tender both in heart and conscience.

"It can do no good, only harm. *Hurting* people's feelings never can do good," she reflected, sadly. "And I came home on Sunday so full of wanting to be better—to be gentle and winning and considerate and to make my life a less ugly and useless thing than it has been. And here I am again! Oh, Lavinia, you might have encouraged me."

But as she thought the words, a light seemed to flash across Susie's mind. Was her striving after better things, were all her resolutions to hang upon others? If they had no root of their own what were they worth? Even if Lavinia were discouraging, what then? It was a new direction of thought, and it seemed to brace her to patience and renewed effort.

But the disappointment was keen.

In high spirits, confident of success, Betty Jerome started on Saturday morning for what her brother Alexis called "another go at the natives." Vanda had letters to write for her mother, and was not able to accompany her, so Betty got leave to go alone.

"It isn't so pleasant certainly," she owned, "but I always find that the people get more quickly to feel at home with you if you go without a maid. And I'm not nearly so

frightened to-day as we were before, Vanda, for really the women were all so nice."

Poor Betty—in her innocence of heart with no misgiving, with her bright enthusiasm gilding the sober autumn morning so that she felt as if the air were full of mid-summer sunshine, off she set.

All went well at first; the two or three cottages to which she had been directed were fairly clean and tidy, and the women received her civilly and seemed pleased at the idea, in some cases promising at once that their daughters should join the class, in others that they would talk it over with "father," and let the young lady know, thanking her kindly all the same. Then Betty proceeded to the part of her task as to which she had no apprehension—the visiting for the second or third time the houses where she had already enrolled some of the

girls' names, merely to leave the little notes fixing the day and hour for the first class.

At the first two cottages which stood together, but at some little distance from the regular street, it was all right. "Liza and Jessie would be that pleased to know it was all settled—they'd be at The Dell in good time, no fear."

And it was the same next door. Then Betty had to make a little *détour* to arrive at the remaining half-dozen houses where she had already been so successful.

At the first, in response to her tap, the door was opened by Mrs. Judkin herself.

"Good morning, miss," she said, not uncivilly, but holding the door in a fashion which showed she was not going to invite Betty to enter. "Was you a-wanting anything?"

"Don't you remember me, Mrs. Judkin?"

said the girl brightly. "I've come to tell you that we've got our class all settled for this day week, so we'll expect Hester and Polly at half-past three. I've written it down just to remind them," and she held out the little note. "I won't come in, as I see you're busy."

To her surprise the woman made no effort to take the note.

"No, miss, I'm not busy," she said. "I'm not one as leaves all the cleanin' of the week to Saturday afternoon, though you may think so. I can manage my own affairs, thank you, and look after my own daughters, and be beholden to nobody. There's no occasion to leave your letters, miss," and Mrs. Judkin made as if she would shut the door in Betty's face.

The girl stared at her. "Can she have been drinking?" was the first thought. But

no—to do her justice, no one could have harboured such an idea in connection with the woman. “She must just have a horrible temper and something has put her out,” thought Betty.

“Good morning, Mrs. Judkin,” she said quietly. “If you think better of the matter you can let me know,” and she turned away, leaving the woman rather red in the face and at the bottom of her heart considerably ashamed of herself.

At the next house notice of Betty’s approach had apparently been received, for a girl of twelve or so came to the door and informed the young lady with the air of repeating a lesson that “mother was out and sister was off on a visit to aunt’s and wouldn’t be home in time for the sewing-class,” in the face of which rebuff Betty could say or do nothing.

“What can be coming over them all?” thought the poor child, trying to turn it into a joke to herself; “it is queer that at these two houses they should have been so odd this morning.”

But she got up her spirits again as she came to the next one, whose mistress she remembered had been one of the heartiest and most sympathizing in the scheme.

“Good morning, Mrs. Bentley,” she said, as she caught sight of the person in question standing in the neat little garden in front. Here there was no need to knock and no possibility of avoiding Betty’s visit.

“Good morning, miss. Step in, if you please,” and Betty’s heart rose. “Take a seat, miss. I was thinkin’ you’d be comin’ round, and I’m right down sorry to say as I’ve had to change my mind about Rose and the sewing-class.”



“GOOD MORNING, MISS. STEP IN, IF YOU PLEASE.”



“ You don't mean to say you won't let her come ? ” Betty cried.

“ Well, miss, we're very sorry—we are—both the master and me. But you see there's two things—we've never mixed ourselves up with 'lections and such-like, and then again we'd be sadly put about for Rose to get put off her plain ways and turn up-settin'—we're only plain folk, you see, miss, and we've no thought of ladies'-maiding for her, nor dressmaking, neither.”

“ I don't understand, Mrs. Bentley. I don't want to teach the girls to be ladies'-maids or dressmakers—all we mean is to show them how to keep their own clothes tidy and to save their money by working for themselves.”

“ To be sure—to be sure,” said Mrs. Bentley, but her tone though gentle was unconvinced.

“ But,” went on Betty, “ what *do* you mean about elections ?” and she looked as she felt, completely mystified.

Mrs. Bentley grew red.

“ I shouldn't have said it,” she exclaimed. “ But I'm too silly. It was only, miss, seein' as how Mr. Thorncroft is going to retire and his lordship, your papa, such a likely gentleman—and to be sure it's only natural, as I said to Miss Lavinia, that young ladies should like to get the votes for their papa by makin' friends—there now, miss—it's naught to be ashamed of.”

For Betty had grown not red but white, and as she got up from her chair Mrs. Bentley felt positively frightened at the effect of her words.

“ Ashamed !” she repeated ; “ no, indeed, it is not *we* who should be ashamed. How could you, Mrs. Bentley, listen to such—such

falsehoods? And how can Miss Thickness, calling herself a lady, go about telling them? *Surely*, Mrs. Bentley, you have misunderstood?" she ended almost appealingly.

"Maybe, miss—maybe it wasn't quite as I've put it. It's Miss Thickness's districk hereabouts, you see, and we gets talkin' with each other. You'll not go to the others to-day, miss? They'd maybe be oncivil, some of them. You see I was housemaid at the Red House a many years, and if I spoke to Miss Thickness again about it maybe she'd come round about it, and I'd talk to the others."

"No, thank you," said Betty. "I will go to the other houses, because I promised, and if they are rude to me, I shall know whom to thank."

She left Mrs. Bentley's in such a fever of indignation as her gentle loving heart had never before experienced. But outwardly

her bearing was calm and dignified. At the other houses it was everywhere the same—more or less civilly or uncivilly worded excuses—one woman going the length of saying she wanted “no new-fangled nonsense or fine-lady airs, as was the beginning of all kinds of mischief, for her girls,” and one and all showing beyond a doubt that it was a *parti pris* against the ladies of The Dell. And, at the end of another half-hour or so, Betty stood at the entrance of the road leading to her home biting her lips to keep in her sobs, literally choking with the fiery feelings that she was striving to control.

“What shall I do?” she thought. “What is it best to do?”

Her impulse was strong to run home and relate her woes to her parents and brothers. But yet she hesitated. Betty was a wise little person.

“Once done it could never be undone,” she reflected. “We could *never* see the Thicknesses again, and the story would get about and it would upset all the peace and rest here that poor papa and mamma are enjoying so. And *supposing* it has been exaggerated? I have often heard that it is inconceivable how things get turned and twisted in a village or a little place like this. She *may* not have meant it as it sounded.” And a sudden light spread over Betty’s disturbed face. “Yes,” she said, “I’ll do it. I’ll not condemn her unheard,” and in another minute she had turned and was walking quickly towards the High Street again, in the direction of the old red-brick house.

Her heart beat fast as she rang the bell. It was scarcely twelve o’clock, a most unconventional hour for a visit, and as the parlour-maid opened the door she looked at

the young lady with surprise. It wasn't as if it was one of the Miss Vyners, or one of old Miss Catterby's nieces, she told them afterwards in the kitchen, but she was taken aback at seeing Miss Jerome, so taken aback that she let her in, quite forgetting that on Saturday morning Miss Thickness never liked to be disturbed, whatever happened. So she ushered the visitor into the dining-room, the bow-window of which Lavinia made into a sort of sanctum for herself and her account-books and her various papers and letters.

Betty was too preoccupied to notice the very scant welcome contained in Miss Thickness's greeting as she rose and came forward, holding out her hand certainly, but with the stiffest possible inclination of the head.

"Miss Jerome?" she said.

"No, I'm not Miss Jerome," said Betty;

“ I am Betty, the second Miss Jerome. And I have come to see you, Miss Thickness, entirely on my own account. No one knows I've come. I didn't know it myself till a few minutes ago. You must excuse me for disturbing you at this time of day, but I was very anxious to see you.”

“ Won't you sit down ? ” said Lavinia. “ I am very busy, but——”

“ I will not keep you long,” said Betty, fixing her great earnest brown eyes on her hostess. “ I want to know—I have come to ask you yourself, Miss Thickness, if it is true that you have been speaking against us, against my sister and me, and indeed against all of us, to the people here—to the people in North Street, the women whose daughters had promised to come to our sewing-class. I thought it over and I determined to ask you, and not to believe it unless you said

it was true, for I know things do get horribly exaggerated in a little gossiping place like this, and I would be *so* glad to find it had been so.”

Lavinia grew very red—the unlucky words, “a little gossiping place like this,” had hardened her heart.

“Will you kindly tell me what you call ‘speaking against you,’ Miss Jerome?” she asked, icily.

Betty considered. She was very anxious to be exact.

“I was told that we were taking up these girls out of fine-lady freaks, that the class would unsettle them and put nonsense in their heads, and that—worst of all—we had some selfish, underhand motive in it, which I hardly understand, something to do with gaining popularity in case my father stands for somewhere—Leaford itself, I suppose,

if Mr. Thorncroft, the member who is going to retire, is the member here."

Miss Thickness's face grew paler; this was more than she had intended; to do her justice, the allusion to Lord William's possible candidature had slipped out unawares.

"I did not—no one here knew Mr. Thorncroft was going to retire till two days ago," she said. "I said it seemed probable that Lord William had known it and that this had to do with your coming to The Dell. There is no crime in that. I may have inferred that you had some motive of the kind in taking up this line in Leaford. But I own I had no *right* to attribute such motives. As for my opinion of the class, you have not on the whole been misinformed. I disapprove of it. I think it will do the girls no good and very probably harm, and I told the Bentleys and the Judkins and some of the

others what I thought. I have also told my sisters that I do not wish them to take part in it. I have known the Leaford people all my life, Miss Jerome ; I do not see why you and your sister, newcomers and probably birds of passage here, needed to interfere with them. You would have found it anything but amusing when the novelty had worn off."

She half rose, as if expecting Betty to go. But Betty sat still, her eyes looking down; without speaking. Then she raised them, and somewhat to Lavinia's surprise they, those great, sweet, childlike eyes, were swimming in tears.

"Oh, Miss Thickness," she said, "I am so sorry, *so* sorry not to be able to like and respect you, when I was so ready to think you everything good, knowing what you have been to your brothers and sisters. But you

know you don't believe what you are saying I won't answer any of it. You *do* know our motives, and you cannot have spoken to mamma even for half an hour without seeing we are not the sort of girls you try to make us out. It is all prejudice, and it is cruelly unjust. But there is no more to be said. I feel as if I couldn't believe it. Good-bye," and then she got up and quietly turned to go.

"Miss Jerome," said Lavinia. Betty stopped.

"Yes?" she said.

"I am sorry this has occurred, but I have done what I thought right. And I am not used to equivocations or smoothings away of disagreeable things. *Some* women, I dare say, would have managed to oppose you without appearing to do so."

Betty did not speak.

“ May I ask you,” Miss Thickness continued, “ may I ask you not to mention what has occurred this morning to my sister Susan ? ”

“ Why should I promise you that ? ” asked Betty.

“ Because it would make mischief between her and me. If you are really actuated by high and unselfish motives, why should you wish to do so ? ”

Betty stood for a moment reflecting.

“ You are right,” she said, ignoring the taunt of the last words, “ I have no wish to do so. I will not tell Susie about it,” and then at last she left the room ; and Lavinia, victorious, only there are some kinds of victory which feel very like defeat, returned to her account-books.

Not far from the gate of The Dell, Betty, hurrying along in a whirl of confused feelings,

heard a panting breath beside her, and in another moment Woolly Bear had nearly knocked her over in his joy at finding her again.

“Oh, Woolly darling,” said Betty, warmly returning his caresses, “did you really think it was a year since you had seen me, you silly old goose? Where did you come from?” and she looked about her in perplexity.

A voice from the little path just skirting the hedge inside The Dell grounds replied :

“Why, didn’t you see us coming, Betty?” and her brother Cesar leaped over the little ditch that separated him from the road. “The hedge is thin enough here. Why, child, what’s wrong?” he went on, as his sister murmured something about not having been looking about her, and he caught sight of her troubled face and tearful eyes.

The sympathy in his voice broke down Betty's valiant resolution and she burst into tears.

"Oh, Cesar," she said, "I meant to tell nobody, but I can't help telling you now I've met you," and out poured all Betty's troubles and indignation.

Mr. Jerome listened attentively, and without interrupting her, unless one or two muttered ejaculations should count for interruptions. When she had finished—and the last detail she related was Miss Thickness's request that Susie should not be told—he exclaimed—

"Upon my word, that is the coolest thing I ever heard. I only hope Susie will hear of it. Won't the servants tell her you were there?"

"Perhaps," said Betty, "and now I think of it I rather fancy I caught sight of her

face at a window as I came away ; she was looking out in a puzzled sort of way."

" I hope she will get to know the whole," said Cesar. " I am vindictive enough for that. For she is quite different from the rest of the family. My poor little Brown Bess," and he drew Betty's hand through his arm protectingly. " It is *too* bad," and for a moment or two the brother and sister walked on in silence.



“ I THINK you are right, Betty, and it is very good of you not to tell any one else. It would put a stop to all pleasant relations with them as neighbours, and worry my father and mother.”

“ And that about papa standing for Leaford ? ” said Betty, earnestly.

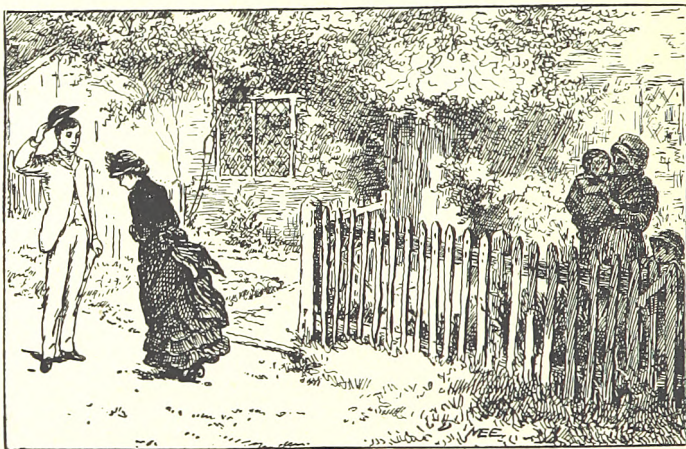
“It is too absurd—leave time to show it. My father could never stand for this place. It wouldn't suit him in any way. Pearn and Wallthorpe would be different, and he has spoken about them as openly as possible. My poor father going out of his way to tout for popularity—it is too absurd,” and Cesar laughed. Lord William's frank, soldierly nature was almost ludicrously opposed to any such ideas. “So, dear, we'll keep it all to our two selves.”

Those were Mr. Jerome's last words as he turned again to resume his interrupted walk to Leaford post-office, whither, in company with Woolly Bear, he had been bound.

“Take Woolly with you,” Betty called after him, seeing the St. Bernard hesitate between his allegiance to his beloved mistress and the delights of a ramble. “Go,

Woolly sweet, I don't want you, and you've not had a walk."

It was to be a morning of meetings for Mr. Jerome. He had just finished his own business at the post-office, and was turning



MEETING OF MR. JEROME AND SUSIE.

out of the little side-street into the main road again, when he and Woolly ran full tilt against Susie Thickness, hurrying in the direction whence he had come.

“I beg your pardon, a thousand pardons,” he exclaimed, catching sight of her face, which looked by no means composed or happy ; indeed he could almost have imagined, that, like his sister Betty, Susie had been indulging in some tears that morning. And her confused, uneasy manner rather lent colour to the supposition.

“Good morning,” she replied, seeming as if anxious to hurry on without saying more. But Cesar suspected that he knew the cause of Susie’s troubles, and this made him a little persistent.

“I won’t detain you, as I see you are in a hurry,” he said. “But if your business is at the post-office I am afraid your patience will be tried—the place is full of country-people fussing about their deposits in the post-office Savings Bank.—It is Saturday—market-day—I suppose that’s the reason.”

“Oh, dear,” said Susie, stopping short, “how vexing! I was there early this morning, but it was empty then. And I may not have a chance of coming again to-day. I—I have been so worried and vexed this morning and everything seems against me,” with a little catch in her breath, that was cousin-german to a sob.

“I am so sorry,” said Cesar, who was really, in spite of his rather cold manner, one of the most sympathizing of human beings. “I am so sorry,” and his sympathy softened the tone of his voice and shone out of his eyes. “Don’t think me meddling or impatient, but I can’t help telling you that I know all about it, though no one else does. I met Betty just now—she saw you at the window as she was leaving your house this morning, and—she fancied you looked troubled.”

Susie, in her astonishment forgetting the consciousness of her somewhat red eyes which had hitherto prevented her from looking Mr. Jerome straight in the face, turned round and stared at him.

“Betty at our house this morning!” she exclaimed. “No, I never saw her. I was watching for Ned, who sometimes comes home early on Saturdays. But—you say you know all about—what is troubling me so, and *Betty*—do you mean that *Betty* knows about Gregory? How could she? How can any one? I haven’t told *anybody*—I can’t understand; you frighten me.”

Mr. Jerome felt intensely disgusted with himself.

“I beg your pardon most humbly,” he said, his face flushing, “I have made some idiotic mistake. I was thinking of something that Betty has been troubled about,

and I suppose my mind was running upon it."

"And it was nothing about Gregory?" asked Susie, half-suspiciously.

"Gregory?" Cesar repeated. "I don't know who Gregory is, even."

"He is one of my brothers—the third," said Susie. "He is going into the army and he is studying at Mallinger's—cramming, I suppose I should say."

"At Mallinger's," Mr. Jerome repeated his thoughts and speculations taking a completely new turn, as the few words which had passed between him and Vanda on the subject, the Sunday before, returned to his mind.

"Yes—why not? Why do you seem so surprised?" asked Susie a little petulantly.

Mr. Jerome looked at her and hesitated. In the interest of their talk they had already

passed the post-office door and were walking slowly down the street towards the end which led into some fields and lanes.

“I did not mean to look surprised,” he said. “Indeed, I think I had already heard that you had a brother at Mallinger’s. But—you were going to the post-office, Miss Thickness—I am afraid it is very disagreeably crowded. It is not, is it, any commission you could entrust to me?”

“I don’t really know,” said Susie, speaking almost like a child, and then hesitating. “It is perhaps nothing of consequence. I may be annoying myself for nothing. If—if you wouldn’t mind promising me not to tell anybody, perhaps I might ask you about it?”

Cesar bowed, but without smiling. He had learnt that Susie was very cantankerous about “being laughed at.”

“Certainly,” he said. “You may depend upon me.”

“It’s something I’ve lost,” said Susie. “I wouldn’t mind asking at the post-office if the old man was alone. He’s a nice old man, and he wouldn’t make fun of me. It’s the bit of paper they give you when you register a letter, you know.”

“The receipt?” asked Cesar.

“Yes, I suppose it’s that. I was registering a letter this morning—a very important letter,” Susie went on, “and I put the receipt in my purse and when I got home it was gone. And I got into a fuss about it—I have had a good deal of worry lately, and it has made me silly. Do you think it matters—about the bit of paper, I mean?”

“Was there money in the letter?” asked Mr. Jerome, bluntly.

Susie looked surprised.

“Yes,” she said, her face flushing again, “a good deal. Five pounds.”

“And it was sent to some one you have written to before,—who is in the habit of getting letters from you?”

“I don’t——” began Susie, but stopped. “You have promised not to tell any one,” she went on. “Yes, it was to Gregory, the brother I told you of—the brother at Mallinger’s. I—I didn’t mean to say anything about him,” she went on, “but I was startled when you said all at once that you knew what I was troubled about, and his name came out. But you won’t tell anybody?” she added, pleadingly.

“I have promised I would not,” said Mr. Jerome, rather stiffly.

“No, you haven’t—not about Gregory. What you promised was about my sending money. And you haven’t told me yet if it matters about the bit of paper?”

“I shouldn’t trouble about it in your place. It isn’t as if there were any fear of the letter miscarrying. Your brother will acknowledge it at once. You were thinking of asking the post-office people to give you another receipt? I don’t think I would do so. But,” as a new idea struck him “supposing you telegraphed to ask him to telegraph as soon as he gets the money?”

Susie’s face lighted up.

“That would be very nice,” she said, “for I know I shall fidget about it. But, I forgot,” she went on, “I can’t tell him to telegraph. I don’t want—nobody at home must know about it.”

Cesar Jerome looked very grave.

“How old is your brother, Miss Thick-ness?” he asked, gently.

“Seventeen, no, eighteen—he is a year

older than Ned. He looks more, though. He's the nicest-looking of them, and in some ways the nicest."

"And how does he like Mallinger's? Is he working well?" asked Mr. Jerome in a matter-of-fact, off-hand way, as if *not* working well at Mallinger's were by no means an extraordinary state of things—a manner which somehow put Susie at her ease.

"I'm rather afraid he is not," she said, raising her blue, still troubled-looking eyes to her companion's face. "There seems so much amusement going on there always—far too much, I should say. I knew very little about it till lately, I hadn't been writing to Gregory often. But I've heard several times from him the last week." Then she stopped short—neither by word nor glance did Mr. Jerome lead her to say more, but she knew he was waiting for what

else she had to tell. "I—I've no business to trouble you with my troubles," she burst out at last, "but you have heard a good deal; perhaps I had better tell you all. It is sometimes easier to tell things to a stranger than to a near friend. And—I fancied you seemed to know about Mallinger's."

"I do," he replied. "I had a good deal to do with it at one time."

"And what do you think of it?" asked Susie, very anxiously.

"I think it is a very bad place for a young and impressionable boy to be at," said Mr. Jerome. "I don't say they don't learn well, that is to say, that they are not well crammed, but I would never advise any one to send a son there if he was not *particularly* steady and self-reliant in every way."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Susie, "that is just

exactly, I fear, what Gregory is not. I am afraid he has been idling dreadfully, and that that has got him into all sorts of trouble."

"And has he told you all about it?" asked Mr. Jerome, gently.

"Yes," said Susie. "When I wrote to him a few days ago he was already in great trouble. I am so thankful I did write to him just then, for he says my letter stopped him from doing 'something desperate.' Those were his very words," she went on, in a lowered and awestruck voice. "I suppose he meant running away, or enlisting, or something like that. But he bound me down not to tell Lavinia, or papa, or anybody at home. If he found I had done so, he said he would go off at once and never be heard of again; but he promised to tell me everything if I would not tell. Of course I wrote to him begging

him to tell me all, and only this morning I got his letter. He has got into debt, Mr. Jerome, dreadfully into debt—more than ten pounds. Fancy! And he said he must have five pounds at once, or else the man—it's something about a horse—will be writing to my father. I can't tell you all just now, but I am miserable about him. I have sent him the five pounds, but that will only quiet things for a time, and I have no more money."

"He must tell your father, Miss Thickness, he must be made to tell your father," said Cesar, decidedly. "I know this sort of thing so well. It is the beginning of all kinds of troubles, and he will never get free of them unless he makes a manful effort now, before he gets more involved. I—I could tell you a very similar story—at least it began much in this way, and caused terrible anxiety and

distress before the young fellow in that case came to his senses, but I trust you will be able to stop things going so far in your brother's case."

He stopped short, and Susie saw that his eyes were full of earnestness. She felt herself grow pale.

"Oh, Mr. Jerome, you frighten me!" she said. "Do you think then I have done wrong to send him the money? What else could I do?"

"I can't say unless I know all the ins and outs of it. But do not send him any more—not at least without consulting some one. You might, with the best will in the world, be really doing your brother the greatest injury possible. Do promise me this."

"Yes," said Susie. "I will promise it. But I must go home now. I am late already, I fear. Anyway, it is right for the present.

And I am glad it doesn't matter about the receipt."

They had turned before this, and were walking up the High Street towards Susie's home. Suddenly quick, firm steps behind them made Mr. Jerome half turn. He started a little as he caught sight of the newcomer, but lifted his hat quietly.

"Susie!" exclaimed a well-known voice. And Susie in her turn started, and more visibly than Mr. Jerome. The voice was that of her sister Lavinia.

"Where have you been?" Miss Thickness went on. "I had no idea you were going out this morning, you might have done my messages. Oh, Mr. Jerome, I beg your pardon. I suppose time hangs heavily on your hands here, otherwise you would not find Leaford High Street very amusing.

“On the contrary, I have been very busy since I came down,” said Mr. Jerome. “I have a good deal of writing to do for my father,” he added half mischievously.

“Oh!” said Miss Lavinia, “I dare say.”

By this time they were at the door of the Red House. Miss Thickness shook hands coldly with the young man, and Susie followed suit, trying as she did so to infuse a shade of cordiality and gratitude into her manner. They were legible enough in her pretty, timid eyes, and in Mr. Jerome’s slight smile Susie saw that she was understood.

“Has that young man been talking to you about that absurd idea of his sisters—the sewing-class you were telling me about?” said Lavinia.

“No,” said Susie, “he never mentioned it. I dare say he knows nothing about it.” But as she spoke, the remembrance of

Cesar's first words on meeting her that morning returned to her. Perhaps he did know about it after all, but how could he have known that Lavinia had refused to let her sisters take part in it? And what was it he had said about Betty having been down there that morning? Susie stopped short. She felt completely mystified.

"Lavinia," she said, "we must let the Miss Jeromes know about it."

"About what?"

"That you don't want us to go to the sewing-class."

Miss Thickness turned round sharply.

"I am perfectly sick of the name of the Jeromes," she said. "Morning, noon, and night one hears of nothing else. There now——" for just as she spoke, a great hairy mass came bumping and tumbling against the two ladies, and the door being

precisely at that moment opened from the inside, Lavinia, Susie, and the newcomer—none other than Woolly Bear—all rolled or fell in together, all but knocking down the parlour-maid and cannoning against Mr. Thickness, who was at that moment crossing the hall towards his study.

“That abominable dog!” Miss Thickness ejaculated; but Susie, whose spirits were in an unusually excitable state, could not speak for laughing.

“I’m so sorry, Lavinia,” she said, “I am really. But it was so absurd, just as you were complaining of the Jeromes, for one of them, poor Woolly, to come forcing his company upon us in that very uncalled-for way. Poor fellow! he must have been behind us, I suppose, and when he saw us at the door he thought his master was there too.”

“ And how are we to get rid of him ? ” said Lavinia, as she picked herself up. “ Mr. Jerome will have turned the corner and be out of sight by now.”

“ I’ll take him home,” said Mr. Thickness, “ that is to say, if he will follow me. I was just going to take a turn before luncheon. Come along, come along then, my fine fellow—” and he began whistling and snapping his fingers at the huge creature as if he were something between a baby and a canary, which set Susie off laughing again.

“ His name’s Woolly—Woolly Bear, papa. Just talk to him sensibly and he’ll understand. There now, that’s all right,” as she got Mr. Thickness and the dog out on to the front step. “ You’re to go home, Woolly, do you hear ?—*go home*. He’ll probably catch sight of Mr. Jerome round the corner, papa.”

The family were all assembled round the

luncheon-table when Mr. Thickness returned. He looked in excellent spirits.

“How did you get on with Woolly, papa?” asked Susie.

“All right, all right, my dear. We overtook Mr. Jerome, and I walked on with him, and at The Dell gates we met Miss Jerome, the elder one. She is really a very charming, a very sweet girl. She said her mother was hoping to call on you to-day, Lavinia, but that you were not to stay at home on purpose. I said you were always in on Saturday afternoon.”

Miss Thickness looked up, but did not speak.

“And,” the worthy gentleman went on, “she said they were anxious to see you and the girls about a scheme they have for improving some of the poor people about here. A very sensible scheme it seems to me, and

I said of course we should be delighted to be of any help possible, and she thanked me most—most gratifyingly. They have some gaieties in view, too, for next week, in which Lady William wants your co-operation. I am delighted for you all to have such agreeable neighbours.”

“We will talk it over after I have seen Lady William,” said Lavinia, quietly, adding to herself, “So that little Betty Jerome has not told anybody of our encounter this morning, it appears. I almost wish I had left her entirely free to do so. And how unlucky for papa to meet the other sister! Dear me! I cannot cope with their diplomatic ways, I fear. And to think of Susie walking about the town with the son! I must indeed warn her, foolish child.”

CHAPTER IX.

THE "gaieties" at The Dell to which good Mr. Thickness had in the innocence of his heart committed his daughters, turned out to be a so-called carpet dance, preceded by some amateur theatricals of a very simple kind. The advent of some more friends of the Jeromes, on a visit to one of the neighbouring houses, helped to give a reason for these little festivities, which took place the week following the first sewing class. To this same sewing class Susie and her sisters received a cold and evidently unwilling permission to go, and Betty, faithful to her

promise, gave them no reason to suppose that she was surprised at seeing them.

“It is all that dear old papa of theirs,” she said to Cesar, her sole confidant. “I can’t make out how he comes to have such grumpy, sour-natured children as the eldest ones—Miss Thickness and the brother. And even Catherine is very irritating. Emily is only amusing, her little airs are so babyish, and she’s not a bad child at heart, if she would let herself be natural. But Susie of course is the only one I really care for.”

“Martin Thickness isn’t half a bad fellow,” said Mr. Jerome. “It’s only that dull manner of his. Indeed he must be a very good fellow to have stood his sister and the narrow life she has kept them to.”

“But about Susie—don’t you really think it’s wonderful that she should be so nice and sweet? I don’t despair of getting leave for

her to act with us ; it would do her good ; she is not looking well ; I only hope Lavinia doesn't punish her in private to make up for having had to give in."

"No," said Mr. Jerome, "I thought her looking ill. But I hardly advise you to try to get her to take part in the acting ; it would probably only expose her to annoyance at home."

So it came to pass that it was only as a spectator that Susie was present at the theatricals. It was the first time she had seen anything of the kind, and she had expected to enjoy it tremendously. But after all, Cathie, who had been afraid of vexing Lavinia by seeming to care about it, came off much better. She went into fits of laughter at the comic parts, and was nearly in tears at the pathetic bits, so that, as Betty afterwards declared, it was really a pleasure to see her

shaken out of her primness for once. But Susie sat still, smiling mildly, wishing she could feel like Cathie, and envying her, for Susie's heart was very sore.

Things were not improving with Gregory ; he had been effusively grateful to her for the five pounds she had sent him, and for a few days the difficulties seemed tided over. Then came another letter, more miserable than the first, other debts had turned up, which he had quite forgotten or under-estimated. His only hope was in Susie, if she could by hook or by crook lend him ten pounds, he could make all straight, and would promise, *vow*, to save it out of his pocket-money and return it to her. But failing this, he would run away ; he could not, *dared* not, face his father, and even worse than his father, Lavinia ! And Susie knew there was more truth in this than in most boyish threats of the kind. Yet, as

for sending him ten pounds—he might as well have asked for ten hundred!

In her distress she thought of the one confidant whom circumstances had thrown in her way, and it was with vague hopes of help or advice of some practical kind that she dressed for the party at The Dell.

But her hopes faded almost as soon as they arrived at the house. There seemed such a crowd of people; Vanda and Betty, and not they alone, but their brothers too, seemed so busy and to have their hands so full, that Susie at once decided she must expect no individual attention. And when the acting was over, and everybody adjourned to another room for dancing, she and Cathie sat in a corner beside Lavinia, feeling very little less “out of it” than that first afternoon at the garden party. Miss Thickness felt a certain gratification at this turn of events.

“ I shall not require to warn Susie,” she said to herself grimly, as Mr. Jerome passed



“ SHE AND CATHIE SAT IN A CORNER BESIDE LAVINIA FEELING . . . ‘OUT OF IT.’ ”

them dancing with the best looking of the Misses Bendover, of Over. “ Very likely

that will come to something," she thought ; " those girls have plenty of money, and that is everything nowadays with these worldly-minded people."

Yet, with strange inconsistency, as she glanced at Susie, a sort of spasm of regret passed through her. She did not like to see the girl so dull and listless, " she scarcely looks pretty to-night," she thought. " It is very foolish of papa to wish them to come to these parties. They are not fitted for it, and I have no wish that they should be. But even Susie must see that the Miss Jeromes' attentions are most capricious."

At that moment a gentle voice beside them was heard speaking.

" Are you and your sister not dancing, dear Susie ?" it said. " You do dance ? And oh, Miss Thickness, mamma would be so pleased if you would come to the other end of the

room where she is, for a little. Would you? It is quite an undertaking, is it not?—acting and dancing in one evening. I have been superintending the restoration of the dining-room to its normal condition in time for supper. But has not Betty been here with you?” and the speaker, Vanda, looked round in surprise.

“No, she has not been near us,” said Cathie, in a rather aggrieved tone. And, truth to tell, Betty’s friendship was not proof against her fears of Miss Lavinia.

“Oh, dear,” said Vanda, “I wish I had known. But you *will* dance, won’t you? Mayn’t I introduce a partner?”

Catherine glanced at Lavinia.

“We dance very little,” she said, dubiously. But at that moment Vanda caught sight of an unattached young man in their near neighbourhood, and before Cathie had time to

decipher Lavinia's expression, she was led off on his arm.

"Don't mind about me, please, Miss Jerome," said Susie, gently. "You have so many people to look after, and I dare say I shall see Betty directly."

"If you will give me the waltz which is just beginning, I will undertake to find Betty," said Mr Jerome, who came up at that moment. A look of unmistakable satisfaction overspread Susie's face, and she started up instantly.

"Oh, thank you," she said, heartily.

Vanda looked a little amused, but Miss Thickness pinched up her lips. "How can Susie be so silly and undignified," she thought. "The man is laughing at her, I am certain."

"Mr. Jerome," said Susie after a turn or two, "it is very selfish and troublesome of me, I know, but you have so many people to dance with to-night that I may not see you again,

and I wanted very much to speak to you if— if you don't mind."

For Cesar's face had grown graver as she went on speaking, and a sudden horror came over the girl that perhaps she was doing something entirely unbecoming and unmaidenly, so far was she from guessing that it was the sight of her own pale, anxious little face that had made Cesar look so serious.

"More trouble about the brother, no doubt," he said to himself. "What a shame that it should all fall upon her. I wish I had warned the father or brother as soon as I heard the lad was at Mallinger's. They would have looked after him, and even if too late to save all mischief, it would have prevented its troubling her," and he did not quite at once reply to Susie's appeal. The girl's face flushed.

"I beg your pardon," she said, half-uncon-

sciously, beginning to draw her hand from his arm, "I always thought him dreadfully 'stuck-up' till the other day," she said to herself, "and now I suppose he is vexed with himself for being so kind then,"—"I beg your pardon," she repeated. "I know I have no—"

"Oh, Miss Thickness," Cesar exclaimed, "how you misunderstand me! I am only grieved to see, or to suspect, that you are still anxious and worried about the matter you told me of. And—I do not know but that I am a little to blame in it," he went on.

"You!" said Susie, in surprise.

"Yes," he replied. "I had some misgiving that first day when you spoke of your brother and where he was. But Mallinger's is rather a sore subject with us," he said. "If you don't mind I would rather not tell

you what my own knowledge of the place was—it is all past now.”

“Of course,” said Susie. “I don’t want to know anything like that. It is easy to see it is not a good place for a rather easy-going, good-hearted, idle sort of boy like Gregory. Only, just yet, I don’t see *what* to do, how to get him away from there,” and she sighed.

“Won’t you tell me all about it?” Mr. Jerome asked. “The money got there safely, I suppose? See here, we can sit down for a few minutes; there is no draught in this corner, I think.”

The few minutes grew into a good many before Susie and her partner had finished their discussion, and the girl started up with a little exclamation of dismay.

“Oh, dear, I believe we have sat out two whole dances,” she said. “And you must have been wanting to dance with lots of

other girls. And I don't know what Lavinia would say if she knew."

"The second part of that speech is the only part worthy of an answer," said Cesar, laughing. "And you still owe me a dance, for all this does not count, you know."

"I don't know how to thank you," said Susie, and it was well her mind was lightened of some of its anxiety, for Lavinia's expression when her young sister rejoined her was certainly the reverse of reassuring.

"Oh, Susie, what a time you've been," Catherine exclaimed. "You've not been dancing all this time with Mr. Jerome, surely," she went on, not observing that the subject of her remarks was still within hearing. "I had such a stupid partner. I'm quite ready to go home, I haven't enjoyed the dancing a bit."

“Cath—” began Susie, warningly. But at that moment Cesar came forward again.

“They are just making a set of Lancers,” he said, addressing himself to Catherine, “may I have the pleasure of dancing with you? And if you will be our *vis-à-vis*, Vyner,” he went on, as Mr. Percy Vyner, Charley’s elder brother at Cambridge, who as a rule thought himself far too distinguished for the Thickness girls, invited Susie for the same dance.

“Yes, that will do capitally,” and Lavinia was left in solitary state, pleased in one half of her heart that her sisters should enjoy themselves, yet not without serious misgivings.

“I must, yes, I certainly must warn Susie,” she repeated to herself.

But the evening was not destined to pass without further disturbance of her own feelings.

“Miss Thickness,” said a voice, and looking up Lavinia saw Betty Jerome standing beside her, “would you not like to have some tea, or an ice perhaps? Mamma sent me to ask,” it was noticeable, by the way, that when Betty distinguished herself by any specially kindly little action she was fond of taking shelter behind “mamma,” or “Vanda,” or somebody—“if you wouldn’t mind coming with me, we could find a comfortable corner in the tea-room.”

“Thank you,” said Lavinia influenced in spite of herself by the gentle, appealing manner and the friendliness glancing out of the lovely brown eyes, which she had last seen looking so wounded and startled. “You are very kind,” and almost without knowing it, she found herself very pleasantly installed and Betty ministering to her wants. “I hope I am not keeping you from dancing,” she

went on, speaking as if she herself were at least forty. Lavinia always took this tone and somehow people came tacitly to accept her assumed age as a fact.

“Oh, no,” said Betty, “I am not dancing just now, and, in any case,” here she grew very red, “I have been wanting all the evening to speak to you, but I felt rather frightened. I wanted to thank you for letting Susie and Cathie join us with the class after all, and I hope it meant that—that you had come to think better of it, and, in a way, of *us*. And I think perhaps I was rude to you the other day,” she added in a lower voice.

Miss Thickness cleared her throat.

“I do not think you were rude, Miss Jerome,” she said. “Perhaps you may have thought I was. But I did not intend to be so. I only spoke the truth. The fact is we see things so differently that mutual

understanding is almost impossible. I know nothing of the gay world in which you live ; we are plain people and take life seriously. I wish however to credit you with good motives and as far as your *motives* go, perhaps I was not just to you."

Betty looked at Lavinia thoughtfully.

"Miss Thickness," she said, earnestly, "I do think you misjudge us. People can take life seriously in the right way even when they are not living in a small, quiet country place. And—life has not been all play to us—indeed, when I think of mamma, how brave, and active, and indefatigable she has been ! Oh, how little people understand each other when they judge from the outside ! But I do want to thank you for letting Susie and Catherine come."

"I don't deserve your thanks," said Lavinia stiffly though she did smile a little. "It was

my father who gave them leave. But I was glad for you to see I was not prejudiced, though I thought it right to give my opinion honestly. And I hope after all as it is only for a short time that the class may do no harm."

"I hope not. I do really think we may hope as much as *that*," said Betty smiling much more genially than Miss Thickness; and then some one came to claim her for the next dance and Lavinia saw her no more.

An hour or so later when Lavinia on Martin's arm was making her way from the cloak room to the carriage, dutifully followed, as she believed, by her sisters, a glance over her shoulder showed her that Susie had found a cavalier. The obnoxious Mr. Jerome was there again, escorting Susie, while Catherine came by herself.

"Oh, pray don't trouble," said Miss Thick-

ness, addressing the young man, "we are all right you see, having my brother. Cathie, are you sure your cloak is wrapped enough round you?"

But Cesar did not take the hint. All that Lavinia gained by her diplomacy was that Martin began tugging at Catherine's cloak, thus giving opportunity in the little bustle that ensued, for a small *tête-à-tête* between Mr. Jerome and Susie, of which Lavinia's very quick ears unfortunately caught a word or two.

"Then you will not be away long?" Susie was saying.

"As short a time as possible, you may be sure," was the reply, and then followed on the girl's part a sentence or two in a lower voice, of which the only words Miss Thickness could clearly distinguish were "so glad," and "anxious to see you again."

Lavinia's ears were not given to deceiving her, but she almost accused them just now of doing so.

"Susie," she said coldly, when, after a somewhat frigid farewell to Cesar on her part, and, to her thinking, a very unnecessarily cordial shake of the hand by Martin, the brother and sisters found themselves driving off, "Susie, I think you should remember that Catherine is your elder sister. Mr. Jerome should have offered his arm to her, not to you, just now."

"Susie is often taken for the elder," said Catherine; "I didn't mind, Lavinia."

"It was not your feelings I was considering," said Miss Thickness, "it was Susie's conduct."

"Oh, come now," said Martin, "it is a matter of no consequence. We've had a very pleasant evening, I'm sure, and I'm sure Susie didn't mean to vex you."

“Thank you, Martin. No, I didn’t mean to vex Lavinia.”

But she spoke half dreamily, not as if she had taken her sister’s reprimand much to heart, and Lavinia, though she said no more, felt by no means serene in the thoughts of that evening’s events.

“Did you enjoy it, Susie?” asked Catherine when the two girls were up stairs by themselves.

“Did you?” was Susie’s reply.

“Ye—es, I think so. Not at the beginning, except the acting. I did enjoy that. But I didn’t enjoy the dancing at all till Mr. Jerome asked me for the Lancers and then I danced all the time.” Here Catherine gave a sigh. “I’m afraid I should soon grow very fond of such things,” she said.

“And why shouldn’t you?” said Susie. “Who could look happier and brighter than

Vanda and Betty, and you must allow that though they know how to enjoy dancing they know how to work too?"

"It seems so," said Catherine; "but still—there must be many temptations in a life such as theirs."

"The more credit to them then for being what they are," said Susie.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" asked Catherine. "You have never answered."

Susie was sitting by the fire, her fair hair half shading her face as it fell in long wavy curls released from plaits and rolls. She looked up with a glow on her face which might have been the reflection of the embers, or—Catherine was not sure what. She only thought how very pretty Susie looked.

"Yes," she said. "I didn't care much for the acting. But afterwards—oh, yes! I never was so happy in my life."

CHAPTER X.

“**B**ETTY,” said Cesar Jerome, a few days after the little dance at The Dell, “this is the day of your sewing-class, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Betty replied; “and this evening we’re going to have a singing practice. I’m awfully busy, Cesar,” she went on rather importantly. “Alex is so eager about these glees, and he likes me to help him.”

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Jerome answered, rather absently. “I’m not going to add to your work. And it’s quite right for you and Vanda to be as much as possible with Alex, for the short time he’s here. I am so thank-

ful for him to have this happy winter at home: the remembrance of it will stay by him when he's away again, poor fellow. He is so much more cheerful and contented now, and it's greatly thanks to you girls."

Betty blushed with pleasure.

"I don't think he regrets having refused the invitation," she said. "And I think when he is out in India again he will, as you say, like to look back on this time. It has pleased papa and mamma so, too. But what about our sewing-class, Cesar?"

"I wanted to ask you if you and Vanda, or one of you, could offer to walk back with the Thicknesses, so that I might, without it seeming strange, go too," said Cesar, simply. "The fact is," he went on, "I have been able to be of a little service to Susie, and I should like to tell her about it."

"Was it—no, I won't ask anything at all,"

said Betty resolutely, though she felt not a little curious.

“That’s right,” said her brother, “for just now, at least, I cannot tell you any more. You may have seen she looked worried once or twice lately?”

“Yes,” said Betty. “I did not see her the two days you were away, but I thought she looked much brighter again at our dance—at the end of the evening, any way. Oh, yes, Cesar, I can easily manage it. Do you know,” she went on, “that some of these very girls whose mothers were so horrid to me are coming to our class to-day? Isn’t it nice? I do believe it’s through Susie, somehow. I am so fond of Susie, and I think I like her more and more. She seemed so difficult to get at, at first; now she is quite different, as if she were waking up, in some way.”

“ I think you have done her good and made her happier,” said Cesar. “ There, now, it isn’t often I pay you compliments, but two in ten minutes, eh, Betty ! ”

Susie had been waiting with more eagerness than anxiety, for she had come to have great faith in Mr. Jerome’s management, to learn the results of his interference in Gregory’s troubles. That very Saturday morning the post brought her a few words from her brother, written in a very different strain to his former letters. He couldn’t thank her enough, he wrote ; what he had gone through would be a lesson to him for all his life ; he would never forget what some one, whom he did not name, had been to him, and “ I don’t think I shall disappoint him ; he has put me on my honour, and I must show him I deserve it.” But he entered into no particulars, Susie could understand all

when she saw "him" again. So it was with mingled feelings of gratitude and curiosity, tempered by a considerable dash of shyness, that she saw Mr. Jerome join his sisters, Cathie and herself, when they were slowly strolling homewards to the Red House, that afternoon after the class.

"I thought I should see you to-day," said Cesar, when they found themselves a few steps in the rear of the others. "I was very anxious to tell you about poor Gregory. Have you heard from him?"

"Only a few words. He referred me to you; and oh, Mr. Jerome, I *don't* know how to thank you," she burst out, "you have managed so well—touching Gregory's best feelings, and making him so anxious to do better. It is such a mercy that he has not to be sent home in disgrace; it would have hardened him—indeed he wouldn't have

come, he would have run away. Oh, what have you not saved us from!"

"You make far too much of it, indeed you do, Miss Thickness," said Cesar, earnestly. "I have had a good deal to do with boys and young men, and I know it is not always easy for them to keep straight, and I can sympathize with them. But Gregory is a very fine fellow. I have no fears about him now—I have not indeed. And it is only temporarily that I have approved of his not telling your father everything; he will do so when he comes home, and it will be very different then, for I feel sure he will have made a start. I have promised to see him again before then."

"And—he wasn't vexed with me for having told you? *How* well you must have managed!" repeated Susie again, admiringly.

"It was quite easy," said Cesar.

He did not tell Susie, he had promised he would not, in what an exaggerated state of almost despair he had found the lad; there had been no difficulty in extracting his full confidence once he was assured that the home authorities, above all, his new friend strongly suspected, his eldest sister, were not to be told.

“And,” began Susie again, with greater hesitation this time, “about the money—the debts?”

“I went into those and saw the people. They had frightened him; the most important was for horse hire,” said Cesar, smiling a little. “I put it all right. I lent him the money and he will repay me as soon as he can. I feel sure he will tell your father the whole, and then if Mr. Thickness prefers to pay me at once, of course I shall let him do so.”

He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, trying to make it appear a little business affair merely. But Susie was not satisfied, her colour came and went, and she began fidgeting at her gloves. She pulled off the left one at last, but Cesar was not prepared for what followed.

“Mr. Jerome,” she said, “you are trying to make light of it, but you cannot make *me* think lightly of it. And I cannot bear that you should risk losing the money. I thought of something the other day that I might have done, it was to sell this,” and she held out to him a pretty old-fashioned ring. There were two or three rubies and one fair-sized diamond in it. “It is my own ring; my godmother left it to me. How much should you think it worth?”

Cesar looked at it carefully.

“Twelve or fifteen pounds, I dare say,” he said.

Susie’s face cleared.

“Oh,” she said, “I am so glad it is as much. Well, then, Mr. Jerome, would you—*would* you mind keeping it—as—as a sort of pledge, you know, till Gregory can pay you? You see,” she went on with the sort of quaint *naïveté*, which was one of her charms, “nobody knows about it but you and I and Gregory, and so it is right that you should have some sort of security.”

Mr. Jerome gave her one quick glance and then looked down.

“I wish—” he began, but then he stopped. He had slipped the ring on to the end of his finger and kept his eyes fixed on it as he walked on in silence.

“Very well,” he said at last, “but I must make one condition. If I take a great fancy

to the ring—it is a very pretty one—will you, a few weeks or so hence—will you give me the option of buying it?”

Susie looked rather puzzled. She was fond of her ring ; she had been glad to think she need not part with it permanently. But then, save for Mr. Jerome’s interposition it might have been sold away for good by this time, and after all his kindness of course it was only fair he should have it if he liked.

“Certainly,” she said, “you may keep it if you like. But it may be a good while before Gregory can pay you, unless of course what you said about papa were to be. But I am glad you like it.”

“I shall like to take it away with me,” he replied.

“Are you going soon?” asked Susie, and her face fell a little. It was provoking that he should be going just as she had got to

know him and to feel at ease with him; and then too it was such a comfort to have some one to talk to about Gregory.

“Very soon—in a week or two. I had scarcely hoped to have stayed so long,” he said.

“But you can do as you like, can't you? You are not an officer like your brother?” asked Susie.

“No, but I have plenty to do. I have a home of my own, you know, and it gives me a good deal of work. It is a place that has been very much neglected.”

Susie looked up with interest in her eyes.

“I should like to tell you about it some time or other,” he said. “I am going to Over for a few days next week,” he went on, after a little pause. “You know the Bend-overs, don't you?”

“Not very well,” said Susie. “They were at your dance last week.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Miss Bendover is charming, they say,” Susie went on.

“Exceedingly so,” said Mr. Jerome.

“Oh,” Susie replied. She did not notice that he spoke absently, and a queer, very slight sensation of chill came over her. But it seemed to melt away at once when Cesar turned to her again, with a smile.

“What was I saying?” he said. “I don’t think I know. You said something about Helen Bendover, did you not, and I answered at random. I wasn’t thinking—I do beg your pardon.”

“I asked if she was not very charming and you replied ‘exceedingly so,’” Susie, still slightly piqued, answered.

“I did not mean to say that. She is a

nice girl, but not exceedingly anything," said Cesar. "Then, it is understood I am to keep the ring in the meantime, and, if I ask you to let me buy it for good you know some time or other, you won't refuse?"

He looked at Susie, with a little of the old manner she had at first so resented. In spite of herself she felt her colour rise a little.

"Are you laughing at me?" she said. "I don't understand what you mean. You puzzle me. As things are, the ring is really yours. It is I, or Gregory, that should buy it back from *you*."

"And then?"

"What do you mean by 'and then'?" said Susie, beginning to get cross. "It isn't quite—quite fair of you, Mr. Jerome, to tease me, when you know I can't resent it, because of your having been so very kind."

And she almost looked as if she were going to cry.

“Have I—is it unladylike or anything like that of me, to have given you the ring?” she went on. Mr. Jerome’s face grew grave, and the smile died out of his eyes.

“How can you imagine such things, Susie?” he said, and at the moment she scarcely noticed that he had called her by her Christian name. “You seem to think me a perfect brute sometimes. Why are you so suspicious? Unladylike indeed! No—I think it—” but he stopped suddenly.

“What?” asked Susie.

“I won’t tell you just now. You would perhaps misunderstand me again and I won’t risk that.”

But it was now his turn to look rather put out.

“Shall we walk a little faster, and overtake the others?” said Susie, timidly.

“If you like,” he said, but as Susie put her proposal in practice, he lingered a little.

“She is full of prepossessions and prejudices still,” he said to himself. But he glanced at the little ring with satisfaction, before he took it off his finger and carefully deposited it in his pocket.

“You are coming to us this evening,” said Vanda, as they all said good-bye to each other at the end of the road. “We must make the most of our time now, Cesar has only a week or two more.”

But much may be done in a week or two! Poor Lavinia; she was in despair. The Jeromes had completely transformed her little world. How they managed to get through all they did, without forgetting something or somebody, or seeming cross

or fussy, was a great puzzle to her. The sewing-class was progressing steadily; she began to feel less faith in her prophesies of its being a fine lady's fancy which would soon be tired of, and to allow to herself that the Jerome girls seemed to have a good idea of method as well as unflagging energy.

“There are certainly some things in which I could wish that Catherine and Susie resembled them,” she thought. “But as it is I am very much afraid that all this will only end in making our girls, Susie especially, discontented with their ordinary life.”

“Susie especially,” yes, Lavinia had many a misgiving about Susie, though hitherto her “warnings” had been but vague and less impressive than she could have wished. Susie, of all the young party, seemed the most to enjoy herself. Never had she looked so pretty; never had her eyes been so bright

and her step so springing ; never, it must be added, had she taken in such good part Lavinia's reprimands.

“ It is not doing me any harm, sister, to have a busier life. Even the amusement will not hurt me, I feel sure. Vanda and Betty often have very quiet times when their brothers are away ; this is an extra merry time for them, they say themselves ; they want Alexis to enjoy his holidays, Betty says.”

“ Ah, yes. Very fine,” said Lavinia. “ It is the tone of the day ; unhealthy love of excitement.”

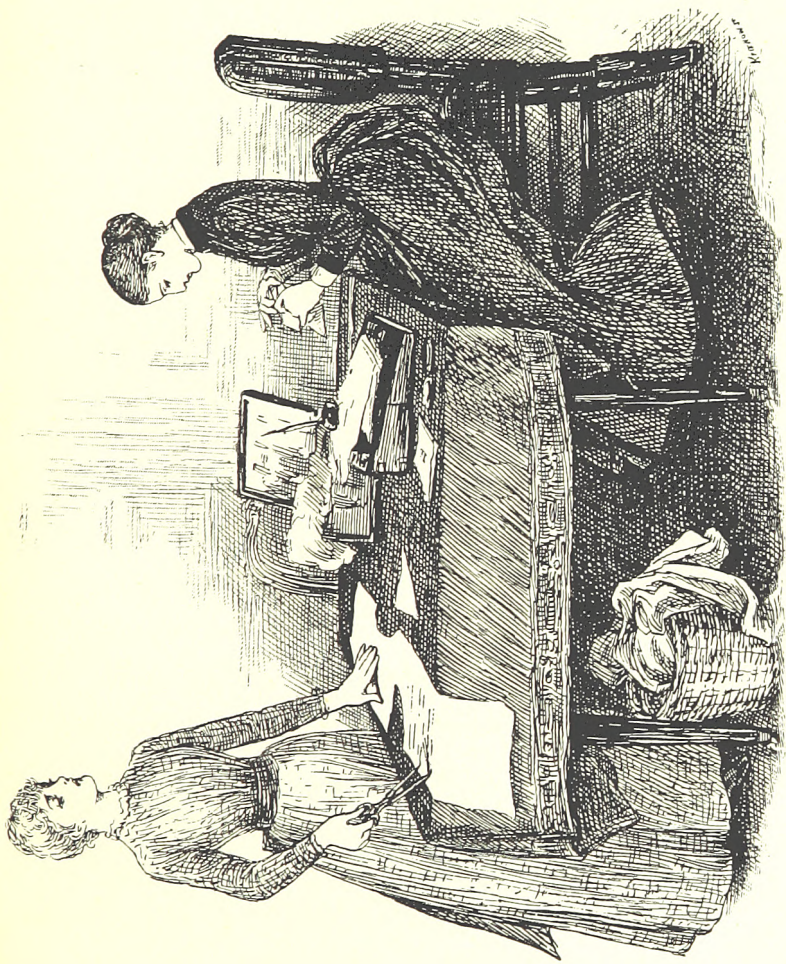
“ But, sister,” Susie persisted, though more gently than of old, “ you *can't* call them frivolous girls. You see yourself that they persevere in what they begin. And they have so many interesting things of all kinds to do. I do feel that I am learning so much from them.”

“The proof of the pudding is in the eating,” quoted Lavinia. “I shall feel more inclined to believe in the Jeromes’ happy influence on you once they are gone—how I wish they were! and you all back in your regular home-life again. *Then*, if you continue in your present cheerful state of mind, I might be inclined to change my opinion.”

“I shall not grumble, sister. I shall be dreadfully sorry to lose them, but I mean never to grumble again,” said Susie, quietly.

“It is all selfishness,” pursued Miss Thickness, speaking almost more to herself than to Susie, “they are taking you up just now because they have nobody else, and then they will go away and throw you off, if indeed there is no more harm done.”

“What do you mean, Lavinia?” asked Susie, with a spark of her old fierceness. But Miss Thickness would not explain herself



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, LAVINIA?”



further. Somehow, despite all her resolutions as to "warning" Susie, it was not easy to do so when it came to the point.

"I wash my hands of it all," was the only remark she vouchsafed.

And Susie went on with her occupation, that of cutting out some infantine garments for next Saturday's sewing-class—in which, thanks to Fryer's instructions, she was fast becoming an expert—with a quiet smile on her face, though her cheeks were rather rosier than usual.

"Lavinia will see that she is mistaken, some day," she thought.

Practically speaking, Miss Thickness's hand-washing of all to do with The Dell people was not as complete as she could have desired. It was altogether opposed to her father's notions of dignity and hospitality that any members of his family should receive so much

kindness and attention from strangers without something in the shape of a return being offered to them. And in this Lavinia agreed.

“We must do something,” she allowed, “and I see nothing for it but a dinner. It is far too late and cold for anything of an afternoon party; not that I regret it, garden-parties are just another word for flirtations.”

“When there are any men at them, my dear, that is to say,” put in Mr. Thickness. “And that I take to be rather the exception.”

“And of course, papa, we can’t give an evening party. It would be quite out of our line,” she went on; “no, we must ask them to dinner, Lord and Lady William and Miss Jerome, I suppose.”

“And the son—I should particularly wish Mr. Jerome asked, and Martin likes him,” said Mr. Thickness.

“It will make a large party. That is eight

already with four of ourselves. And then we must ask the Vyners, Mr. and Mrs.—I am glad Percy is gone—and who else, papa?”

“Sir Peter and Lady Chard, and perhaps their nephew and niece. The Bendovers I was thinking of, and one of their daughters. We have not invited *them* for a long time, and they are friends of the Jeromes,” said Mr. Thickness.

Rather to his surprise Lavinia responded cordially to the suggestion, for as a rule she was very stiff and ungenial to any of their neighbours who, merely from the fact of their being somewhat above the Thicknesses in the social scale, she determinedly credited with arrogance and ill-bred “airs.”

“They won’t care to come,” she thought to herself, “but for the Jeromes’ sake they probably will do so, and besides, they don’t wish to offend papa. And I will give Miss

Bendover to Mr. Jerome to take in, that will perhaps open that silly Susie's eyes. Miss Catterby is certain there is something in it."

Lavinia set her face against gossip!

On the day of the dinner party Susie, who had been making herself more useful to her sister than had ever before been the case, was surprised by being told that she, and not Catherine, was "to come in to dinner."

"It is Cathie's turn," she ventured to say. But her objection was quickly put aside.

"Catherine does not care about it," Lavinia replied. "As you are fond of the Jeromes you should be pleased;" but something in her tone repressed the thanks on her young sister's lips.

Alas for Lavinia's little plans!

Good Mr. Thickness had been duly indoctrinated by his eldest daughter into the "who was to take whom" part of the programme,

and had conned it, spectacles on nose, under her supervision.

“Lord and Lady William for you and myself, of course, no question,” he said. “Sir Peter, Mrs. Bendover; Mr. Vyner, Lady Chard; Mr. Jerome, Miss—— is it Cathie or Susie this time?”

“No, no; Mr. Jerome, Miss Bendover; it is Susie not Cathie, and Mr. Chard takes her.”

“Of course, of course. All quite right.”

But the little discussion had raised the question in his mind, and when the critical moment arrived Mr. Jerome happened to be standing in convenient proximity to Susie. Mr. Thickness glanced at them with relief.

“My daughter,” he murmured, with a slight gesture, smilingly responded to by Cesar, and as quickly acted upon. And oh, for Lavinia’s feelings when glancing down the

table her eyes fell on Susie comfortably seated by the blackest of the *bêtes noires*, the wolfiest of the wolves, Mr. Jerome himself ; while Helen Bendover was smilingly and apparently contentedly responding to the platitudes of that most harmless of young men, Mr. Norris Chard, Sir Peter's nephew and reputed heir.

Susie was perfectly happy. A softened feeling of something very like gratitude to Lavinia had stolen over her. "After all she is sympathizing ; her bark is ever so much worse than her bite," she said to herself. Even the curious expression which she caught sight of on her sister's face did not undeceive her. "She is trying to look as if she didn't see how happy I am," thought Susie, innocently.

And she answered cordially to Cesar's remark about how well Miss Thickness

was looking, how perfectly the sprays of scarlet flowers in her hair and in her bodice suited her.

“Yes,” said Susie, “doesn’t she look nice?” And the light in her eyes as she spoke gave Mr. Jerome a more favourable idea of Lavinia than he had yet had.

It was a good beginning, and the rest of the evening kept to the same lines.

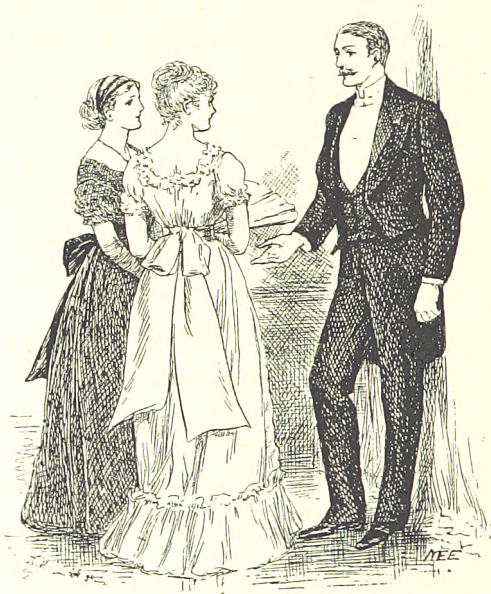
“Oh, Cathie, I have been so happy,” said Susie, when she found herself for a moment alone in a corner of the drawing-room with her next sister; “it was so good of you not to want to go in to dinner, and *wasn’t* it nice of Lavinia to let me have Mr. Jerome instead of that stupid Mr. Chard?”

Catherine looked at her in some surprise.

“Mr. Jerome,” she repeated, “did *he* take you in?”

Susie nodded, but made a little gesture of

silence, for at that moment the men came into the room, and Mr. Jerome at once made his way to where the two sisters were



MR. JEROME AND CATHERINE.

standing. Catherine shook hands with him in her usual half stiff, half timid way, but it was impossible to resist the charm of Cesar's

manner when he exerted himself as he could do sometimes, and in a few minutes the three were laughing as merrily as if Betty, and not Catherine, had made the third. And Lavinia, occupied with her other guests, had perforce for the moment to leave them alone.

Not for long however. In obedience to Lavinia's instructions Martin came solemnly across the room.

"Susie," he said, "I'm going to open the piano, we must have some music."

"By all means," said Cesar, turning with alacrity to Catherine. "Will you sing, Miss Thickness, or play?"

"Susie," said Catherine appealingly, "our duet!"

But Susie only smiled.

"Play something alone first, do, Cathie dear!"

And Susie's good fairy led Catherine off to the piano.

"I—I think," began Susie, nervously, when she and Cesar were again, so to say, alone, "I think I must go over and talk to Miss Bendover and Miss Chard a little," and she half rose from her seat.

Mr. Jerome laid his hand for half a second detainingly on her arm.

"No," he said, "don't go just yet. I may not have an opportunity for ever so long of telling you about my own place, and all I am trying to do there. It doesn't bore you?" he added, anxiously.

"It interests me exceedingly," said Susie, "if only Lavinia—"

"She won't be vexed," said Cesar, quickly. "She—it was her doing that I took you in to dinner. And those girls over there are perfectly happy. Your brother is talking to

Miss Chard, and Helen Bendover is the most good-natured girl in the whole world. And I shall be leaving so soon, you know, Susie."

"Shall you really?" said Susie's soft voice, while a shadow stole into her eyes.

"Yes, indeed," he said with a sigh.

So Susie stayed.

CHAPTER XI.

“WHAT is the matter, Cesar?” asked Betty, the next morning, hearing a sudden exclamation from her brother as he opened and read one of his letters. They were alone in the dining-room, none of the others having as yet made their appearance. “Nothing wrong, I hope?”

“No, not exactly, or rather not at all wrong,” said Cesar. “It is only that I see I must go north—go home, I should say, but it always seems home to me where all of you are—almost immediately. I am needed at Saxby for several things. And I am

going to Over to-day. I wish I could get out of it."

"You cannot," said Betty. "You know Mr. Bendover arranged things on purpose for you to meet that clever man and see the new machines and all."

"Yes," Cesar agreed. "I knew I should have to go." But he sighed nevertheless. "I shall tell Leader to pack up all my things and send them to meet me at Crowby: it will be quicker, for I don't see that I can possibly come back here if I have to stay three nights at Over. I must be at Saxby by Tuesday."

"Oh, dear," said Betty, dolefully. "But you will come back for Christmas, Cesar?"

"Come back for Christmas," he repeated. "I should rather think so."

So it was not with any exaggeratedly low spirits that the rest of The Dell

family saw Cesar leave them that same afternoon.

“He will be back in less than two months,” said Betty; “that is nice to think of. But he looks *very* sorry to go, doesn’t he, Vanda?”

Two days later came Saturday, the day for the sewing class. The three younger Thickness girls came as usual, but Betty’s quick eyes saw a change in Susie. The girl was pale and subdued, more like the Susie of their first acquaintance.

“Is there anything the matter, dear Susie?” asked Betty, sympathizingly. “You look—I don’t know how you look.”

Susie smiled, but not very successfully.

“I don’t think I am quite well,” she said. “I feel so tired somehow.”

“And they were all saying how well, how lovely you looked the other night,” said

Betty, regretfully. "We are all rather out of spirits ourselves, you know Susie, because of Cesar."

Susie's colour had risen at Betty's pretty speech, but it faded as quickly, leaving her paler than before.

"Because of Mr. Jerome?" she said. "What about him?"

"Oh, he's gone—didn't you know?" said Betty.

"He's at Over, he went there two days ago—something rather particular, and he's going on to his own place straight from there, without coming back. Of course he'll be with us for Christmas, but that's some way off."

"Yes," said Susie, but that was all.

She made some excuse for hastening home before her sisters; for once, the Misses Jerome found Catherine and Emily more

responsive and interested than their favourite Susie.

Lavinia was sitting alone in the drawing-room that afternoon, when the door opened and Susie came in alone.

“Are you home already? Where are the others?” Miss Thickness asked.

“I came on first. I wanted to tell you, sister, what, remembering all you said the other evening—the evening of the dinner-party,” said Susie, her voice trembling a little, “you will, I am sure, be glad to hear. Ce—Mr. Jerome has gone.”

Lavinia let her hands drop.

“There now—I told you so,” she exclaimed. “Where has he gone, and when?”

“Two days ago, I believe—to Over in the first place, and straight on to his own home,” said Susie in a dry, monotonous tone, as if repeating a lesson by heart.

“Ah, just as I thought. I have heard again, more definitely,” Lavinia went on, “about Miss Bendover’s engagement. It is quite certain, though not to be announced just yet. All that annoyed me the other evening in his manner to you was a mere blind ; he was just amusing himself by trying to make you flirt. I would not have mentioned it again ; it is not a pleasant subject, but now that you see it all clearly, it is as well for you to understand the whole. I am glad the young man sees he *was* going too far, even though he might shelter himself by saying you seem a mere child.”

“He could not say that,” said Susie.

“Well, in any case—even had Miss Bendover not come in his way, he would never have thought of *you*. He is looking out for money. He has that place of his own that came through his godfather, but he is spend-

ing far too much—a ridiculous amount—in building new cottages, schools, and goodness knows what; the place had certainly been neglected, but he has taken up this philanthropic craze, and will be crippled in his income for years. He can only afford it by marrying a rich wife. So you see, Susie—Thank heaven you have a sister who does not shrink from telling you the truth, even if hurting to you.”

“Thank you,” Lavinia, said Susie, gently, though her tone was still hard and dry. And then she went up stairs to her own room.

“Poor child,” said Lavinia to herself with a thrill of genuine womanly feeling, “I would have spared her if I could. It is in no way *my* doing. How I seemed to foresee it all! As if a man of his class would ever have thought seriously of a girl like Susie!

It will be a lesson to her for life. All the same, how I do wish those people had never come to disturb our peaceful life."

And Susie meanwhile had flung herself at full length on her bed, and there was sobbing her poor little heart out, with the unmitigated anguish of nineteen.

"How can men be so wicked?" she thought. "And Lavinia says it's quite common, that they always amuse themselves like that. But *oh*, if only I could make him think I hadn't taken it seriously, that I hadn't cared?"

Ah, yes, there was the sting!

It was hard work for Susie to keep up appearances, especially to Lavinia. In her heart she felt a certain gratitude due to her eldest sister, and she was vexed with herself that she found the debt so difficult of payment.

“It was an ungracious task,” the girl repeated to herself. “I *should* be grateful to her. But if she had been less prejudiced against the Jeromes all through, I should have found it easier to thank her now.”

Pride came to her aid to a certain extent. She laughed and talked more than usual through the long, dreary Sunday which seemed as if it would never come to an end, for she missed Betty's bright companionship, and yet—“just for a day or two,” she said to herself, “I *can't* stand her asking if there is anything the matter. So she sent word by Cathie that her head was still aching, and for the first time since the Jeromes had come to The Dell, played truant from the Sunday school. Then came Monday, Susie was busy all the morning; she had of late got Lavinia by degrees to allow her to be of use in household matters; but by the afternoon she felt

as if the strain was growing almost more than she could bear.

“I *must* be alone,” she said to herself with a sort of inaudible cry, and she dressed herself quickly and set off for a solitary ramble through the now all but bare, wintry-looking woods, leaving word with a servant that she would be in before dark.

Once she was out of the house and could feel herself really alone it seemed to Susie as if she could breathe more freely. She turned away from the direction of The Dell, and entered the woods at the other side, which skirted the high road leading to the great junction, where all travellers from Leaford had to change wherever they happened to be bound for. She walked quickly, for she wanted to tire herself, with a childish idea that if she could succeed in doing so, the stinging pain which had never left her

since Lavinia had so relentlessly "opened her eyes," would grow less acute.

"To think it isn't a week ago since that evening I was so happy," she thought. "What a fool I was. And, oh, to think how he must have laughed at me! That is the worst. If *only* I could find out some way of making him think I didn't care. But very likely he has forgotten all about me already, unless he has been amusing Miss Bendover by describing my absurdities. And to think that I was so mad as to put myself under an obligation to him. What *would* Lavinia say if she knew about Gregory. She must *never* know!"

She had walked some distance when the increasingly chilly feeling in the air, and the already fading light warned her that the short afternoon was closing in, and she turned to retrace her steps. Suddenly the sound of

some one walking rapidly behind her, made her half-unconsciously slacken her pace.

“ I will let whoever it is overtake me,” she thought. “ I hate being followed.”

But almost as she decided thus, a voice calling her by name, made her start.

“ Miss Thickness ! Susie ! Is it possible ? What a piece of luck ! ” and the joyous, eager tones were those of Cesar Jerome.

Susie’s heart almost stopped beating. Here, and how unexpectedly, was the opportunity she had been longing for ! Her heart went on again with almost suffocating rapidity ; it seemed to her as if Cesar must hear it. She made a gigantic effort over herself.

“ Mr. Jerome ! ” she said lightly. “ From where have you dropped ? Didn’t some one or other say you had left, or was it your brother ? ”

He looked at her with already a shadow of disappointment and perplexity.

“Yes,” he said, “I am supposed to have left. I was summoned away the morning after the last time we met.”

Susie puckered her pretty brows with a sort of affectation of bewilderment.

“That’s far too puzzling,” she said. “When did we last meet? Oh, yes, ten days ago, wasn’t it? the day you dined with us.”

“No,” said Mr. Jerome, “it is not ten days ago. It will be a week to-morrow.”

“What a memory you have!” she said, laughing. “And what have you been doing with yourself since then—Oh yes, now I remember, you said you were going to Over, or could that too have been Mr. Alexis Jerome? Do forgive me if it was.”

He looked at her in surprise, what had

come over her? Her eyes were sparkling, with fun and excitement it seemed to him. What had become of the gentle, half-shy Susie of a week ago? And he who had been saying to himself that he feared, a fear which was much more a hope, that she would be missing him and wondering at his sudden departure. And some careless words which had been dropped in his hearing at Over returned to his memory. "That third Miss Thickness, the very pretty one," Helen, or one of the Bendovers had said, "is really beginning to be talked about a good deal. Mr. Chard admires her immensely."

"No," he said at last after a pause of some moments, "it was not Alex, it was I. I am on my way from Over now. I have stayed longer there than I expected."

"Oh," she said carelessly. "It must be a pleasant house to stay at."

“ I was not there exactly for pleasure,” he said, “ though it was not unpleasant. But can't we get something more interesting to talk about ? ” he went on with a sort of effort to throw off the curious impression of her manner, and smiling a little.

“ I think I must hurry home,” said Susie, glancing as she spoke at a path leading directly to the road. “ This is my nearest way. Good-bye, Mr. Jerome. It is nearer for you to go on through the woods. I suppose we shall be seeing you again about Christmas ? ”

“ I don't know,” he said—the smile had quite faded from his face—“ in case you don't, perhaps I should tell——”

“ But you are *sure* to be in the neighbourhood, even if not at Leaford,” interrupted Susie. “ It is very cold, don't you think so ? ” and she shivered a little as if eager to get away.

“If I am in the neighbourhood I shall certainly be at Leaford,” he replied, with again a slight look of perplexity. “I won’t detain you, Miss Thickness. I was only going to say you may depend on my going to see your brother again—I am sure he will be all right. Still——”

Then Susie’s face changed for the first time and its old expression returned.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “Yes, I am glad to be able to thank you once again for all your goodness to him.”

Cesar looked at her. She seemed so like herself that he took courage.

“I have been very glad to do what I have done,” he said, simply, “and I think you know it. Why—what has been—what has made you so different to-day, Miss Thickness? Have I done anything to annoy you, unwittingly, of course?”

Susie laughed.

“What a curious idea!” she said. “On the contrary I feel ashamed—I really do—to think of the great, very great, obligation I am under to you. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Pray don’t speak of it so. I should be very sorry for you to feel it in that way,” he said, eagerly. “You—it is not—if only I could explain,” he added, confusedly.

“He is wishing he might tell me of his engagement to Miss Bendover,” thought Susie. “He is conceited enough to think that would set me at my ease with him, I suppose.”

Her face flushed and she grew angry at feeling it.

“No explanation could possibly make me feel that I was not under very great obliga-

tion to you," she said. "And I shall always be *most* grateful to you, Mr. Jerome. Good-bye again," and she held out her hand, barely touching his, and then hastened along the side path to the road.

The best and cleverest and most observant men are still often very stupid. Susie did not look back—she did not see that Mr. Jerome, instead of pursuing his way to The Dell, turned straight on his heels, returning whence he had come. Nor did she hear the words he muttered to himself as he took his watch out of his pocket.

"I may still catch the express at Dartley, if I walk fast," he said. "I couldn't stand them all at The Dell, wondering what I had come for and all the rest of it. If *she* tells them she has seen me, I can't help it; very likely she won't. But what *is* the meaning of it? Is it my own fault somehow, have I

mismanaged it, or have I been mistaken in imagining she was getting to care for me ? ”

Cesar knit his brows and tried to think it out quietly. It was not easy ; he was smarting under the bitter disappointment of Susie’s strangely changed manner. He had snatched this one evening at Leaford in the hope of somehow or other succeeding in getting a glimpse of her, *perhaps*, if he judged it not premature, venturing a little further than he had yet dared to go.

“ For though I dare not, it would not have been right to take advantage of her inexperience till I had thoroughly explained my position,” he thought. “ I might have felt my way a little. It would have been something to have taken away with me if she had been as she was the other evening. But to be so repulsed, to see so plainly how abso-

lutely indifferent I am to her, is hard lines. Coming so suddenly too—was she flirting the other night? Good heavens, I did not think she knew how to flirt! I thought her as genuine as Betty. And after all, so perhaps she is,” he reflected with a sigh. “Perhaps she saw how much in earnest I was and thought it kind to stop it. Only, there was something strange, almost bitter, in her manner.”

Then his thoughts reverted to Miss Bendover’s mention of Mr. Chard.

“Even if there is anything in it,” he thought, “that need not have made Susie so—so terribly different in her manner to me. It would have been more like her to have shown me my mistake more—gently. Heaven knows I don’t think too highly of myself, and she, so lovely, so sure to be admired.”

Cesar Jerome was right in his estimate of himself so far as his modesty was concerned. But even this did not explain things satisfactorily. Suddenly he stopped short, as a new idea struck him.

“ Can any one have been making mischief? Miss Thickness—the eldest one—if she found harm to say of Betty, if she was prejudiced against her and Vanda, *I* need not expect to escape! Yet she seemed so nice that evening, giving me Susie to take in to dinner, too. Ah well, I must be patient for a while, though it is rather hard, and may be harder still if I have really been mistaken. I cannot help being glad that I have her little ring.”

Just at that moment, Susie, on the steps of her father's house by this time, started as a sudden recollection occurred to her.

“ Oh dear,” she thought, “ and he has still got my ring ! ”

At dinner that evening Susie seemed to have quite recovered her spirits. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed. Lavinia glanced at her once or twice with some anxiety, but there did not appear to be anything forced about the girl's manner. Nor was there ; for the moment she was enjoying the sensation of having, as she imagined, triumphed.

“ She is all right,” thought Miss Thickness. “ She was only suffering from a sort of mortification. How glad I am I stopped it in time ! But she must not let any of *them* suspect anything, and I know she has been keeping out of their way. That will never do.”

“ Susie,” she said presently, “ can you take a message for me to the Miss Jeromes to-

morrow ? There is a girl I want them to take into the class, a girl who may really profit by it, as she is intended to be a servant."

Susie looked up quickly. It was generous of Lavinia to withdraw her opposition, she thought, but yet somehow it gave her less pleasure now.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I can of course go if you like. I was not intending to do so ; it is Betty's turn to come to see me, I think."

"Oh, Susie," said Emily, "I think that's rather mean of you. Betty explained that she would be very busy for a few days ; she doesn't like leaving her mother when Mr. Jerome first goes away, especially as the others are at Windless for two nights."

"At Windless," said Mr. Thickness ; "oh,

that reminds me, Helen Bendover's engagement is announced. I have known it was coming for some little time, Bendover was consulting me about some little business matters, but he told me when he was in to-day, that it is no longer a secret."

"Ah, indeed," said Lavinia, and Susie felt that she did *not* look at her. "I suppose then Mr. Jerome will soon be coming back again?"

"Mr. Jerome?" exclaimed her father, "what has he to do with it? She is engaged to the eldest of the Herveys, Mark Hervey—the people who were staying at Windless lately—cousins of the Jeromes."

"Oh," said Lavinia, but for once that was all.

The evening passed like a strange, confused dream to Susie. But as they were all

going to bed, Miss Thickness called her into her room.

“Susie,” she said. “Of course I cannot deny that I have made a mistake. Still I do not regret it. At all costs it was best to put any such idea completely out of your head, If it is not Helen Bendover it will soon be some one else.”

“Yes?” said Susie, faintly.

“You see, dear,”—how seldom had Lavinia ever so addressed her!—“his family, even supposing he were different himself, could *never* consent to his marrying one of us. We are quite in a different world, and they look upon things quite differently. Besides this, he must marry money. I have found out about it all—he has a fine property from his mother’s side, but it is very much burdened and has been dreadfully neglected, and he

needs money. It is all as clear as daylight ; they have sent him away before there was any real danger, or he has thought it wiser to go himself. If—that is to say, he has given any serious thought to it, to *you*, at all, and sees it might do you harm.”

“ He does not think so *now*, at any rate,” Susie burst out, but though Lavinia looked mystified, the girl would not explain herself further.

“ I don’t suppose he has ever thought of it seriously,” she went on ; “ these London men, you know, Susie—they forget how different a girl brought up like you is—they look upon it as mere amusement.”

“ Yes,” said Susie, wearily, “ I suppose so. But don’t let us talk of it any more for goodness’ sake. Good-night, sister.”

“But you must not stay away from The Dell—it would look as if you were, well, disappointed,” said Lavinia.

“I don’t much care if it does,” thought Susie to herself, for all the spirit was gone out of her.



set in
fiercely

and ruthlessly that

year. By the middle of

December there had been

a heavy fall of snow, which showed no signs of melting. Three days before Christmas the snow began again. People tried to believe they liked it, and congratulated each

other on the "real, old-fashioned Christmas weather," but in their hearts I think even the strongest wished it were not *quite* so cold, and as for the feebler ones, the old and the very young, the invalids, and worst of all perhaps, the very poor, ah! the old-fashioned winter brought them no cause for rejoicing.

The morning before that of Christmas Eve saw Susie toiling along the road to The Dell. She had promised Betty to be with her early, and she was determined not to disappoint her. She had even braved Lavinia's remonstrances; her allusions to colds and neuralgia, and chilblains and frost-bites had fallen unheeded.

"You know I don't catch cold nearly as easily as I used to do," she said. "None of us do; we have been so much more in the open air this autumn, and the skating has made us so hardy," and Lavinia had to give



"THE MORNING . . . SAW SUSIE TOILING ALONG THE ROAD TO
THE DELL."



in. It was much less uncommon than of yore for Susie to assert herself, and somehow Miss Thickness did not resent her doing so, as might have been expected. Susie had changed in the last two months; she had grown older, and sometimes it almost seemed, harder; there had been moments at which it had not been easy for her to keep down her resentment against Lavinia for her, in a sense, well-meant interference.

It had been fortunate that Miss Thickness's regard for appearances, or family pride, had led her from the first to oppose Susie's holding herself aloof from her friends at The Dell. For despite Betty Jerome's faithfulness, the drifting apart, once begun, might, under the circumstances, have gone far. And how Susie would have got through these weary weeks without Betty, she often asked herself. Betty herself was anxious and uneasy—she

had seen a good deal and suspected more, and she felt by instinct that Susie was unhappy. Had any one but her beloved Cesar been concerned, she would have been ready with her indignant blame. But that *he* could have been selfish or inconsiderate, capable in the slightest degree of trifling with any girl, above all, one so—in spite of the element of prejudice and suspiciousness resulting from her narrow education—peculiarly inexperienced as Susie, his sister knew to be impossible. Something had gone wrong, Betty saw, and it was a great pity. For she loved Susie dearly, they all loved her, and would be ready to love her still more. And though Cesar never mentioned her in his letters, Betty felt convinced he had not forgotten her.

Susie had thrown herself with increased zeal into all her friend's interests and employ-

ments; her really quick intelligence and practical capabilities had developed astonishingly.

“She would be the very wife for Cesar,” thought Betty, and not Betty alone.

So on the whole the time had passed satisfactorily, though with the impetuosity of her age, Susie believed herself to have outlived her youth since that fatal afternoon in the woods, when she had met Mr. Jerome for the last time.

Had he been in earnest or not? Had she herself crushed it all, or had there been nothing on his part to crush? These were the torturing questions which it required more determination than poor Susie was mistress of, to put aside, even while she repeated to herself over and over again that *now* “any way, it was too late.”

She had not been allowed to forget him.

Gregory's letters were all in the same strain. That very morning she had got one, alluding more warmly than ever to Mr. Jerome's goodness in coming round, ever so far out of his way, to see the boy again, as he had promised. For Gregory was not coming home for Christmas. An examination was impending, and he had asked and obtained leave to stay on working till it came off.

"I am pretty sure I shall pass now," he wrote to Susie, "and if I do, you will know whom to thank for it. And it will be a very different matter telling father *then*, about all my folly, won't it?"

Susie had sighed as she read the letter, even though it was so satisfactory. And she sighed again as she thought of it, while making her way through the snow. She had been especially resolute in coming that morning, because she knew Mr. Jerome was

expected the same evening ; “ for once he is there,” she thought, “ I can’t go ; I don’t know how I am to manage. And then there is my ring.”

Betty was full of gratitude to her for keeping her appointment, and their business matters, concerns of Christmas trees and treats of various kinds, were fully discussed. The treat *par excellence* was to be next week.

“ I do hope the snow will have left off falling by then,” said Betty. “ See, Susie, it is beginning again a little, and they say we shall have a heavy fall before night. It is really too much of a good thing. And how fearfully cold it must be travelling. Both our brothers are coming to-night.”

Susie looked surprised. “ Is Mr. Alexis Jerome away too ? ” she said. “ Martin went to London last week, and we were very sorry for him to have to go, for fear he

shouldn't get back for Christmas, poor old fellow. But he is coming—by the two o'clock express, there was a note this morning. If only James and Gregory were coming too!”

“I *meant* Martin,” said Betty, “not Alex. You didn't understand when I said ‘both our brothers,’ that I meant yours and ours. We had a letter from Cesar this morning; he has come round by London, rather a long round, and he met your brother yesterday and perhaps they're coming together. But Cesar was to write again fixing his train. We shall hear this afternoon.”

“Oh,” said Susie, “I didn't know. Martin didn't mention Mr. Jerome. At least,” with a sudden recollection that the note was to Lavinia, “I didn't see what he said.”

The snow was falling more heavily.

“I must go,” said Susie.

“Yes,” said Betty, “I'm afraid you must.

I wish it would clear. I don't like people travelling in such weather. I'm afraid of their being snowed up, or something."

"It doesn't matter for men," said Susie, rather unsympathizingly. Then she kissed Betty and went home.

"He has gone to see Gregory," she said to herself. "How funny that he and Martin should have run against each other in London. I'm glad I went this morning; now I shall not need to go again for some days, and I must trust to chance to keep out of his way. When Greg comes down, if Mr. Jerome is still here, he will be able himself to see about repaying the money. That must be done; and if papa is pleased with Gregory he won't mind advancing it out of his allowance. I do hope Greg will pass. But at all costs *he* must be paid, and I must get back my ring."

Lost in her reflections she hardly perceived how, more and more thickly, the flakes were falling.

“It’s going to be a regular snowstorm,” said Emily, who met her at the door. “If it’s like this in London, perhaps Martin won’t come to-day.”

“Oh, nonsense!” said Susie. “As if a snowstorm mattered. And very likely it’s much worse here than in London.”

By luncheon-time it was almost dark ; there seemed a strange, unreal sort of feeling about everywhere.

“It makes one feel quite stupefied,” said Cathie.

“Yes,” Mr. Thickness agreed, “I rarely remember such a snowfall. I wish Martin had managed to get back last night,” he added.

The afternoon wore on, and as the normal

hour for daylight to fade approached, the snow at last gave signs of ceasing.

“Martin should be here by six,” said Mr. Thickness, as he came into the drawing-room, where Lavinia was dispensing tea. “Keep some tea hot for him, my dear. He will be frightfully cold,” and he himself went up to the fireplace, where he stood rubbing his hands in the warm blaze.

But six o'clock came and went and brought no sign of the traveller. Dinner was put off for half-an-hour, then ordered up. It was no use waiting, Miss Thickness decided; most likely Martin had put off till the next day after all; there was not the slightest need for uneasiness.

Qui s'excuse s'accuse, however. Her very disclaimer of any just cause for anxiety suggested, or rather gave form to the unacknowledged misgivings that were floating about.

Dinner was a forced affair ; everybody tried to talk as usual, and nobody succeeded, and everybody felt glad when it was over.

As he rose from the table Mr. Thickness glanced at Ned in an off-hand manner.

“ You’re not afraid of getting your feet wet, my boy ? ” he said. “ I think you might as well run along to the station and inquire if the 5.45 has come in from Dartley. It may have been delayed by the snow, and if so Martin may be coming still. Or if it is in, it will be more satisfactory to know he is certainly not coming to-night.”

Off went Ned, noways loath, and the rest of the family settled themselves for the evening as usual in the drawing-room. Some desultory conversation went on, though everybody felt that till Ned’s return there was an increased sense of strain and unrest. Suddenly the door-bell rang—Ned was not yet pro-

moted to a latch-key—the boy's voice was heard for an instant, "All in the drawing-room, you say?" and in a moment he was among them, his legs and boots wet and snow-be-spattered, but though he had evidently not wiped his feet, no word of remonstrance came from Lavinia. For his pale face and anxious eyes heralded some bad news.

"Papa," he said, "sister—the 5.45 has been in some time. But it had to leave Dartley before the London express was in. There's—there's been an awful accident they say—about half way down the line—something to do with the snow and the signals. And they haven't got any precise news yet. They can't telegraph; the wires are broken. But——No, papa;" as Mr. Thickness was starting to his feet, "it's no use—no earthly use your going. They've promised—sworn—Dredge, you know, the telegraph clerk whose

old mother the girls look after—he has sworn to send up as soon as any news comes. But—it's possible we may not hear to-night. That's the worst of it."

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An hour or two passed—hours which seemed like days. Lavinia and Cathie tried to cheer their father; Ned and Emily kept making furtive expeditions to the front door; Susie sat apart and still, speaking to no one, with her face white and set.

"Poor Susie," said Catherine, gently, once or twice, under her breath, "I almost think she feels it the worst of us all," but when she stole up to her and kissed her gently Susie barely responded.

Then again a ring at the hall door—a rather uncertain, jerky, half-timorous one this time—again a momentary discussion in the

hall, where a servant had evidently been on the alert, the drawing-room door opens and a strange figure appears. A small figure so shrouded in a cloak or shawl, that at first sight of it each stares at the other in bewilderment. Then the cloak is thrown off and a familiar voice is heard.

“ Don’t be startled ; it’s only me—Betty. I’ve—I’ve run down myself to—to tell you,” she was sadly out of breath, “ that it’s all right about Martin, your son I mean, Mr. Thickness, we’ve just heard——”

“ How ? What ? Dredge promised,” began Ned.

“ It’s no news of the—the accident,” Betty went on, with a little shiver, “ none has come. It’s only that we’ve just had a letter from—Cesar,” and here she seemed to choke down something, “ saying that Martin was *not* coming down with him to-day. He was

unavoidably detained till to-morrow, he told Cesar. It is quite certain he was not coming. I thought you'd be so glad to know. The letter should have been here at four. Cesar only mentioned it casually, but I was so glad he did. And I just rushed off myself to tell you. I thought none of the servants would have understood how to explain it properly."

"Oh, Miss Jerome, oh, Betty, how can we thank you?" exclaimed a voice, or everybody's voice all together. "And Mr. Jerome, your brother—he was not coming either then?" and this time it was Lavinia who spoke.

"No, no—he *was* coming. He—must be in the train, the very train. We may not know *anything* till to-morrow," and here poor Betty broke down and burst into tears.

A silence fell on them all. They glanced

at the little bringer of good news with a sort of reverence.

“And in the midst of your own terrible anxiety you thought of us,” said Lavinia, brokenly. “Oh, my child—you have done more than you knew.”

She threw her arms round Betty and kissed her. She was not repulsed. But then the girl started up. “I must run back,” she said; “don’t anybody come with me, please. It would only—they might think it was Cesar if they saw two. Let me go alone please, dear Miss Thickness.”

And before they could say more she was away. Ten minutes later when calm was a little restored some one glancing round, missed Susie.

“Can she have run after Betty?” said Catherine.

But “No, miss, I saw Miss Susie run up

stairs to her own room," said the parlourmaid. And Lavinia with mingling feelings, decided that for the moment it would be kindest to leave her alone.

Susie was not in her own room however. She was out, making her way by a bye-path through the field at the side of the garden, which led to the station. It was a short cut usually, though to-night the encumbered ground made it the very reverse. But at least she was here less likely to be seen. "And if I am seen," she thought, "I can ask for news as if on Martin's account."

What, indeed, she meant to do when she got to the station, she did not know. She had a vague idea that she would hear *something* just by standing about for a few minutes ; all she was sure of was that she could not have endured another moment's strain of suspense at home among them all, without

going out of her mind. So she toiled on, keeping near the hedge, for the snow was falling again, and she needed the landmark.

It was hard work ; once or twice she fell, and had difficulty in getting to her feet again.

“ How did Betty manage, I wonder ? ” she said to herself, not knowing that Betty had been wise enough to keep to the road, and furthermore that it was only just now that the blinding, bewildering snow had begun again.

“ I shall never get to the station, ” she said.

But suddenly a dark figure loomed out close beside her.

Susie gave a little scream.

“ Who is there ? What is the matter ? ” said a well-known voice.

Susie, in her state of excitement, could not at first speak.

“Is it you, Mr. Jerome?” she said at last.
“It is not your ghost?”

“Susie!” the ghost replied, catching hold of her as she stood floundering in the snow.
“What in heaven’s name are you doing out here?”

Susie’s voice quivered and shook as she replied:

“I don’t know. I was going to the station to ask about the accident. I couldn’t bear the suspense. No one knows. Don’t—don’t tell any one,” she answered, confusedly.

“You were afraid about Martin?” he said, quickly.

“No; we knew he wasn’t coming; it wasn’t that,” said Susie. “It was about *you*. I could not bear the thought that if anything happened to you, it would have been my fault. At least, it would always have seemed so to me, for it was on Gregory’s account

you had come round by London, I know. I could not have endured the self-reproach," and she seemed as if she would have drawn away her hands.

But he held them firmly.

"Susie," he said, "was that all? Tell me the truth—was it only self-reproach you would have felt? Was I, as I have been almost driven to think, was I quite mistaken in believing—you cared a little—for me, myself?"

"I don't know," she began; then conscious of a half-smothered exclamation of impatience on his part—"no!" she said, boldly, "you were not mistaken. I have been very miserable lately."

"And why—oh, why were you so strange, so frightfully changed to me that last day we met? I had come on purpose on the chance of seeing you."

“I thought you had only been—I don’t know how to say it—amusing yourself a little with me. I thought you were going to marry Miss Bendover, and in any case that you wouldn’t, that your people wouldn’t let you, think of *me*,” said Susie slowly and reluctantly. “I am not rich — or grand,” she went on with a little tremulous laugh.

“But you are—now at least—yes, now and for ever—you are my Susie, the one woman in the world to me,” he whispered. “Rich and grand indeed! *I* am neither the one nor the other. I am scarcely more than poor, Susie, but that will mend with time. And—”

But Susie made a sudden start.

“Oh,” she cried, “you must not stay here. They are in an agony about you at The Dell. And Betty was so thoughtful

for us," she went on, hurriedly telling what had happened.

"It is all right," he said. "Two of our servants were at the station. I sent them on; they would go much quicker than I. I came round by this short cut, not expecting to find it so heavy. Thank God I did, Susie. How long would you have gone on doubting me? I longed to speak out fully that last day—before then I hardly dared, not till I had got some things settled. And now I don't *think* your father can object," he added. "But you must not stay here in the snow, my darling."

"How was it? Was there *not* an accident? How did you get here?" asked Susie.

"They sent on a special train. Yes, there was an accident, but much exaggerated. Only two poor fellows killed, but

no passengers. We have all been hard at work for some hours, and indeed we scarcely hoped to get on to-night at all. I must see you in at your own gate, Susie—and to-morrow—I may come down early, may I not ?”

“ But don’t tell any one—ever—about to-night ?” said Susie.

“ Not Lavinia—oh, surely I may tell Lavinia ?” he replied, maliciously, for he had a shrewd suspicion who was at the bottom of all Susie’s “ thoughts” about him.

But Susie was on the other side of the gate by this time.

“ I will tell Lavinia myself,” she replied.

“ Then *I* shall tell Betty,” he said. “ I should have some of the pleasure.”

“ And oh,” Susie suddenly exclaimed,

“please don't forget to give me back my ring.”

“Nothing of the kind. You promised me I should buy it if I wished to do so. ‘Fair exchange is no robbery.’ I am going to pay you for it—with another.”

THE END.



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