



AUNT DIANA

ROSA NOVCHETTE CAREY

WITH

ILLUSTRATIONS



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ALISON WATCHED, HALF FASCINATED BY HORROR.

[See page 142.]

AUNT DIANA

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

*AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,' 'ESTHER CAMBRON'S
STORY,' ETC.*

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AUNT DIANA.

CHAPTER I.

ALISON DROPS HER ROSES.

THERE are conflicts in most lives—real hand-to-hand combats, that have to be fought, not with any fleshly weapons, but with the inner forces of the being—battles wherein the victory is not always to the strong, where the young and the weak and the little ones may be found abiding nearest to the standards.

Such a conflict had come to Alison Merle, breaking up the surface of her smooth outer life, and revealing possible shoals and quicksands, in which many of her brightest hopes might be wrecked, when Duty with its sternest face seemed to beckon to her on one side, and Inclination whispered tenderly into her ear on the other, 'You are too young for such a piece of self-sacrifice; no one in their senses would ask such a thing of you.'

'It is hard. I do not know that even if Aunt Di think it right I shall ever have the heart to do it,' murmured Alison, talking to herself in her agitation, after the manner of older folk. 'I have just rooted myself in this dear place, and the soil suits me. I could not flourish anywhere else; and,' finished Alison, with a quaint little smile, 'sickly plants are worth nothing.'

To any ordinary spectator the interior of that little room would have presented a picture of perfect serenity and absolute comfort. Even the young creature comfortably seated in a chair by the window, with an open letter and a cluster of deep red roses lying amongst the folds of her white gown, presented no disturbing image, though the cheek had lost its wonted fresh colour, and the dark, dreamy eyes had a look of doubt that was almost pain in them.

It was a still, drowsy afternoon in June; down in the pleasant

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garden below all the winged creatures in nature were holding high revel ; a butterflies' feast seemed to be held among the roses ; gnats and dragon-flies moved in giddy circles over the lawn ; two or three solemn brown bees had met in conclave over one flower-bed ; while the insects danced airily and boomed through their tiny trumpets, a shrill concert sounded from the trees overhead ; through the thick foliage one could catch the silvery gleam of water ; the splash of an oar sounded in the distance, then another, slow, measured, rhythmic ; surely an afternoon for an idle mood, when one's thoughts might cull sweets like the bees.

The low bay window at which Alison was sitting was framed in roses, the long sprays tapped softly against the glass ; the greenery had transformed it into an old-fashioned bower, and many a wandering bee found its way inside, in curious investigation of the flower-filled vases.

How Alison had grown to love that room ! She looked round it now with half-regretful, appreciative eyes, that noted every trifle—the white tent bed, the wardrobe that Aunt Di had so tastefully painted with her own hand (a marvellous work of art in Alison's eyes), the hanging book-cases, the little writing-table, the snug couch with its nest of pillows, the simply framed landscapes on the wall, all the work of the same skilful hand ; the tame canary pluming its yellow coat fussily after its bath. Surely an ideal girl's room ! And Alison did so love the beauty and fitness of things—anything that was ugly or disorderly gave her positive pain.

'You are a little Sybarite,' Aunt Diana said once, with a chiding laugh. 'A crumpled rose-leaf would disturb your slumbers. What a comfort that I have transplanted you from The Holms ! The atmosphere of Moss-side, old-maidish as it is, suits you much better. A constitution like Roger's can stand it, but hardly you, Ailie.'

Alison remembered this speech ; it had pained her a little at the time ; it was just one of Aunt Diana's shrewd speeches that brought one suddenly face to face with oneself, like one's image reflected in an over-true looking-glass.

Was that true of her ? Was she really as indolent and luxury-loving as Aunt Diana's words seemed to imply ?

The discomforts of her home life had been very great. Looking back through the glamour of these two happy years, during which she had lived at Moss-side, her life seemed to her almost unbearable, and yet she had shared it with those she dearly loved. Was not

Roger part of it, and Rudel and her father, not to mention Missie and Poppie? Was it not an unnatural thing that she should be blooming here, a petted exotic, instead of abiding in the rougher home soil?

Two years ago—she had been sixteen then, and, oh, how discontented and ill and unhappy she had been! It was not only the loss of her mother, it was her own incapacity for responsibility, her morbid dislike to her surroundings, that had fretted all her fine colour away. Perhaps her health may have been partly the cause, but surely she need not have been so disagreeable, so captious, so miserable, so disposed to look on the dark side of everything, that even Roger, with all his sweet temper, gave her a wide berth, and her father—well, thought Alison, with a shadowed brow, her father had never quite understood her. Change of air would do her good, and then Aunt Diana had come down upon them with the freshness of a moorland breeze.

‘You must give your eldest girl to me, Ainslie,’ she had said to Alison’s father; ‘she wants care and cherishing more than Miss Leigh has time to give her. She looks overgrown and sickly; and,’ finished Aunt Diana, with a funny little laugh, ‘I am a neat sort of person, and I do hate to see a round thing trying to fit itself into a square hole; it leaves all the corners empty and ready for dust.’ And, of course, Aunt Diana had her way.

Instead of the whirr of machinery—for her father’s saw-mills were just behind their house—Alison had now only to listen to the soft flow of the river that glided below the green lawns and shrubberies of Moss-side; instead of waking up in the morning to look across the dusty shrubs and trees to the vast wood piles and masses of un-sawn timber, that seemed endlessly between her and the blue sky, Alison’s eyes had now the finest prospect: one shaded garden seemed to run into another, and when the willows were thinned or bare in winter-time, what a view of the river and green meadows on the opposite side!

The moral surroundings were almost as much changed. Instead of Miss Leigh’s dry method of instruction—her laboured and hackneyed phrases, suggestive of the bare bones of wisdom—Aunt Diana had placed within her reach many a pleasant short cut to knowledge, had suggested all sorts of enviable accomplishments; money was not stinted where Alison’s talents could be turned to account. Lavish by nature, Aunt Diana showed herself liberal in all

that concerned her niece's welfare. What she could teach herself she taught without regarding time or pains; when she left it to others, she surrounded Alison with a certain wise oversight that made itself felt; faults were rebuked smilingly, little errors of judgment commented on by a passing word. Aunt Diana could be abrupt, critical, keen as a sea breeze, but her censure never hurt or stung or corroded, as some people's sharp speeches did. Alison always heard her humbly, owned her right, and set herself to do better.

In this pleasant but bracing atmosphere Alison had thriven and grown. She was still a tall slim girl, somewhat youthful in look, but with plenty of warm life and energy about her; and though the dark eyes had still their old trick of dreaming, they seemed to dream more happily, and the shadow did not lie so deep in them—not, at least, until the June afternoon, when Alison sat sighing and visibly disturbed with her lap full of roses. It was evident at last that she found her thoughts too painful, for after another half-hour's intense brooding she suddenly jumped up from her seat, scattering the flowers where they lay unheeded on the Indian matting, and walked abruptly to the door.

She had dropped her letters, too; but she went back and picked them up, not replacing them in their envelopes, and then she went out into the passage.

A dark oak staircase led into a little square hall, fitted up with book-cases like a library, with a harmonium on one side; a glass door opened into a conservatory, through which one passed into the garden.

Alison turned the handle of a door just opposite the staircase, and stood for a moment hesitating on the threshold.

What a pleasant room that was, half studio and half drawing-room, full of cross lights, and artistically littered with an odd jumble of mediæval and modern furniture—oak chairs and cabinets, basket-work lounges, tiny tea-tables, fit for Lilliputian princesses, and hanging cupboards of quaint old china that gave warm colouring to the whole. A wiry brown terrier with bright eyes jumped up with a welcome bark; a small black kitten, about the size of a moderate piece of coal, followed him gingerly. Alison stooped down to caress them, but her eyes were still fixed on a lady who stood with her back towards her, painting at an easel.

'Well, child, what now?' The voice was nicely modulated, clear,

and musical, but the manner slightly abrupt. Alison lifted up Jetty in her arms while Trip rolled over at her feet, in a vain attempt to testify his joy. 'I have come to see you, Aunt Di,' she returned, in an hesitating way.

'And I suppose you prefer my profile to my front face,' remarked Miss Carrington drily, as she painted a troublesome little piece of foliage. 'Alison,' in a more animated manner, 'my special muse is cross-grained to-day; I cannot woo her with these blues and greens at all; this tree does not please me; I wanted an effect of shadowy brightness, such as one sees when the wind plays through the leaves, and the road is flecked with a sort of lattice work of moving lights and shades, but this is far too sombre.'

Alison came forward at once, and inspected the picture. 'It is very pretty, Aunt Di,' she said, forgetting her own worries in a moment. 'It is one of your best. I think I see what you mean, but to me it is all beautiful; that old man—a pensioner, is he not? and that poor, tired sheep, that seems to have dropped down by the way, left behind by the flock, is so suggestive of the title "Noontide rest."'

'That is what I intended. You are an intelligent child, Ailie; both the man and the sheep must be old; it is not for young creatures to rest at noontide; my old pensioner has already borne the burthen and heat of the day.'

'Of course, I see what you mean, Aunt Di.'

'My parable is not hard to read,' replied Miss Carrington with a smile; but as Alison studied the picture with increased interest and admiration, a pair of shrewd, kindly eyes were studying the girl's face.

'Go and put yourself in that easy chair opposite, and tell me all about it,' she said at last, rousing her by a good-humoured little push. 'I must finish this branch if I am to enjoy my night's rest, but I can listen to any amount of lettered woes,' with a suggestive glance at Alison's hand.

'Oh! Aunt Di, how do you find out things so?' stammered Alison; then, as though used to obedience, she moved to the chair that was always reserved for Miss Carrington's visitors, whom she was wont to entertain after a fashion of her own.

People always got on with Miss Carrington, but they found it difficult to describe her; no one knew her age exactly, and certainly no one would have ventured to put such a question.

As some one once said of her, 'she was made up of negatives,'

she was neither young nor old, she was not stout, but still less was she thin ; no one in their senses could call her handsome—the word did not suit her at all, but neither would any one with eyes in their head call her plain. An old Scotch serving man once described her best in her younger days, when he said, ‘Eh, but Miss Diana is real bonnie,’ and ‘real bonnie’ she was still. The negatives held good in the matter of dress ; it was an odd thing, but people never could remember exactly what Miss Carrington wore ; she had a style of her own, they said, and it exactly suited her, and though this was somewhat vague, it hit the truth somehow. Miss Carrington had a style of her own, as befitted a middle-aged gentlewoman, one who neither wanted to look young nor dreaded to look old, who could see the first streak of grey in her bright brown hair without making herself unhappy about it. ‘We are bound to grow old,’ as she was given to remark, ‘and I do not see that we need want to loiter behind our contemporaries. Every season of the year is good ; spring is the friskiest time, but autumn has warm, mellow tints of its own ; when my hair is quite grey I mean to tell every one I think it the most becoming colour.’

In her youth people had found fault with Diana Carrington ; ‘she was too matter-of-fact, too bracing, too abrupt for their taste,’ they said ; ‘they liked a more womanly softness, it was more becoming in a girl.’ And perhaps they were right. Miss Carrington was a little abrupt, though this trait showed less markedly in her mature age ; but then she was so healthy-minded and vigorous. In society she had certainly seemed a little out of place, much as a piece of moorland heather would look if it were suddenly transplanted into a hot-house full of delicate exotics. She was not ungraceful—far from it ; but she could never be made to understand the light current coin of society—the unmeaning flow of words that passed for conversation. She liked to talk of things that interested her, or else to be wholly silent.

‘Why are you always so dreadfully in earnest?’ one of her partners said to her ; ‘when we are on the playground, we need not discuss all these serious matters.’

‘One gets tired of nothing but play,’ returned Diana, a little crossly at this, for she was interested in the subject, and wanted to pick the brains of her companion for her own purposes ; ‘grown-up children get the worst of it. When we are young we are allowed to choose our own playfellows—little girls, I mean,’ which was certainly

rude of Diana, only the gentleman received it with a good-natured laugh, and after that they were good friends to the end of the chapter.

'I really am glad I am not a girl any longer,' observed Miss Carrington once, confidentially to a lady who very much disliked growing old, 'one is so much more free, and then one can say more what one likes; a girl cannot be eccentric, it is bad form; she must follow the footsteps of the flock, and a very good thing too. I have just come, not to the prettiest, but to the most perfect age, when the tether is removed, and I am at liberty to wander into pastures new at my own sweet will, and no one can say a word;' but whatever she meant by this queer bit of philosophy, Diana certainly was happier in her middle age than she had been in her sweet youth.

'Real bonnie,' not only in face but in heart; what better could be said of any woman?

'I wonder how long I am to have patience,' observed Miss Carrington, painting on industriously, as Alison sat with drooping head, looking at her letters without offering to read them. 'I am quite sure those are Rudel's straggling characters; that boy's handwriting is a disgrace to the family; it has put him out of my will for ever; fancy one's nephew being such a sorry scribe.'

'Rudel does write badly,' returned Alison, with a faint little smile, 'but I like his letters better than Missie's; there is one from Miss Leigh, too; do you admire her handwriting, Aunt Di?'

'No, it is too thin and angular,' returned Miss Carrington severely; 'it wants freedom and breadth; it reminds me too much of Miss Leigh herself.'

'Oh, I am so glad you say that,' returned Alison delightedly; 'I thought it was only my own naughtiness, but I know I always found her so depressing.'

'Miss Leigh is a very excellent person—I quite agree with your father in that; she has a mine of gold locked up in her if one could only find the way to it; it is not gold that glitters, perhaps, but it is genuine metal for all that.'

'Why, Aunt Di, you are praising her now.'

'Of course I am praising her; I am only finding fault with her handwriting and her manners. Cultivate a pleasing manner, Alison; you have no idea how valuable a commodity it is; it is worth half the world's wares; people will not always take the trouble to dig below the surface, they prefer judging from the outer appearance. Now about poor Miss Leigh, your worthy governess and factotum.'

‘Oh, she is not the last, Aunt Di—at least, to me.’

‘Never mind, don’t interrupt me. I am in the mood for moralising, and you are certainly not in the mood for reading your letters. If she be not necessary to you, The Holms would rue her absence.’

‘I do not think we are any of us very fond of her,’ interposed Alison hurriedly. ‘I know she fidgets father dreadfully, and Roger, too, though he is so good to her.’

‘Roger is good to every one but himself,’ responded Miss Carrington; ‘but even he, with all his good nature, has owned to me that Miss Leigh has a very trying manner. You see, Alison, fussy people make poor companions. Miss Leigh has never leisure for anything but her own worries; she is too overweighted for cheerful conversation; if she could forget Poppie’s misdemeanours, and Missie’s pertness, and Rudel’s roughness, and the servants’ failures for about half an hour at a time, I could quite fancy Miss Leigh a pleasing companion; but now let me hear her letter.’

CHAPTER II.

WHAT MISS LEIGH SAID.

'IT is dreadfully long,' sighed Alison, as she reluctantly obeyed. It was evident that she wished Miss Carrington to read the letters for herself, but Aunt Diana held a different opinion.

'My dear Alison,' it began, 'I am afraid that my weekly account will be little more cheering than the last; indeed, I am arriving slowly at the conviction that, unless some change be made in the household arrangements, I shall be compelled, however reluctantly, to resign my post.'

'Humph! that looks bad,' from Miss Carrington.

'I have done all I can in representing to your father the mischief that must result from his injudicious treatment of Mabel; she is becoming so thoroughly spoiled, so entirely her own mistress, that no amount of reasoning has any effect upon her. I do not wish to lay any undue stress on her behaviour to myself; but her treatment of Mr. Roger, and the bad example that she sets to Poppie, not to mention the constant bickering that is always going on between her and Rudel, are quite destroying the harmony of the household. Your dear father will not understand how much of this mischief may be laid to his over-indulgence of Mabel; he lets her have her own way in everything, and laughs at her little airs and graces instead of checking them; latterly she has coaxed him to allow her to take the head of the table, and, what is worse, she has several times contradicted me to my face, and set aside the orders that I have given in the house; the servants have more than once complained of her interference, and, in fact, I have had to bear a great deal of grumbling from Nanny. You may imagine, my dear Alison, how trying all this is to a person of my sensitive temperament; ever since I have lived at The Holms I have tried to merit the trust reposed in me by your dear parents. Your father was good enough once to say that he had the utmost confidence in my principles and mode of tuition;

he has ceased to express himself now much on any subject. I think business is harassing him, for he looks jaded and careworn, and poor Mr. Roger seems out of spirits.

‘I always said it was a black day for us when Miss Carrington took you away from The Holms. With all due deference to your aunt’s benevolence and good feelings—for I have the highest respect for her judgment—I cannot help thinking that a daughter’s place is with her widowed father. If you had remained with us, Alison, Mabel would never have usurped your rightful place; and though I do not recollect you were much of a manager—young people seldom are—still, Mr. Roger seemed happier, and Rudel was not quite so rough.

‘You will say I am writing a complaining letter, but things have come to such a pass that I do not feel myself competent to fill such a harassing post any longer. Of course you will talk the matter over with your aunt, and perhaps you may be able to assist me to some solution of our difficulties. If Miss Carrington knows of some suitable person, perhaps she would kindly mention it to me. Of course it is hard, after eight years of faithful service, to have to seek a new situation, but we all have our feelings, and mine are outraged to such an extent that I begin to long for a little peace and quiet. Poppie sends her love; she would be a tolerably good girl if Mabel would leave her alone.

‘I remain, dear Alison,

‘Your affectionate friend,

‘PATIENCE LEIGH.’

‘Patience has changed to impatience,’ muttered Miss Carrington, grimly. ‘Sensitive people never own to being out of temper, but I should have said myself that there was a spice of ill-temper in that letter. Poor Miss Leigh is decidedly ruffled.’

‘She never could manage Missie; I always knew that,’ returned Alison sorrowfully.

‘And how old is Mabel, or Missie as you call her?’

‘Sixteen last birthday, Aunt Diana.’

‘Humph! there is not a more troublesome age. She is a woman-child, if you know what that is; a sort of hybrid creature,—something of both and with the faults of both; they have got their armour, but they “have not proved it.”’

‘Missie thinks herself quite grown-up, Aunt Di.’

‘So do we; but how the angels must laugh at us, and the poor, pitiful mistakes we grown-up children make, just as you and I would laugh at Missie!’

‘I am afraid I should be too angry to laugh,’ returned Alison.

‘That would be good ammunition wasted. I would as soon be angry with a monkey for trying to copy its master. Mabel imagines herself grown-up, and having no good model of womanhood before her eyes, except Miss Leigh’s sad countenance, has invented a character for herself. Do you think her dresses are like yours, Ailie?’

Alison shook her head doubtfully; she was evidently too heavy of heart to jest.

‘It will never do to let Miss Leigh go,’ she observed presently.

‘Oh, no, certainly not; a gold mine is valuable. Even if one has to blunder a little in finding an entrance, one would like to keep it in the family. Suppose you let me hear the contents of Rudel’s letter, and after that we can talk if you like.’ And again Alison obeyed:—

‘MY DEAR OLD ALISON,—I always said it was a jolly shame that Aunt Diana kidnapped you. We have never been comfortable since, and we never shall be; but what’s the use of grumbling? as the cat said to the dog when he had a bare bone to gnaw. It will be the same a hundred years hence. By the bye, how is Trip? I have got a jolly little animal of my own now,—an otter terrier,—and we call her Otter; she is the most knowing little creature, and so affectionate, only Missie hates her, because she sets on to her cat. Of course I edge her on to it; it is such fun to see Joe spitting and sneezing, with his back like a railway-arch, and his tail swelling visibly, and Missie stamping and scolding and longing to box Otter’s ears, only she dare not, because I should box hers. It is rare fun, I can tell you. I have got a jackdaw, too,—such a beauty! and I call him Sulky. He is so tame that he will follow us all over the garden, and into the timber yard when the men are not working. It is so funny to see him hopping after one, with a sort of jump and skip, with his head on one side, as though he were not taking any notice of us, when all the time he was cocking his little black eye at Otter.

‘If it were not for Otter and Sulky I could not put up with things much longer, they are so horrid. Miss Leigh is bonier than ever, and she sighs so much that Roger is obliged to shut the door during mealtimes because of the draught.

‘Poor old Roger is down in the mouth, too; father is always pitching into him for something or other. Last week there was a lot said about a consignment of timber that had gone wrong. Father declared Roger was to blame; but I don’t believe it; the poor old fellow could scarcely touch his luncheon, he was so worried and put about; and then Missie would keep on aggravating him when father had gone out of the room: “Mr. Fergusson told father that you had mistaken your vocation, and that you would never make a good business man.” Actually the little monkey had the cheek to say that to him; if I had been Roger I should have boxed her ears.’

‘Rudel seems rather fond of that mode of chastisement,’ observed Miss Carrington; ‘young ladies do not have their ears boxed; you had better inform Master Rudel of that fact.’

‘He used not to be so rough, Aunt Di; he is such a dear boy; but you see things are at sixes and sevens just now. Poor Roger! I wish he had Rudel’s spirit.’

And then she went on:—

‘Missie takes the head of the table. The coffee is terribly bad, and always cold; but as father drinks cocoa, we have no redress. Nanny and Sarah look crosser every day. They tell Miss Leigh that two mistresses are upsetting at their time of life; and no wonder, for they must be a hundred between them. I think father is ill or something, for he is as glum as possible; but there, no more at present, from your affectionate and deeply worried brother,

‘RUDEL.

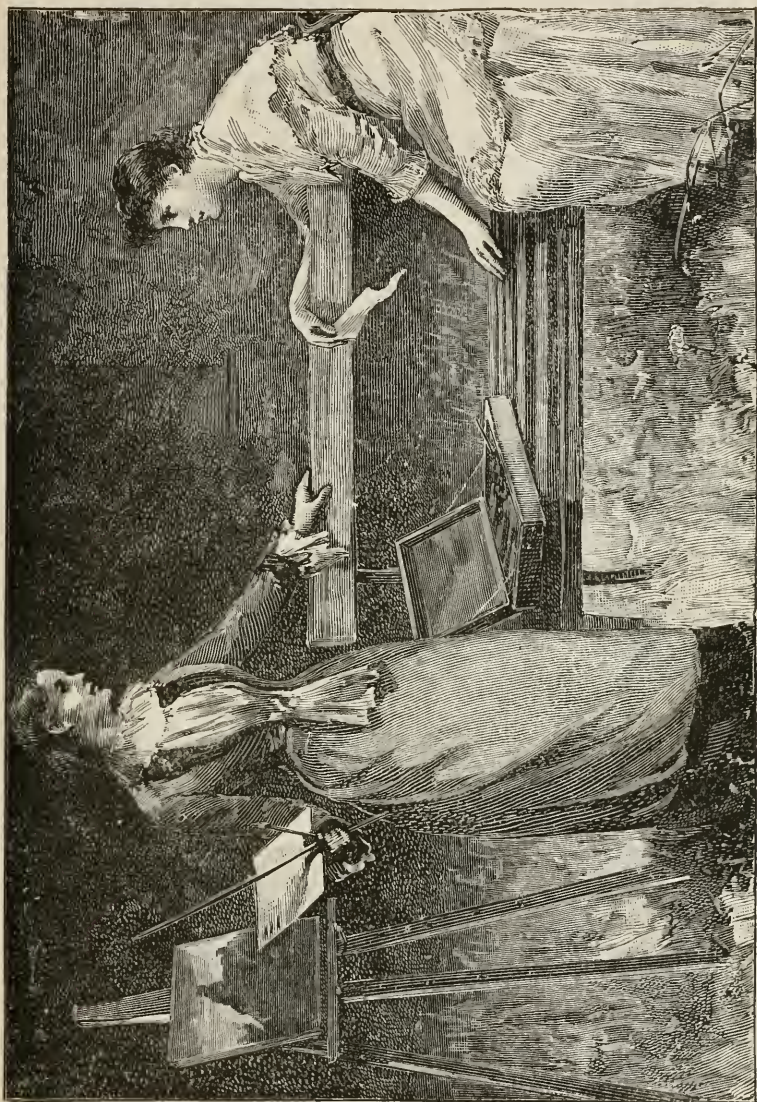
‘P.S.—Poppie is crying because Missie has just ordered her to bed, and Miss Leigh promised that she might sit up to see Roger. Poppie vowed she would not move. It ended, as it mostly does, by Missie taking her by the shoulders and turning her into the passage. Miss Leigh went after Poppie, but she did not bring her back. Missie scored there.’

‘Oh, Aunt Di, can’t you just see it all?’

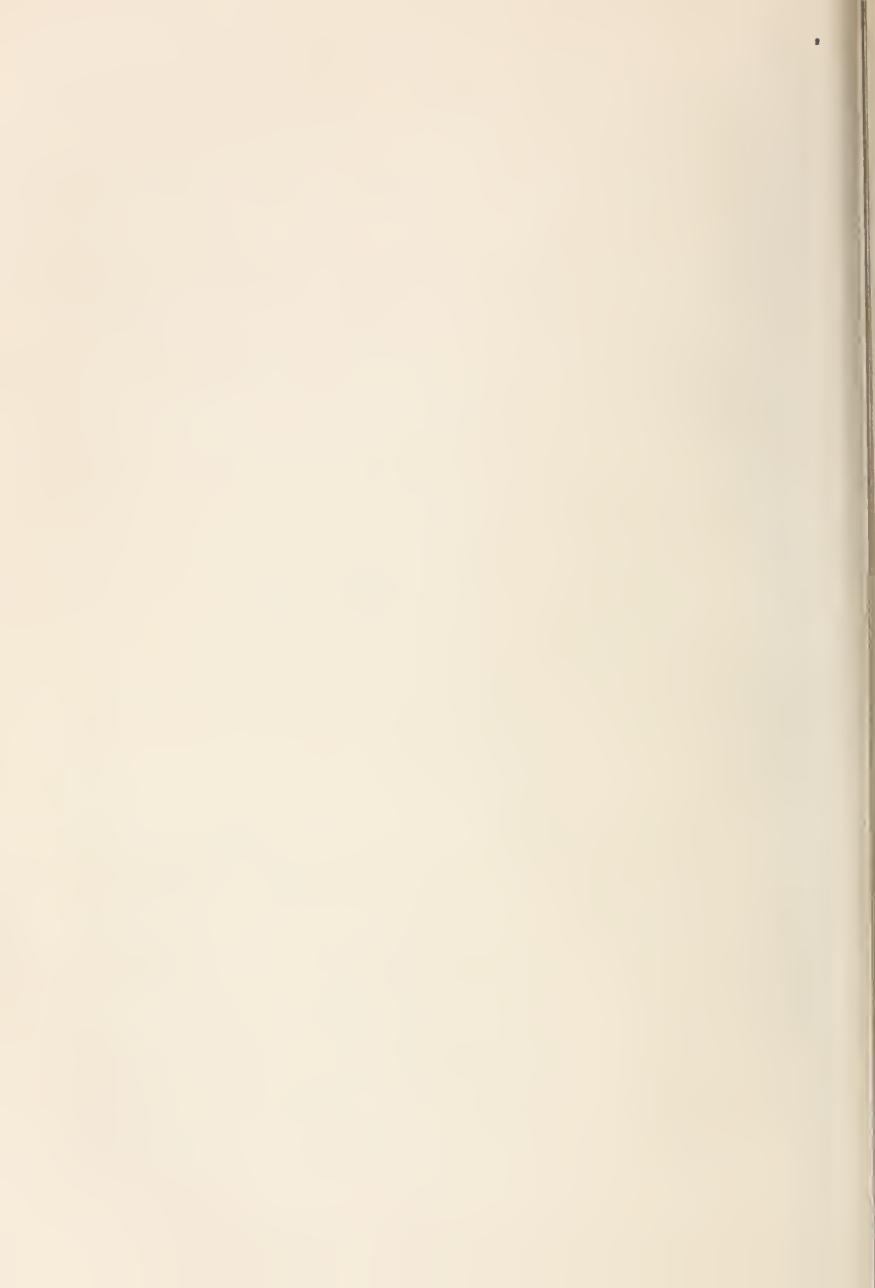
‘Well, child, it does not need a telescope; if only your father would shut up his books and study his children instead. But there, there are other people besides the immortal Mrs. Jelleby who cannot see nearer than Africa.’

‘Dear Aunt Di, won’t you put away your palette and brushes?’ very coaxingly.

‘What, before I’ve finished my tree shadows? My painting will



'WON'T YOU PUT AWAY YOUR PALETTE AND BRUSHES?'



not hinder your talking, and there is nothing the matter with my hearing, I am thankful to say.'

'But, Aunt Di, I have something very serious to say. These letters came two or three hours ago, and I have been thinking about them ever since.'

'I hope you went on with little Sallie's frock, then ; working with one's fingers helps thinking.' But though Miss Carrington spoke in jest, her eyes watched the girl a little anxiously.

'Oh, I could not work ; I was far too miserable, Aunt Diana. I do believe Miss Leigh is right in what she says, and that I am shirking my duty.'

'Since when ?' a little dryly.

'Since I got quite well and strong and happy, about a year ago,' returned Alison, answering most literally. 'I ought to have gone back then, and not have stopped on here quietly, taking the good of everything, and enjoying myself, just as though I had no duties, and no place in life. It is all my fault if Missie is getting the upper hand, and making every one uncomfortable.'

An uncompromising 'humph' from Miss Carrington was all Alison's answer to this. The girl's colour varied a little, and she went on more nervously,—

'You were quite right to take me away, Aunt Di, whatever Miss Leigh says, and I think I was right to go.'

'Well, two rights won't make one wrong,' was the quizzing response ; but Alison held on to her point somewhat unsteadily.

'I was not well ; I was all jarred and miserable, and not a bit of good to any one.'

'An overgrown girl, in fact,' annotated Miss Carrington, *sotto voce*.

'I was always crying or cross, and wondering what was the matter with me, and then you came like a good angel, and brought me to this dear place,—and——' Here Alison's lip quivered. 'Now I do love it, and you too, Aunt Di.'

Miss Carrington smiled benevolently ; she was not a demonstrative woman, but it was evident that this frank expression of affection pleased her ; but her reply was as usual somewhat matter-of-fact.

'All young people like sunshine and roses, and you get plenty of them here ; you and your roses, too, were rather smoke-dried at The Holms. I will say this for you, Alison, that these two years have not been wasted.'

'How do you mean ?' somewhat eagerly.

'I flatter myself that we have both grown a little. Now don't laugh, Ailie, because you are a wise child, and can look round the corner quicker than most people. I do hate to stop and explain the meaning of my odd speeches; it is almost as bad as if I had to write on this picture "This is a tree, a man," and so on.'

'If you mean that I am improved,' returned Alison modestly, 'it makes me very happy to hear it; but I owe it all to you and Mr. Moore.'

'We will each receive our dues,' with a funny little smile; 'we will not take for a moment into consideration that our pupil has been willing, and industrious, and teachable. You need not flush, Ailie; a little praise does no harm, it just oils the wheels and prevents them dragging. You have not reached perfection yet, neither have I, but I have a comfortable sort of assurance that we are both trying hard to break ourselves of our faults, and—I wish you would let me go on painting now, you very troublesome child.'

'Aunt Di, I really do not want to tease you, but I have made up my mind—at least, it has come suddenly into my head—that I ought to put all these pleasant things away, and go home to father and Roger.'

'Pourquoi, mademoiselle?' Though she spoke lightly, a shadow crossed Miss Carrington's face; but Alison did not see it.

'I am eighteen now; in some sense I may be said to have finished my education, though I hope to go on learning all my life. I am quite strong, at least as strong as I ever shall be, for I do not think I am quite a giant, Aunt Di, and I am not half so afraid of things.'

'You have ceased to start at your own shadow. Well, well, I can endorse that; but how about your love of comfort? I have you there, little Sybarite.'

Alison pouted. 'I can't bear you to call me that. Is it wrong to like pretty things, and to make oneself comfortable?'

'Humph, it belongs to the class of venial sins; but this trait or failing, or whatever a moralist might choose to call it, will certainly unfit you for The Holms. My training will hardly avail there, Ailie.'

Alison was silent a moment from sheer pain. Was not Aunt Diana right? Did not these two peaceful years spent at Moss-side—in its atmosphere of refinement, culture, and congenial society—unfit her still more completely for the noisier and disorderly elements of her own home? Might not she do more harm than good, bringing her young undisciplined forces to bear on such a state of things?

Was it really her duty to interfere, and might not Aunt Diana miss her too, badly? This last thought made her voice very plaintive. 'I do wish you would tell me what you think, Aunt Di; I have not been quite happy in my mind for weeks. If Miss Leigh goes, what will become of Poppie? And then it is so bad for the boys to have their home so uncomfortable.'

'Are you quite sure you would not add to the discomfort, Alison?'

'That is what I want to find out. It will be such a terrible piece of self-sacrifice; and then if it were to be wasted,' and here Alison's eyes filled with tears. 'I don't believe you know how fond I am of you, Aunt Di, and how necessary you are to my happiness, and the idea of leaving you and going back to them all seems too dreadful.'

'Unfortunately I am to be the victim of your self-sacrifice. I think I shall have to write an article on the woes of aunts. I thought you were my child, Alison, and that you were going to remain to cheer my old age, but now it appears that I am to be a solitary——'

This was too much for Alison. She was already in the nervous overwrought state that comes from too heavy a pressure. At Miss Carrington's reply, half-reproachful and half-tender, her head drooped on her hands, and the tears began to trickle through her fingers. 'I do not believe that I can ever do it; it is far too hard,' she sobbed. 'I can never go away from you of my own will, Aunt Di.'

There was no immediate answer to this, but in another moment Miss Carrington had walked to her slowly, and then, standing beside her, her hand stroked the girl's hair with a mute caressing gesture. 'Do not cry about it, Ailie,' she said presently; but her own voice was not quite so clear as usual. 'It is not a thing to be decided in a hurry; we must look at it all round; impulse is never a sure guide. No one is quite their own mistress even at eighteen, and I am afraid you will have to ask my leave, unless you prefer running away.'

'Oh, will you let me go, Aunt Di?' with a sudden start of joy, as though the knots that her conscience had tied were suddenly cut through in a most unexpected way.

'My dear, if it be right I will help you to go,' was the expressive but somewhat curt answer to this; but as she spoke Miss Carrington's hands pressed the girl's head a little heavily.

'Now,' she continued, with a visible effort, 'we must put all these troublesome things away for the present; there is the dressing bell, and we have only time to get ready for dinner, and you know it

is our evening at Fernleigh, and we shall have to be cheerful for Mr. Moore's sake.'

'Oh, Aunt Di, you know that it is impossible.'

'Nonsense, nothing is impossible. We ought to keep our own dust for our own shelves, and not sprinkle other folks with our worries. To-night you must be cheerful, for Mr. Moore's sake, and to-morrow is my Wednesday, and you do not mean to damp my garden-party, I hope. You are young, my dear, or you would learn to pocket your troubles until they may safely see the light. Never mind, I mean to set you a noble example, and there is one of your favourite crimson roses to wear.' And putting the flower into the girl's hand, she kissed her lightly between her eyes, and then busied herself in putting up her palette and brushes for the next day's work.

CHAPTER III.

‘WE’D BETTER BIDE A WEE.’

AN hour and a half later Miss Carrington and her niece were walking quickly down one of the garden paths until they came to a little gate set in the hedge; unlatching it, they passed into a neighbouring garden, and then turned their faces in the direction of a low white house, with a verandah running all round it, and roses in profusion running over it. As they did so, the notes of a violin, evidently played by a practised hand, reached them. Miss Carrington’s face brightened, and, making a gesture to her companion to move softly, she stepped up to a window and looked through it. The room, if it were a drawing-room, was almost as heterogeneously furnished as her own, but it bore the character of a library. Two of the walls were lined with book-cases; a grand piano and a harmonium occupied some of the space; there was a round table littered with books, and a superfluity of easy-chairs in every stage of comfort, arranged more with a view to ease than appearance. A nearer inspection would have pointed out certain bachelor arrangements—some costly Turkish pipes; a pair of pistols, splendidly mounted; some silver cups and tankards, with various inscriptions on them, all engraved with the name of Greville Moore, and purporting to be certain prizes in the half-mile race, the high jump, throwing the cricket ball, and other feats of prowess, performed by some youthful athlete.

Although it was summer and all three windows were open, a pleasant little fire burned cheerily, to the evident enjoyment of a noble black collie that lay stretched luxuriously on the bear-skin rug.

An elderly man, with a long white beard and moustache, in a black velvet coat, sat with his back to the light, playing the violin. His face, seen in repose, was clear cut and handsome, in spite of the deep lines that time and perhaps many cares had traced upon it;

but his eyes were cast down, as though in deep meditation, an habitual action, for Mr. Moore had been blind half his life.

He was playing from memory an exquisite fugue from Bach. The thin, somewhat wrinkled hand handled the bow with a precision, a delicacy, a masterly knowledge, that seemed surprising in his situation. Apparently he was lost himself in enjoyment of the sweet sounds that he had conjured up in his darkness, for a smile played round his lips as the harmony widened and vibrated, and his foot softly moved, as though in unison. The collie turned its head lazily as Miss Carrington seated herself within a few feet of the musician; probably he would have risen to greet her, but she held up a warning hand.

Alison, much amused, followed her example. She had Trip in her arms, but the little animal gave her a good deal of trouble; he was not as perfectly trained as the collie, not having arrived at the age of discretion. He wanted to get down and investigate his old friend Keeper and secure a bit of rug for himself, and uttered a protesting whine when his mistress refused to let him go. In a moment the fugue was ended and the bow lowered.

'Is that you, Sunny? Little witch, why have you stolen a march on the blind man? Of course you have flown through the window.'

'Aunt Diana set me the example,' returned Alison demurely. 'How do you do, again, Mr. Moore?'

'Oh, nicely, nicely; time always passes quickly with me in my own special world. Have you given your aunt her favourite chair? How does the picture progress, Miss Diana? Sunny tells me it is one of your best.'

'Would you have me praise my own work?' returned Miss Carrington brightly. 'I must leave you to Alison's criticism. I hope to do something good before I die, and if I do not succeed, well, my life will have been happier for the trying. Do you comprehend me, my good friend?'

'Ay, I can feel out a meaning there,' he replied, a little quaintly, as he stooped to pat Keeper's head. 'You and I think alike on most subjects, don't we, Miss Diana? We both hold that work and life have been synonymous terms, since Adam delved and Eve span.'

'I don't believe in any life without it,' was the concise reply to this.

'Well, it takes all sorts of people to make up a world. I have

long ago divided society into two classes—people who work, and people who prefer to have their work done by other folk. There are men, and women too, who like to drift anyhow through life, and who grumble if some other oarsman does not put back the duckweed for them. Why, they would positively run aground, rather than propel themselves; but my boy is not one of them, I am thankful to say.'

'Nor Alison either. By the bye, Mr. Moore, how does your pupil progress?'

'Oh, Sunny is a fair scholar,' replied the old man, putting out his hand till it rested on Alison's soft hair. 'She does me credit, Miss Diana; she is a good child—a very good child.'

'Aunt Diana,' interrupted Alison, as though to evade further praise, 'we did such a famous morning's work. I had my music lesson—quite a long one—and then I did my Latin, and read Green's History of England for more than an hour.'

'Then no wonder you felt entitled to a whole afternoon's idleness,' was the somewhat quizzical reply to this. Alison's pained, 'Oh, Aunt Di!' held a world of reproach in it. It did not escape Mr. Moore's notice. His other senses were exquisitely acute, and he had trained them to good purpose.

'What is all that, Miss Diana? No one finds fault with Sunny in my presence. By the bye, little sunbeam, there is a cloud somewhere; I can read voices as I can my violin, and there is a loose string. I'll be bound something has gone wrong in your little world; hasn't it, dear?'

'Alison shall tell you another time, Mr. Moore; we neither of us care about airing our worries to-night. Do you remember what old Mrs. Marsh used to say—"Think of your words before you speak them"? I have improvised another proverb for Alison's benefit: "Never air your worry before it is twenty-four hours old"; in other words, go to sleep on it, and when you wake it will probably have shrunk to half its size.'

'Ah, ah! very good! That is so like you, Miss Diana. Well, if we are to let things alone, suppose Sunny reads Greville's letter to you. The lad is in high spirits; he is captain now, and he is full of his matches and the splendid team they have got. He declares Queen's will beat half the other colleges.'

'Commemoration will be here directly,' observed Miss Carrington.

'Yes, but he is not coming home for another five weeks, at least

to stay; his tutor has written to me this morning, and I have given my consent to Greville's joining his reading party to Keswick; the lad is a good lad, but he is young and a bit idle; at least, his love of fun carries him away, and I am afraid he has not worked quite hard enough.'

'Mr. Greville is not fond of putting aside his own duckweed,' put in Alison mischievously; for there was nothing she loved better than to tease the old man about his grandson, who was literally the apple of his eye.

He roused up directly at her irony. 'Come now, that is too bad to say that of the lad when he fights all your battles for you, and never lets any one say a word against you.'

'She does not mean it, Mr. Moore,' interposed Miss Carrington quickly.

'Now, Aunt Di, please don't interfere. I do mean that Mr. Greville Moore will never kill himself with overwork, unless he dies from too much cricket or lawn tennis.'

'You naughty child!' but there was no mistaking the fun in his voice now. 'I shall report all your hard speeches to Greville when I see him; do you think a fine young man is to slave and toil all his best years away? A little harmless fun will not hurt him; he is strengthening his mind and his muscles at the same time.'

Alison and her aunt exchanged amused glances at this. They both thought highly of the young man, who was indeed a sweet-tempered, honest fellow, with plenty of good in him, though hardly up to Miss Carrington's idea of 'thorough'; indeed, he was a favourite with most people; but it was droll and at the same time almost touching to see Mr. Moore's implicit faith in his grandson, who was verily the old man's Benoni and Benjamin—'the son of his sorrow'—as well as the 'son of his right hand.'

If Mr. Moore had been questioned about his life, he would most surely have answered in Jacob's words that 'few and evil had been his days,' for few men had experienced greater vicissitudes. His earlier manhood had opened with brilliant prospects of happiness—health had been his, and fortune also—his talents had been cultivated and yielded him vast resources of enjoyment, and his domestic life had been truly blessed. His wife was in every respect his helpmeet and support, and the little son that prattled baby nonsense at his knee was scarcely less dear to him.

Then after a time the black cloud darkened his horizon; blindness

in its most hopeless and scathing form fell upon him. Not gradually and with slow approaches, changing from twilight into night, but suddenly as the result of an accident; and for a time the man sat down utterly dismayed, and something like despair took possession of him. But his wife was yet spared to him, and it was her soft ministering hand, her simple faith and unflinching courage, that roused him from his brooding sadness, and setting him face to face with the inevitable, bade him be of good comfort for the sake of God's dear love and her own.

'Gerard, we must bear this trouble that our Father has sent. Do not make it too hard for me to say, "His will be done." I will be eyes to you, and hands, you shall never miss what I can give you,' whispered the faithful creature; and to the day of her death she nobly fulfilled her work.

Black as the day that saw his blindness was the hour when his good angel left him for a brighter world. His son had reached manhood then, and very soon after that dear mother's death he had brought home his young wife, that he and his father might no longer lack the comfort of womanly ministry.

For a little while—for three short years—there was peace in the little household of Gerard Moore. Then fever came. In one brief month the younger Gerard and his wife lay side by side in the little churchyard at Riverston, leaving their infant son in his grandfather's care.

Since then the old man and the boy had lived together. To Greville Mr. Moore had transferred the love he had once lavished on his father. Under his grandfather's mild and loving rule, the lad had grown up honest and strong and fearless; not book-loving perhaps, and a little simple in some matters as concerns this world's usages, but on the whole a 'good lad,' as Mr. Moore called him.

'Aunt Di, I do think Mr. Moore the best man in the world,' observed Alison, as she lingered in the moonlight garden on their way back to Moss-side.

There was a silvery gleam across the river, and a little boat was rocking in it. Miss Carrington stood still, as though watching the effect.

'He is a very wonderful man,' she repeated slowly. 'I am prouder of possessing his friendship than I am of my pretty house and garden and that river view, though I am tolerably vain of them all.'

‘You vain, Aunt Di!’

‘Well, am I not human, and a woman; have not the best of us our pet vanities? I am not quite so strong-minded as you wish to make me out. I am proud both for you and myself that such a man as Mr. Moore thinks us worthy of his friendship. Take my word for it, Ailie, friendship is a great test.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked Alison, fixing her eyes dreamily on the silver ripples that seemed full of phosphorescent life.

‘Nothing stamps a man or a woman so much as the choice of friends. Many a life is made or marred at the commencement by a wise or unwise selection. Most of us are mere copyists, and we form our own style on the pattern furnished by our friends. I notice this so much with young people; they cannot create their own atmosphere. Most of us, except a few strong-minded persons, see with other people’s eyes. How necessary then that those eyes should be pure and far-sighted.’

‘I believe you are right, Aunt Di. I always feel better and stronger somehow when I am with you and Mr. Moore, than when I am chattering nonsense with Lettie or Dora Morville; and yet they are nice girls, and I enjoy talking to them.’

‘My little girl,’ returned Aunt Diana, laying her firm, cool hand on Alison’s, ‘I do not want to put our old heads on your young shoulders; it does me good to have you and Letty and Dora all twittering together like young birds in a nest; we must all have our nonsense talks, even we middle-aged people. What I really want is;’ and here she paused with a half sigh, as though some fear moved her; ‘what I really desire is to see you, not shining with any borrowed light, but able to stand on your own feet, and look round you so calmly, that you may discern between a worthless rushlight, a will-o’-the-wisp, and the steady shining of the torch of truth. Don’t you recollect, Ailie, my favourite verse?—

“First take heed to calm and still,
All thy passions and thy will;
Great excitements stop or fly,
Nor ruffle that serenity
Which only keeps the spirit free
Life’s hid path to search and see.”

‘The path is very hidden just now,’ murmured Alison, in a choked voice.

‘Then “we must bide a wee,” and put by brambles one by one

until we come to a clear opening. I do not think we shall find it quite by ourselves, Ailie.'

'No, indeed, Aunt Di.'

'We must just do with our doubts and difficulties as Hezekiah did with his letter; there is no other way of lighting our candle in the darkness. Now run out of the dews, child, and promise me one thing before you go. Take no troublesome bed-fellow with you; fold up the worry with your prayers and just leave it. Good-night, my dear.' And without waiting for an answer Miss Carrington moved away briskly down the garden walk; and as Alison closed her window she could see the tall hooded figure pacing slowly to and fro in the moonlight, a habit of hers when anything had made her restless. Evidently the difficulty in Miss Carrington's mind was still unsolved when, half an hour later, she let herself into the house.

'I will ask Mr. Moore's advice,' she said to herself, as she lingered in the dim studio, only lighted by the uncertain rays that penetrated here and there; 'it is not that I am not capable of the sacrifice, but I believe I am braver for myself than I am for her. I took her away from The Holms because she was not a bit fit for the life, and how do I know that she is strong enough now? Of course, Mr. Moore will have his little joke about "old maids' children"; of course, it is the old story of the hen and the duckling, the hen never can bear her nursling to wet its feet. After all, it may serve as a valuable discipline; it will test the girl, and show it she has backbone or not; and, of course, in some respects it may be wiser to part with her for a time. Greville will be coming back, and——' But here Miss Carrington abruptly paused.

'What nonsense! We need not cross the bridge until we come to it. Come, Trip, old fellow, it is time for us both to retire;' and, with the terrier beside her, Miss Carrington went quickly up the dark staircase, just listening for a minute at Alison's door, to be sure that she was asleep, and then turned into her own room, leaving Trip to investigate his cushioned basket in search of a concealed biscuit, on which he supped leisurely before turning round three times, and curling himself into a brown ball until morning. If Miss Carrington's night was wakeful and somewhat anxious, she asked and desired no sympathy, neither did she question Alison on her amount of sleep; such questions were not in her line.

While Alison made the coffee she read her letters and gleaned items of general interest from the newspaper; then the conservatory

was visited, the various pets noticed and their little wants supplied, and afterwards Alison had her painting lesson.

When this was finished, she left Miss Carrington to her domestic business and her beloved work, and went in search of her old tutor.

In these pleasant tasks the mornings, and sometimes an hour or two of the afternoon, passed rapidly; then she and Miss Carrington either gardened, or walked out, or drove in the little basket-carriage. Sometimes Alison would row her in their pretty cushioned boat to a little island that they much affected, and sometimes Mr. Moore would come too.

So the days rippled on as smoothly and pleasantly as the river; but Miss Leigh's letter was still unanswered, and in Alison's heart lay a rankling fear, which did not this time take the form of words.

CHAPTER IV.

GREVILLE TAKES AN OAR.

PEOPLE said Miss Carrington's Wednesdays were always fine, that she had better fortune in that respect than other folk; and certainly the weather favoured her on this occasion, for it was the very perfection of a June afternoon, with plenty of sunshine and freshness to mitigate the heat. The white butterflies that skimmed over the lawn scarcely revelled in it more than Alison did, as she ran lightly over the grass in her white gown, with a breast-knot of her favourite roses, and her shining hair half hidden under her broad-brimmed hat. These Wednesdays were very popular in the neighbourhood. Miss Carrington was a charming hostess, she had just the right knack of entertaining people; she welcomed them heartily, put them at their ease with themselves and other people, then left them to be as free as her own butterflies. The little wicket gate between Moss-side and Fernleigh was always set open on these occasions; Miss Carrington's lawn was devoted to lawn-tennis; when they had finished their game the young people were welcome to stroll through Mr. Moore's garden, and make themselves at home in the cosy nooks and shady seats with which it abounded.

Very often the exquisite notes of a violin drew them towards the house; two or three times Miss Carrington had discovered more than half her guests clustered in the verandah, listening as though spellbound to the inspired musician.

As a general rule Mr. Moore seldom mingled with the guests; his habits were those of the recluse. A few of his old friends who were sure of their welcome, and one or two of his younger favourites, would sometimes cross the threshold and keep him company in the cool shaded room, to be charmed by his wise and cheerful talk, and to take away lessons of loving submission and uncomplaining fortitude.

To these he would speak of his boy; recounting endless anecdotes of his prowess and courage, and often making mention of his pupil Alison, or as he called her, Sunny, for the young girl had been a veritable sunbeam to her old tutor, making his darkened hours pass more quickly by her ready sympathy and aptitude for learning.

On this afternoon he was not alone. A young man in a light grey summer suit, with a sunburnt handsome face, was standing by the window looking out at the knots of people already gathering on Miss Carrington's lawn, with a humorous, half-vexed expression in his wide-open blue eyes.

'What a lot of people,' he grumbled. 'I believe all Riverston is there; there are three boats full, and two sets of lawn-tennis forming, and I do not know how many more; there goes Miss Merle—Miss Alison, I mean. What a bore, grandfather, that I forgot all about Miss Carrington's Wednesday, and I shall have to go up to London to-morrow.'

'Why, the more the merrier. Is not that the opinion of young folk like you?' returned Mr. Moore, smiling. 'Now, if I said that I wanted you all to myself for this one day you have spared me, that would only be an old man's selfishness, and I should be ashamed of myself for giving it utterance! But you are not generally so unsociable, Greville.'

'There is a regular crowd,' returned the young fellow, still more pettishly. 'I shall not be able to speak to Miss Carrington, or to Miss Alison, either; and you forget, grandfather, that I shall be off to Keswick the day after to-morrow for six weeks at least.'

'I am not likely to forget that, my boy. Well, it is a pity if you are not pleased, for they are going to keep it up unusually late; there is to be music on the lawn. Sunny has been telling me all about it. The moonlight is so clear that Miss Diana has given in to the notion; and young Hepworth—you remember him—has brought his cornet. If I were you, lad, I would just make the best of it, and join in merrily with the rest.'

'And leave you sitting here alone, grandfather? and I thought we should have just one of our old evenings on the river; and I should row you and Miss Carrington and her niece to the Long Island.'

'Nay, lad, I am not likely to be long alone; the vicar will be in by-and-by for a chat; and most likely Mrs. Hendrick and one or two others. Miss Diana will drop in, just to tell me how things pro-

gress, and Sunny too; she never neglects me. Come, come, it is not like you to sulk, boy; I want to hear you laugh with the others; it will make me feel young myself. And, Greville,' with a sudden tenderness in his voice, 'we have shaken hands, but until I feel you I shall not believe my boy is really with me.'

The young man's cloudy face cleared in a moment, he left his place at once, and dropped down on one knee beside his grandfather's chair, and a sort of laughing light came in his eyes.

'You foolish old grand-dad,' he said; 'you have not grown a bit wiser.' And then he knelt patiently while the thin wrinkled hand passed softly over the merry face, and felt the broad, stalwart shoulders, and then rested lingeringly on his head.

'God bless you, lad! you are strong and broad-shouldered like Gerard; you are every inch as fine a man as your father. Grow like him, my boy. Though he was my own son, I will always say there are not many like him; there, there, I must not keep you from the young folks to listen to an old man's maunderings. Tell Sunny that she is to be good to you, as you have not many hours at home. Oh, there's Mrs. Hendrick's step on the gravel; she has stolen a march on the vicar. Now you can leave me with an easy conscience.'

It was evident Greville needed no further bidding. He rose to his feet at once, and strolled out into the verandah, casting comprehensive glances over both gardens; then, satisfying himself that a certain broad-brimmed hat belonged to the person for whom he was in search, he went leisurely through the little gate, and tracked it by sundry winding paths to the river bank.

A little group of girls was gathered round a boat. They were evidently playing at hide and seek with their would-be escort, to the mischievous glee of a young Etonian of tender age, as befitted jackets and turn-down collars.

'Come along, girls,' he shouted. 'Letty and Dora, why don't you jump in? and, Miss Alison, you promised to steer. Quick, quick!'

'Not so fast, Jack; where's the hurry?' called out a fresh voice; and at the merry tones Alison turned round with a sudden start.

'Oh! Mr. Greville!' and her bright face looked brighter still at the unexpected sight of her old friend. 'What does this mean? Mr. Moore never hinted at your coming. I do not believe Aunt Diana knows, either.'

'I thought I would just run down and have a look at you all before I started for Keswick,' returned the young man with assumed carelessness. 'I forgot all about Miss Carrington's Wednesday Populars; never mind, I have just arrived in time for the fun. How do you do, Miss Dora? Miss Lettice, I should hardly have known you, you have so grown. Well, what's the matter, Jack?' for the boy was grumbling audibly.

'Only Fortescue and that other fellow will be down upon us directly, and the girls made me promise to get under way before they came to spoil everything. Letty and Dora want to pick forget-me-nots on the Long Island—there are quantities on the east side, where we had our picnic last year.'

'All right, I'm your man. Miss Alison, if you will be good enough to steer, Jack and I will soon row you across.' And suiting his actions to his words, Greville assisted the girls into the boat; and promptly taking an oar, they were soon gliding down the river.

As the little craft moved from the steps, a clear hallo sounded in their ears; but the mischievous girls only waved their hands gaily in answer, while Jack shouted out, 'You are too late, Fortescue; you had better have a game at tennis;' and then, as Greville's practised oar cut swiftly through the water, the hum of voices died away; garden after garden receded from their view, little islands were passed clothed with low alder bushes, and masses of floating water-lilies and other aquatic plants, calling for prudent steering on Alison's part.

Now and then they passed other boats, with which they exchanged greetings; and once, as they came to a reedy island, a swan came out with ruffled plumage and angry and stretched neck, and would have pursued them, only Jack threatened her with his oar.

'I suppose there are some young ones in there,' observed Greville thoughtfully; and then he let them drift a moment as he contemplated the scene. The broad gleaming river flowing so smoothly between its banks; the meadow-land dotted with groups of cattle worthy of the brush of Vicat Cole; the girls' happy faces—faces that had been familiar to him from boyhood, for Dora and Lettice Morville had been old playfellows of his; their simple summer dresses—all made up the adjuncts of a pleasant picture that he might carry away and remember when he rowed himself across Derwent-water, or looked at the purple hills that encircled him.

In a few minutes they had landed, and Jack, who was the hero of the hour, for it was he who had planned this little excursion, was leading them proudly to the little sheltered island, where the ground was blue with the tiny flowers; and in another moment they were all busily at work. In the intervals of his labour, Greville found time for a sentence or two with Alison; and by-and-by he induced her to rest for a moment on a mossy log, that had lain there for years.

'I suppose we must be going back now,' observed Alison regretfully, as she watched the others' busy movements. 'Aunt Diana will want me to assist her with the tea. She knew we were coming, for Jack was put in charge of us; but she told us not to be long. Dora and I have been wanting to come here for days.'

'It is a bore going back to the other people,' returned Greville lazily; 'there is a host of things I wanted to consult you about. I have an idea! I will get Miss Dora to take my oar, and I know Miss Lettice loves steering, and then we can manage to get a little conversation.' And as things were arranged after this fashion, Greville was soon engaged in an animated account of his last term's doings. Jack listened eagerly, and his oar often remained idle as Greville proudly recounted a successful score at cricket, or some boating feat achieved by one of their men. Alison listened in sympathetic silence: she was quite used to these confidences. Greville, who had no sisters of his own, and who had grown up solitary under his grandfather's roof, found a great deal of pleasure and comfort in his young neighbour's society. Alison would take him to task sometimes in a good-humoured way, and would speak many a word of girlish wisdom in his ear, which he took with tolerable submission; she was longing to say some such word now, but as they were not alone she prudently forbore.

Their return was hailed with delight by the young people who were gathered on the lawn. While Dora put their treasured forget-me-nots in the water, Lettice and Alison hurried into the studio, where they knew Miss Carrington would be busy over the tea-table; and Greville, after exchanging greetings with his friends, followed them more leisurely.

'Well, girls,' observed Miss Carrington brightly, 'you see you have your work before you; all these good folk to serve with tea and strawberries. By the bye, Ailie, a little bird tells me that Greville has put in an appearance. Why, bless the lad, there he is,' as

Greville's amused face suddenly confronted her, and her hands were grasped, and then detained.

'Miss Carrington, I mean to have a good look at you. You are a sight for sore eyes, as old Bailey would say. I have not seen any one so worth looking at since I left home.'

'Go away, you foolish boy,' was Miss Carrington's response to this. 'I am too busy to listen to your blarney;' but her grey eyes softened as they rested on the young man's handsome face. She had known him from babyhood. It was she who had closed his dead mother's eyes, in whose loving arms the little fellow had often nestled in those first sad days when the stricken household were too much engaged to care for the lonely child; when he would follow his dear Cara, as he called her, all over the house, with uncertain, toddling footsteps, to mend some broken toy, or help him out of some tiny difficulty: and he was dear to her now, dearer even than Alison.

'Go away, I am far too busied to be hindered,' was all her greeting to her favourite; but her pleasant face beamed on him as she spoke, and her hand stroked the grey coat-sleeve with a caressing gesture.

'I am going to stop and help you,' returned Greville, with gay defiance of her mandate. 'Is that cup of tea for Mrs. Morville? She is sitting so cosily in the honeysuckle arbour with old Miss Effingham, that it seems a pity to disturb them.'

'Old Miss Effingham indeed!' ejaculated Miss Carrington, 'you disrespectful boy, when you know she is my contemporary.'

'Miss Carrington, you know you are immortal; you will never be old in my eyes,' was the gallant reply. 'I think you grow younger every time I see you.'

'Humph, I hope not. I should be sorry to live for ever in this sort of world, unless you young people improve it very much. Now, Greville, you know our rules for these Wednesdays. This is Liberty Hall; if the ladies like their meal *al fresco*, there are plenty of gentlemen servitors to gratify their whims. Now take this tray of tea and strawberries to the honeysuckle arbour, and I will get ready another for your grandfather and Mrs. Hendrick. Jack, what have you done with your sister Dora? We want all hands just now.'

Miss Carrington certainly knew how to please her young guests. Tea and strawberries had a finer flavour in many a girlish opinion if they were enjoyed in all sorts of odd out-of-the-way places; pretty

Kate Thornborough and Dora took theirs in the boat that lay moored to the steps, and Jack waited on them and kept them company. To be sure, half the tea was spilled in the transit, but the remainder tasted excellently well, and all their neighbours' ducks joined the feast. One young midshipman, Charlie Trevor, performed the surprising feat of carrying his tea-cup into the recesses of an aged willow that grew between the gardens, and then drank it peacefully on a branch that hung over the river; buns and other dainties being handed to him by the delighted Jack at the end of a cane, some of which fell to Charlie's share and some to the ducks. After tea the tennis nets were taken down, and the notes of a cornet began to make itself heard; then singing began in earnest, and Miss Carrington and her elder guests joined in the part-songs. Greville and Alison had been singing together, and when Alison was tired they strolled down one of the garden paths in his grandfather's garden. Just now it was deserted, and they had it to themselves; this was the opportunity Alison wanted, for she began at once—

'Mr. Greville, I do hope you mean to work when you are at Keswick: Aunt Diana said the other day that she knew how disappointed Mr. Moore would be if you failed to take your degree. And I am afraid'—hesitating, as though she feared to give him pain—'I am afraid, from what you told us in the boat, that you have not done much this term.'

Greville bit his lip, and a cloud came over his face.

'What makes you think so?' he asked, rather shortly.

'Your own words,' she returned, so softly that his man's pride could not take alarm. 'Please do not be offended with me; we have always spoken the truth to each other; but all this cricket, tennis, boating, and riding about must have hindered work. Aunt Diana says—may I go on?'—a little timidly.

'Yes, yes,' rather impatiently.

'Aunt Diana says—and you know how wise she is—that though your grandfather has set his heart on your taking a good degree, he will never tell you so, or let you know if you disappoint him. It is just because he is so kind and generous, and gives you full liberty that, she says, you owe him a grand return—that your work and all you do must be for his sake.'

'I see, I see,' returned the young man hastily. He had flushed a little over her words, as though they had gone home to his conscience. 'Yes, grandfather is far too good to me. I do not half

deserve to belong to the dear old man. I'll make a clean breast of it, Miss Alison. I have not worked as I ought, and that is the truth and the whole truth.'

'Oh, Mr. Greville, what a pity!' fell still more softly from Alison's lips.

'Yes,' he returned a little gloomily, 'it is a pity; but I will promise you one thing'—his manner changing into earnestness—'I will work this summer. I will turn over a new leaf and try and make up for lost time. When I come back in August you shall not have to find fault with me.'

Alison smiled at him approvingly; she had gained her point; but a moment after a sigh followed the smile. When he came back in August, would he find her here? And if not here—— But here the notes of the cornet broke on their ear again, and Greville and she joined the company once more.

CHAPTER V.

‘LET THE LITTLE ONE GO.’

GREVILLE paid a brief visit to the studio on the following morning. He found both the ladies busy, as usual; Miss Carrington was still working at her unfinished picture and giving her niece a lesson at the same time.

‘I expected to find you both dawdling over a late breakfast,’ he grumbled. ‘Miss Carrington, you look as fresh as a rose and as brisk as a bee after all your exertions; I always will say that you are a wonderful woman.’

‘I am afraid Alison will not share in these compliments,’ observed Miss Carrington, with a droll expression; ‘I had just been telling her that she looks half asleep. I wonder why young folk always subside after a little excitement.’

‘Everything is tiresome this morning,’ complained Alison, who certainly did not quite carry out her *sobriquet* of ‘Sunny,’ for she looked tired and out of sorts.

‘I shall have to wash this out again, Aunt Diana; I can’t think what makes me work so badly this morning.’

‘I am afraid my pupil is idle,’ returned Miss Carrington gravely. ‘Now, Greville, don’t you mean to sit down and give us a little of your society?’

‘Impossible, Miss Carrington; the dog-cart will be round directly, and I must go back to grandfather.’

‘Then you have only come to bid us good-bye. Will you tell Mr. Moore, please, that as Alison is to spend the afternoon at the Morvilles, I intend to invite myself to tea with him?’

‘All right,’ answered Greville, a little laconically. He was wondering why Alison looked so quiet and wistful this morning; was she only tired, or had anything happened to disturb her?

‘Good-bye, Miss Alison,’ he whispered, as he came round to her side; ‘I have not forgotten your lecture; I mean to act up to it.’

'Good-bye,' returned Alison, trying for one of her old smiles as she looked up at him, but she was conscious of failure when she saw his grave look of inquiry. No one, not even Aunt Diana, knew how much of her heaviness was to be traced to the letter that lay in her pocket; a tiresome effusion from Missie that had spoiled her breakfast somehow.

'Good-bye, Greville,' broke in Miss Carrington's clear, decided voice. 'You know of old that I hate leave-takings, and always cut them short, if possible. "Speed the parting guest," that is my motto, so shake hands, and good speed to you, my boy.'

'Are you going to turn me out of the room, you inhospitable woman?' laughed Greville, who would willingly have lingered a little; but as he knew her ways, and would not have teased her for worlds, so great was his love and reverence for this dear friend, he only raised her hand to his lips—always his parting greeting—and with another look at the pale student beside her took his leave.

'That is over,' observed Miss Carrington bluntly, as she mixed a fresh colour on her palette. 'I wish sometimes I had lived before the Tower of Babel, when people come and bid me good-bye; congenial folk ought never to be separated, that is my opinion; but when such good friends as Abraham and Lot could not live near each other, because of the disagreement of their servants, it is not for me to complain.' And after this general outburst of disturbed feeling, which went far deeper than Alison knew, she worked on in silence.

'Aunt Diana,' exclaimed Alison presently, looking up with a very pale face; 'if you don't mind particularly, I will just put away my work, for I am only spoiling it, and carry the weekly basket to old Mrs. Guppins; it is such a lovely morning for a walk.'

'Do, dear,' returned Miss Carrington, in her usual kind voice; for she was pained to see the girl's restlessness and inattention. 'When we are out of sorts—and I never knew a human being who was not out of sorts sometimes—nothing does us so much good as to try and make a little sunshine for other people; it is sure to reflect back on ourselves.'

Alison's answer was to lay her cheek softly against her aunt's. It was a very unusual caress with her, and spoke volumes.

'I never saw you out of sorts yet, Aunt Di. Mr. Greville was right when he called you a wonderful woman.'

'My dear, good health and no worries have laid a pretty solid

foundation for my virtues. Please do not credit me with so much undeserved praise. If I had a weak digestion I dare say I should be as cranky as other people—though,' suddenly recollecting herself, 'I would make a good fight for it before I got as cross as Mrs. Guppins.'

'Aunt Di,' whispered Alison, a little plaintively, 'I have had such a teasing letter from Missie, and it is troubling me so.'

'Have you, dear? I am very sorry for that.'

'Shall I read it to you?'

'No,' was the somewhat quick response; 'Missie will not be a pleasant companion to me this morning; she will set my wits wool-gathering, like a flock of starlings; no, we will let the little monkey be. Now run off, Ailie, and let the sunshine and Mrs. Guppins perform their healing work, and take Trip with you. I shall be glad of a morning's real solitude.'

'Poor child!' she observed to herself, with a sigh, as the door closed on Alison, 'I thought something had gone wrong with her this morning. Well, well, I cannot live her life for her; Providence does not allow of dual existences. We women have faith for ourselves, why can we not have it for those belonging to us? It would not be good for Alison if I were to smooth her path and clear it from all the thorns and briars, even if I could. Life means something more than enjoyment to all of us: "Bear ye one another's burdens" never meant that we were to deprive each other of the right and privilege of living our own lives. Mr. Despondency, and Miss Muchafraid, and Mr. Ready to Halt, were all as good pilgrims in their way as Mr. Valiant.' And with this she resolutely shut out all troublesome thoughts, brushing them aside as she would flies on her canvas, and went on painting.

When Alison returned at luncheon time, looking refreshed and cheered, she found Miss Carrington still at work.

'Oh, you little Philistine!' she exclaimed, when Alison forcibly deprived her of the brushes; but she took her seat at the table, nevertheless, only grumbling a little that the morning hours had flown so quickly.

As soon as Alison had started for Combe Lodge, where her friends the Morvilles lived, Miss Carrington put on her garden hat, and went in search of her old friend. She found him in his favourite seat, a low bench under the willow, looking over the river. A short terrace walk led to the little boat-house, where Greville's boat, the

Fairy, was kept; a palisade ran along the path, and here the old man would pace securely and contentedly for an hour together, followed by his faithful Keeper, who never left his side for a moment.

'I knew that was you, Miss Diana,' he observed, as the dear lady sat down beside him, and looked thoughtfully at the noble river view before her; 'I should know your step among a hundred, for it never falters or swerves, straight and even, not hastening and not loitering; just like my Gerard's, only a little more womanly.'

Miss Carrington turned her face aside for a moment, as though she forgot the old man's blindness. If her past life had ever held its woman's story, if loving hopes had only terminated in a long pain, no one but herself, and one who was dead, ever knew it; for speech is silver and silence golden in such sacred matters as these.

'He has led me by paths that I have not known;' that was Diana Carrington's thought, when she reviewed past troubles, and looked at them in the light of her maturer wisdom. 'Life is full of mystery; what I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter,' is, and must be, one's sole comfort.

And so her large sunshiny nature gleaned sweetness and strength out of troubles which many a feebler and narrower nature would deem unendurable; and so it was that peace and contentment gladdened her middle age, and the future held no terrors to her loving soul; for she welcomed every grey hair and each faint line or wrinkle as messages from the Father; that soon the heat of the day would be over, and by-and-by she might hope to come home to rest. By-and-by, not too soon, for though rest was good, work was good too; 'and I should like to take just a few gleanings when I go up there,' Diana would say, in her quaint way.

'My good old friend, I have come to seek your advice this afternoon,' she began, when they had talked a little about their dear boy; and she had gladdened Mr. Moore's ears with honest praises of his Benjamin, just to evoke the slow, tender smile that always greeted his name.

'Yes, he is that to me. Gerard's boy is almost as dear as Gerard. Now, let me hear your story, Miss Diana; somehow I guess it is about Sunny.'

Yes, it was about Sunny, she told him a little sadly, for she knew it would go hard with the old man to part with his pupil and daily sunbeam; and then, in her own clear and concise manner, she told him about her own and Alison's difficulties; the state of things at

The Holms, Roger's unhappiness, Miss Leigh's incapacity and perplexed doings, Missie's uppishness, and Rudel's rough complaints. And when she had finished she sat perfectly quiet, with her hands folded in her lap, waiting while her old friend slowly revolved the matter.

'Well, Miss Diana,' he said at last, stroking his beard as he spoke, 'I am afraid there is no "ram caught in the thicket" for us.'

She understood his quaint imagery in a moment.

'You mean,' she said, turning rather pale over her words, 'that there is no avoiding the sacrifice; that you and I must part with the child.'

'Yes, I am afraid we must let the little one go.'

'Oh, Mr. Moore!' with a sudden catch of her breath, 'but it will be very hard for us all, for you and me, and Alison too.'

'Yes, and with Greville also, if I know anything of the boy's mind,' but here she softly checked him with her hand upon his arm. This was the one thing Aunt Diana would not discuss even with her old friend.

'Well, well; you are right,' he replied, obeying the hint; 'there is plenty of time, plenty of time for all that; but an old man's dreams are pardonable. Now look here, Miss Diana, the little lady has twined herself round my heart-strings; she is as fresh and sweet to me as my memory of what a May day used to be. If the good Lord has work for her to do, it is not for us to hinder her.'

'True; but we must be careful not to make a mistake. Suppose, my good old friend, that we are putting her into a position for which she is not fitted. I confess I have my doubts; Ainslie is very peculiar and unsatisfactory with regard to his children, and Alison is proud and somewhat sensitive; she was fretting her heart out like a caged lark when I brought her away from The Holms; it was an ungenial soil for a nature like hers.'

'Perhaps it may seem so to us; but what if the Gardener has chosen just that soil for our little blossom?'

'If I thought that,' she returned doubtfully.

'My dear,' he said, in his fatherly way, 'if you had your will you would put your treasure in a glass case, where no adverse winds could get at her. Well, she might be beautiful to look at then, but her utility in this world, and the purpose for which she was created, would be frustrated. What if you have done your training, and now the Master intends to school her Himself?'

Miss Carrington was silent ; she felt a struggle between her will and sense of right. Her reluctance was not for herself, but for Alison.

‘Let the little one go,’ he repeated ; ‘it will only be for a time. I have a conviction that she will be back with us in a year or two ; let her go home and try and bring things more into harmony ; when Mabel grows older and wiser she can come back to us, but there seems sore need of her at ‘The Holms.’

‘Very well,’ returned Miss Carrington, with a sigh ; and then she added in a low voice, ‘I know you are right in your decision ; I have been fighting against it for days for Alison’s sake, for I knew it would break her heart to leave us ; but, all the same, I felt I should have to let her go.’ And after this she said no more, and they sat for a long time in silence, until the grey-headed footman, who had lived with Mr. Moore ever since his son’s birth, came to summon them to tea in the library.

When Alison returned late that evening, pleased and excited with her afternoon’s boating excursion and a gipsy tea on the Long Island, Miss Carrington met her as usual, listened with warm interest to her recital of the day’s doings, and entered into her girlish experiences in her usual kind way. If Alison noticed anything, it was only to wonder why Aunt Diana looked so tenderly at her ; for the quiet grey eyes generally kept their own counsel.

But a little later on, as Alison laid her head on the pillow, and watched the shadow of the rose-leaves in the moonlight, too excited and wakeful to think of closing her eyes, there was a light tap at the door, and Aunt Diana’s tall figure, in its dark wrapper, came softly to her side.

‘You are not asleep, Ailie?’

‘Of course not, Aunt Di ; I’m not even a bit sleepy. Are you come for one of our dear old chats?’ starting up on her pillow.

‘Yes,’ very gravely, taking the chair beside the bed. ‘How light your room is, Ailie ; no wonder you do not feel inclined to sleep, with all those dancing moonbeams on the floor.’

‘I should like to dance with them,’ returned Alison restlessly ; ‘how delicious it was last night, and how well that cornet sounded !’

‘Never mind about that,’ was the unexpected answer ; ‘I have not come for a gossip, you little goose, the daylight will do for that. Do you remember what we were talking about that day when Miss Leigh’s letter came, and you were so unhappy——?’ But Alison interrupted her with sudden terror.

'Oh, no, Aunt Di, we will not talk about that to-night.'

'Why not to-night, Ailie?' she returned softly, as the girl's hands closed round her arm. 'Procrastination will do nothing for us here. My dear, I said then that if I made up my mind that it was right I would help you to go.'

'Yes, yes; but oh, dear Aunt Di, do not say another word, I could not bear it.'

'Well, I am going to help you,' was the calm reply; and then Miss Carrington gently drew the girl's sorrowful face to her shoulder, and while the moonbeams glimmered round them she talked of the parting that lay in store for them.

It was late before she left Alison's room; nevertheless, she sat down and wrote a brief note before she retired to rest.

'MY DEAR AINSLIE,—

'Your daughter Alison has now finished her education. At least, my good friend Mr. Moore and I have brought her to that point where she may be safely trusted to carry on her studies alone. As it is only right that you should reap the advantages of having a grown-up daughter to superintend your household, as, of course, Mabel is still in the schoolroom with Miss Leigh, I feel, and Alison agrees with me, that I can no longer conscientiously deprive you of her services, especially as her health is improved, and she is now better fitted to endure your northern climate. As delays are always useless, I shall fix the twenty-eighth of this month, a fortnight from this time, for Alison's return to you. Please let Roger meet her at the station, as there will be plenty of luggage to see after. I shall put her in the train myself under the guard's care. You know I am generally averse to young ladies travelling alone, but in this case it is unavoidable, unless you would kindly allow Roger to fetch her, or pay us a short visit yourself with that purpose.'

'He will do neither,' was her unuttered thought as she wrote this last sentence, and then she ended up by signing herself,—

'Yours truly,
'DIANA.'

For ever since her sister had married him she could never summon up resolution to call herself his affectionate sister-in-law, feeling there was nothing sisterly in her intercourse with Ainslie Merle; toleration, bounding on indifference, was all she had ever vouchsafed to him.

When Mr. Merle received this letter an annoyed flush passed over his handsome face.

‘Humph, vigorous and managing as ever,’ he muttered ; ‘just like old Diana, not to let the grass grow under her own feet, or other people’s. I suppose she has got tired of the girl, and has shunted her off on us, as though two daughters in a house are not enough for any man ; but these old maids are so selfish. Well, she is rich, and one must not offend her, but I wish she had taken a fancy to Alison.’

These remarks were happily made to himself, but the cloud lifted a little from his brow, and he smiled grimly over a postscript that had been hastily added.

‘Of course, if Alison fails to give you any comfort, or things do not work well after a fair trial, say for a year, I am quite willing to have her again, for I am not tired of the child.’

Mr. Moore smiled and shook his white head, when Miss Carrington owned that in a weak moment she had written that postscript.

‘You have opened a door of escape for him there, you wise woman,’ he said, lifting his finger at her. ‘If you and I are right in our estimate of Ainslie Merle’s character, Sunny will be back with us before the year is out.’

CHAPTER VI.

ALISON'S WELCOME HOME.

IT seemed to Alison as though the weather sympathized with her sad mood. Grey skies and a perfect deluge of rain blotted out the landscape, as she sat alone in the comfortable first-class compartment, looking out at the dreary prospect of dripping hedges and flying telegraph wires, realizing every moment, with an aching heart, that a greater distance lay between her and the beloved Moss-side.

All around her lay the evidence of Aunt Diana's thoughtful care—the new book for which Alison had long wished, the bouquet that loving hands had culled for her, the delicate luncheon in the pretty new basket that had been bought for this especial purpose, the dainty little strap and rug; while her travelling box was stored with all sorts of surprises—sketches that Alison had often admired, books for which she had vainly longed, ornaments such as girls love, and which had been chosen out of Aunt Diana's own jewel casket, presents for the other nephews and nieces, and a propitiatory offering to Miss Leigh.

By-and-by Alison would take pleasure in these things, but just now the poor little heart was too much broken for any such comfort; she was pining already for the dear face that had looked so strangely pale and grave when she had taken her leave of it; she wanted to feel those quiet, earnest kisses again.

'Oh, Aunt Di, Aunt Di! how could you send me away from you!' she sobbed, over and over again, in the first bitterness of her grief; for, contradict as wisecracks will, there is a keenness, an intensity in youthful sorrow, that would astonish older people; the present grief seems so overpowering that any future consolation appears only a mockery. It is only those who have lived long and experienced suffering in its bare reality that know the healing effects of time.

Never since her mother's death had Alison shed such bitter tears; never had her young heart felt that terrible grip of pain which a long

and uncertain parting from those we love so often entails. It seemed to her, as she sat looking out listlessly at the driving rain-clouds, as though happiness and she had parted for ever, that, away from Moss-side, Aunt Diana, and Mr. Moore, there would be no peace or comfort for her, nothing but a wearisome round of monotonous duty.

It was at this point of her sorrowful cogitations that her eyes rested on the little basket beside her. Aunt Diana had charged her most impressively not to let the noontide hour pass without taking some refreshment.

'You must promise me, Ailie,' she had repeated more than once as they stood together in the station; 'you have made only a miserable pretence at breakfast, and you must try and do justice to the luncheon I have provided for you.'

As Alison remembered this injunction, she dried her eyes and opened her basket a little unwillingly; feeling, as young people will under such circumstances, that the thought of any material comfort in the shape of food and drink was simply repugnant to her; but in another moment a quick flash of joy passed over her face, for among the strawberry leaves lay a little slip of folded paper—a hidden message of comfort for the young exile.

'My poor, tired little Ailie,' it said, 'I just know how you are feeling when you open this basket; how my pet will have been crying her eyes out over that weary word, good-bye; and how dull and heavy her loving heart will be with this sad parting. Poor child! if I could only have spared you your share of pain by taking a double portion myself; but, alas! this is not possible. Now, my dear, if you love me, which I know you do, for we have always been a great deal to each other, and always shall be, you must dry your eyes, eat your luncheon, and begin to look things bravely in the face; our parting may not be for long; one of these days, if you have worked well, I shall hope to claim you again; and wherever you are, either at Moss-side or The Holms, you are always Aunt Diana's child: please remember that; but then my child must not disappoint me.'

'We are both making a great sacrifice; now, I look to you to carry it out nobly; be brave, put self in the background, remember where daily strength is to be found, and draw your supply daily; there is no such thing as laying up for the morrow, every day brings its own cares and its own joys, every day must furnish its own prayers, and its own thanksgiving as well.'

‘My dear little Ailie, this is a hard, stony bit of road for your feet to traverse, but if you look beyond it you will see the signpost—duty. I do not say, do not think of me, but think of me happily, as your mother’s friend, who will be journeying with you every step of the way. We think too much of visible partings, and too little of the real loving communion of hearts; what if you are nearly two hundred miles away from me, I am beside you still. Now, little pilgrim, good-bye. Always your devoted

‘AUNT DIANA.’

What matter if the tears were set flowing again over these tender words, they were not now so bitter; and something in Alison’s heart seemed to stir into life at this touch of wise sympathy.

‘I must not disappoint Aunt Di,’ she thought; ‘she and Mr. Moore will look for me to do great things at home; they would have me brave and humble, and loving to every one, even to Missie. It will be hard, I know it will—a stony bit of road, as she says. Miss Leigh so uncongenial and depressing, and father so cold and difficult to understand; but, as Aunt Di’s favourite verse says:

“Holy strivings nerve and strengthen,
 Long endurance wins the crown,
 When the evening shadows lengthen
 Thou shalt lay thy burden down.”

And as Alison softly repeated the lines a watery sunbeam suddenly broke through the clouds like a faint sweet promise of better days.

It was still early in the afternoon when the train steamed slowly into the Chesterton station. Alison gathered up her numerous articles of travelling gear, and looked out with some eagerness, but Roger’s tall figure, and fair, closely-cropped head was nowhere in sight; and, much disappointed and perplexed, she gave a porter instructions about her travelling boxes, quite ignoring the fact that a sturdy, clumsily-built boy, with a Scotch cap set rakishly on his rough stubbly hair, was eyeing her sheepishly, and restraining the alarmed restlessness of a small yellowish dog that he had in his arms.

‘Will you fetch me a cab, please?’ faltered Alison, feeling ready to cry again at her loneliness, and wondering at Roger’s unkind desertion; and then all at once she encountered a pair of round blue eyes, very wide open. She started; yes, there was the wide mouth, the droll, freckled face that she remembered so well; of course, it

was Rudel, grown, but not otherwise altered, grinning affably at her, but making no other attempt at approach.

‘Why, Rudel,’ she exclaimed reproachfully, ‘why did you not speak to me or touch me? I was looking for Roger, and nearly passed you by.’

‘Oh, but I should have halloed all in good time,’ he returned with another grin, shaking hands with her, but refraining from any warmer fraternal greeting; and, seeing the lad’s agony of embarrassment, Alison, with much tact, left him to himself, and, identifying her trunks, watched their transit to the roof of the cab, putting in her own hand-packages without any offer of help on Rudel’s part.

As soon as she was seated in the cab, he got in after her, and proceeded to put down both windows. ‘You would not like me to go outside, I suppose,’ he said in a good-humoured, dawdling voice; ‘these cabs are so stuffy they make a fellow feel queer.’

‘Go outside if you like,’ returned Alison, willing to humour him, but rather disturbed at the boy’s coolness.

‘Oh, it does not matter,’ was the contradictory response; ‘we have not far to go, and cabby is so unusually stout there would not be room for Otter. Oh, by the bye, Roger told me to tell you that father told him that somebody else must come to the station, as he could not be spared. Roger was awfully put about, for he said I should be no help, and I have not been much, eh?’ with another grin that threatened to become a laugh.

‘I wish dear old Roger could have come, but I am glad to see you too,’ was Alison’s polite reply. ‘You are grown, Rudel, are you not?’

‘Oh, yes,’ indifferently, ‘I am heaps fatter. Roger calls me “the fat boy in Pickwick.”’

‘Oh, no, I should not call you fat.’

‘I have plenty of muscle,’ returned the boy, with sudden animation; and it was strange to see how the heavy, unattractive look vanished from his face and showed him in a pleasanter light. ‘I can fight any one in the school, now, even Booby Richards, who is double my size. Father says I should make a capital navy; he declares he shall send me out to the colonies by-and-by. Hurrah for a jolly life, say I, among the squatters. Shouldn’t I like to be a wild cattle driver, or have a sheep farm, and live in a little shanty of my own with Otter and half a dozen other dogs! I don’t care about people, they are so shoddy sometimes, but dogs are capital comrades.’

'So that is Otter, the dog you wrote to me about?'

'Yes, is she not a canny little beast? Look at her short sturdy legs and her nice sharp little head; she is a real beauty, aren't you, old girl? and, Alison, I must take you to see Sulky; he will make you die of laughing, he will indeed.'

'All in good time,' returned his sister, much amused at this sudden garrulity;—any mention of his pets always loosened Rudel's tongue;—'but, Rudel, you have not told me you are glad to see me.'

'Oh, haven't I?' shifting his seat uneasily.

'I thought you would have kissed me after two years of absence.'

'Oh, I never kiss girls,' reddening visibly.

'Not your own sisters?' exclaimed Alison, in a grieved voice.

'Oh, Rudel, you used not to be so stiff and unkind.'

'I ain't one or the other,' rousing up at this reproach. 'I think it is first-rate—your coming, I mean—and you are no end of a brick to do it, and,' with a sudden burst of confidence, 'I shouldn't mind giving you a kiss now and then when you wanted it particularly, if you would promise not to tell Missie; I would not give her one—no, not if she were to ask me on her bended knees—a stuck-up little minx.'

'Oh, Rudel, for shame! Mabel is as much your sister as I am.'

'No, she isn't, and never shall be,' growled the lad. 'I tell you what, Alison, you are an out-and-outer, and no mistake, and I will help you fight all your battles, that I will, as sure as my name is Rudel, and that is better than ever so many kisses.'

'Dear Rudel, I am sure you mean kindly, though you have such a funny way of showing it; but I have no wish to fight any one.'

'Oh, but you will be obliged to fight Missie, whether you wish for it or not,' was the cool rejoinder; but Alison was spared any further argument on this subject, as they had reached The Holms, and in another moment were driving up the gravelled sweep between rows of dusty evergreens.

Alison looked out a little curiously and sadly. Everything was unchanged, and yet everything looked older and more dreary than she remembered it; the square, grey stone house looked grim and uninviting, with no mantle of ivy or creeper to clothe its weather-stained walls; the front garden, with its dusty shrubs and ill-kept lawn, seemed a wilderness after the fresh greenery of Moss-side and

Fernleigh ; the grass quite brown and burnt up until to-day's rain had soddened it. As the cab stopped, the heavy whirring and straining of machinery were disagreeably audible. Over the low laurels Alison had a glimpse of the large vegetable garden and high black walls with grimy ivy festooning them ; above was a hideous crank for hoisting the timber. A mighty plank quivered in mid air as it was slowly lifted to its place. Alison averted her eyes with a shudder as she passed into the house, and so she failed to perceive another message of peace, a robin singing in the ivy, undisturbed by the grinding iron music overhead ; for many such loving tokens and little lessons are to be seen and learned, if we only open our eyes and read what the Father sends us.

The Holms was a singularly-built house. A square, stone hall, uncarpeted and chilly-looking, led to the kitchen and other domestic offices, all on a large scale and unusually roomy ; a wide flight of stone steps, differing from the modern staircase by being also uncovered, led to the sitting-rooms, dining-room, drawing-room, school-room, and study, all opening on to a narrow corridor, fitted from end to end with books—books literally lining it from floor to ceiling.

As Alison wearily ascended the steps, a thin lady-like woman in a black gown, with a depressed, gentle face, came to the head of the staircase.

'I am so glad to see you, my dear,' she said, kissing her affectionately. 'Why, I do believe you are grown, Alison ; you are taller than I expected to see you, but you are looking pale.'

'Oh, that is nothing,' returned Alison hastily, 'I am tired with the journey.' For just then she did not wish her looks to be too keenly criticised. 'Where are the others, Miss Leigh—father, Mabel, and Poppie?'

A flush passed over the governess's careworn face.

'I am so sorry, Alison, that I am the only one to greet your homecoming. Mabel and Poppie are out ; they had an invitation to an afternoon party at the Brownlows ; it is little Stacy's birthday. I wanted Mabel to stay at home and let Poppie go without her, but she would not hear of it.'

'Never mind,' returned Alison quietly ; but she was conscious of a hurt, chilled feeling as Miss Leigh brought out this lame excuse. This was her return home after two years' absence, and yet Roger could not be spared to meet her at the station, and Mabel could not give up an afternoon's amusement to welcome her sister. Her

father was busy as usual ; probably he had forgotten her existence by this time.

'You are very tired, my dear,' continued Miss Leigh, disturbed at the young girl's sudden gravity and paleness. 'Shall I take you to your room, and send you up a cup of tea? I dare say you would like to be quiet a little ; there is no regular dinner to-night, as your father may be a little late ; so we have a substantial tea at half-past seven.'

'Thank you,' replied Alison gratefully, touched at this unexpected thoughtfulness on Miss Leigh's part. But as she followed her, somewhat slowly, Rudel skipped up after her, three steps at a time.

'I suppose you do not want to see Sulky now, Alison?'

'No, no,' interrupted Miss Leigh, 'your sister is tired, Rudel ; you had better go down and leave her to rest.'

'Oh, I was not talking to you, Mother Leigh,' was the boy's rude retort ; and as Alison turned round to shake her head at him, she discovered him in the act of making one of his favourite faces at the back of the unconscious governess.

Her shocked 'Rudel!' brought his puckered features into order at once ; he put his hands into his pockets and executed a prolonged whistle.

'I say, missus,' he observed, when he had sufficiently relieved his feelings, 'have you told Alison about her room?'

'No, no yet, Rudel,' returned the much-enduring Miss Leigh.

'Then I shall. I call it a nasty trick of Missie's ; no one but a girl would do such a thing ; here she has been and taken your room, Alison, with mother's things in it ; and nothing the missus can say will get her to give it up. Missus is awfully wild about it, ain't you, missus?'

'Oh, Rudel! do be quiet,' remonstrated Miss Leigh, in the old worried voice Alison knew so well. 'What a tiresome boy you are ! and I wanted to tell your sister quietly. Alison, my dear, I am very sorry, but Mabel has appropriated your room, and most improperly refuses to give it up. I spoke to your father about it last night, but he only said it did not signify, that he expected you would not mind, as your visit to us might not be a very lengthened one. I think you had better speak to him yourself.'

'I will see about it,' returned Alison quickly, anxious to stem the governess's nervous flow of words. 'Am I to sleep here to-night?' as Miss Leigh opened the door of a back room.

'I have made it as nice as I can,' returned Miss Leigh apologetically, 'but I am afraid you will think it an ugly room; it wants re-papering, and the carpet is dreadfully old.'

'Oh, it will do very well,' observed Alison quietly; but she looked round her with a sinking heart, nevertheless. It was Mabel's old room, and very shabbily furnished, and looked over the kitchen garden and the saw-mills. A perfect forest of timber in neat piles stretched as far as she could see; in front were the hideous pulleys and cranes. For one moment a very different prospect seemed to rise before Alison's aching eyes: a little room with soft green walls and covered with Indian matting; a snowy tent bed in one corner, a dainty couch, with a low table and a vase of crimson and yellow roses on it; outside a shadowy lawn, and a gleam of water shining between the willows; but, with a vast effort, she shut out the bitter sweet recollection.

She listened with well-assumed patience as Miss Leigh pointed out the various little improvements she had effected. Though Alison did not know it, the easy chair and little round table were taken from Miss Leigh's own room; the fuchsias and geraniums in the blue vase were Roger's gift; and even Rudel had contributed the big green fern that stood on the window ledge.

'Now, I will send you up your tea,' observed Miss Leigh at last, when the boxes had arrived, and Rudel had assisted to unstrap them; 'there is no hurry, my dear; you will have nearly two hours to yourself to unpack and rest.'

Alison tried to answer cheerfully, but her head was aching in earnest now; the tears were very near the surface again, but she battled with them bravely.

'I will have my tea and then rest a little; the unpacking can wait for to-morrow,' she thought. 'Oh, Aunt Di,' laying her head against the frilled cover of the easy chair, 'are you thinking of your little pilgrim now?' And then she took out the dear letter and read it over again.

CHAPTER VII.

A DOMESTIC SYMPHONY.

AUNT DIANA'S letter and a cup of excellent tea were both very restorative in their effects, and when Alison had freshened her tired face with cold water, and brushed her dishevelled locks, and exchanged her travelling dress for a light, cool-looking zephyr cloth costume, she felt less reluctance to present herself to the critical eyes of her father and Mabel.

'I am far too pale, and I am afraid my red eyes will betray me,' she thought, as she anxiously scrutinised herself in the small looking-glass, 'but they will not be hard on me, surely, after my long journey;' but here her reflections were broken by a hasty knock.

'May I come in?' questioned a voice that she knew at once was Roger's, and in a moment she had sprung joyfully to the door.

'Oh, Roger, you dear old fellow, - I am so glad to see you again!' she exclaimed, forgetting all her troubles in the sight of his familiar face. Evidently her pleasure was reciprocated; a pair of strong arms almost lifted her off her feet, and bore her across the room towards the window, and, after a hasty kiss or two, Roger put his hand under her chin and gravely inspected her.

'I suppose you are glad to see me,' he observed at length, in a dissatisfied voice, 'as you have been crying evidently at the pleasurable anticipation. So you are sorry to come home, Alison, eh? and yet'—rather reproachfully—'you are wanted very badly here.'

Alison's only answer was to lay her face down on his arm; this was a little too much for her jaded spirits, a few more tears would come. Roger had found her out, as she knew he would.

'Come now, this won't do, Ailie,' he said, with a sort of soothing roughness; 'we shall pack you back again to Aunt Diana if you are going to fret. I looked for rather a different greeting after two years' absence.'

'I can't help it,' she said, trying to dismiss her tears; 'I am

tired, and everything seems strange to-night, and I do miss Aunt Diana.'

'Yes, she has spoiled you for us; you have grown a dainty little lady, Ailie.'

'Oh, no; I am not spoiled in that way,' she interrupted him breathlessly. 'You cannot quite understand, Roger; but there is such a mixed feeling. I have wanted you all these two years; you have never been out of my mind a single day. Please do not think me unkind and disagreeable, or that I am not glad to see you because I cried a little. It is only one of my stupid ways.'

'Well, well; I suppose I must forgive you. Anyhow, I am too glad to have you back to scold you properly. What colour are your eyes generally, Alison? They are as pink as an albino's to-night.'

'It is my turn to look at you,' she returned, trying to pluck up a little spirit. 'Why, you have grown a moustache, Roger. How well it suits you!' glancing at the rough, sandy appendage to his lip with much sisterly complacency; but Roger only broke into a merry laugh.

'Did you ever see such a handsome fellow? Really, Rudel and I are marvellous specimens of manly beauty. He beats me in freckles, though, ha, ha!' And Roger quite rocked himself in merriment.

'I like the look of you very much,' returned Alison gravely, quite ignoring this satirical outburst.

Strangers might not consider Roger handsome; in fact, he was regarded as a clumsy, somewhat heavy-looking young man; but his good-natured face and open blue eyes always redeemed him from any charge of plainness in his sister's opinion. He was so tall and well grown, too; and though he did not carry himself as well as Greville Moore, and was somewhat awkward in the use of his limbs, Alison never would find fault with him on this score. He had not had Mr. Greville's advantages. If Roger had gone to Oxford instead of being put at those horrid mills he would have been polished too. 'If mamma had lived he would have learned little things from her. He only laughs at me if I try to teach him things,' thought Alison.

'Your hair is a little rough—and, oh! your boots are muddy,' she continued, after eyeing him as 'careful robins eye the delver's toil.' 'You have wanted me to keep you in order.'

'I don't seem to match you, somehow,' he observed. 'Do you

always look as though you were just turned out of a bandbox? I wish you would take Missie and Poppie in hand; they drive Miss Leigh crazy with their untidiness. Oh, we are a happy family, Ailie—nothing but billing and cooing and that sort of thing going on from morning to night. You might take Rudel and Missie for a couple of love-birds, the sweet young creatures are so fond of each other, and as for Poppie and Missie—look, there is a specimen of the home-music dulcet strains floating up the staircase. There goes Missie.'

Alison's brow knitted with some perplexity as she listened. 'Flora, will you go into your own room? I insist on it—you are not fit to be seen in that torn frock,' in a sharp, girlish voice.

'What does it matter? she won't mind,' in a shrill, childish treble; 'you are so cross, Mabel. Do let me come in with you and see Alison.'

'No, no; do as I tell you; you shall come in presently. There! you have trampled on my dress and torn some of the trimming, you horrid little thing! I will tell papa if you are so naughty, and then he will not let you come down to tea.' Here an expressive roar on Poppie's part interrupted the discussion. Alison, who could bear no more, moved quickly to the door and opened it. A pretty-looking, fair-haired girl, dressed somewhat untidily and in bad style, with rather a vixenish expression on her flushed face, was standing just outside Alison's room, and behind her a somewhat plain little girl between eight and nine years of age, rather small in stature, and with a droll, freckled face like Rudel's, only it was just now puckered up with crying—a red, inflamed spot on one cheek was evidently the result of a smart blow on her sister's part in payment for the torn trimming.

'How do you do, Mabel?' she said, with a somewhat cold salute of Missie's cheek. 'Please do not prevent Poppie coming to me. I could not help hearing, you spoke so loud, and I do not mind one bit how she looks. Come here, Poppie dear;' but the child, evidently shy and upset by the late fracas, held back in an embarrassed manner, until Missie gave her a rough push.

'Why don't you go to Alison, you stupid little thing?' she said crossly, for she was put out at her sister's sudden appearance on the scene. Missie, in spite of her temper, never liked to look undignified, and here she was caught red-handed in the act of boxing Poppie's ears.

'Please do not force her to come to me ; we shall be very good friends directly,' returned Alison, sorry for the poor child's awkwardness. There was bad management here, or why was Missie allowed to control her after this fashion? 'Come with me, Poppie dear ; Roger is in my room, and I will show you the pretty new game I have brought for you.'

The child's face brightened in a moment, and she moved instantly to take Alison's hand ; again Missie interposed.

'She must change her frock, Alison ; tea is just ready, and I hear papa's step in the garden. He will be very angry if Poppie looks rough or untidy ; and I cannot allow him to be vexed,' pursing up her lips with a virtuous expression.

Alison controlled a quick retort with some difficulty. She had fully expected to find Missie a most aggravating little person, or why should Miss Leigh complain of her so bitterly? But the reality was worse than she anticipated.

'Never mind,' she said calmly ; but she could not help an expressive look at Roger, who was leaning against the doorway, an amused auditor—'we must not vex papa, must we, Poppie? I will help you change your frock, and perhaps after all we may have time to look at the fishponds.' And without another glance at Missie Alison made Poppie cheerfully lead the way, as she did not know her room.

'Well, I am sure !' observed Missie, with a little toss of her head as she marched off to her own—or rather, to Alison's room ; but she did not much enjoy the sound of Roger's laugh behind her. 'Alison scored there,' he observed audibly, as he followed her, still chuckling to himself. Alison sighed heavily as she heard him. What a miserable state of things ! she thought ; laughing at Missie would only inflame her naturally bad temper. Was this their notion of family life? Hasty words and recriminations, constant teasing on the boys' part, and mutual aggravations. 'Live peaceably with all men,' was the command. And this was how they obeyed it ; no wonder Alison's gentle nature felt saddened as she followed Poppie to her room, a little one leading out of Miss Leigh's.

Poppie speedily grew confidential as Alison brushed out her tawny mane, and fastened it into a neat pigtail ; when nicely dressed, Poppie was not such a bad-looking child. She had a funny little face, and a turned-up nose ; but though not pretty, there was something piquante in her expression. She had brown eyes, like

Alison—only very bright and sparkling—and long, beautiful eye-lashes; and though she was far too small for her age, there was a fairy-like lightness about her. When Alison had finished dressing her, she kissed her and told her pleasantly that she was sure she was a good girl, for Miss Leigh always said so. ‘Mabel does not say so, though,’ observed Poppie, with a reflective frown; ‘she says very often that I am a horrid little thing, and a tiresome monkey, and——’

‘Come and look at the fishponds,’ observed Alison, cutting short this string of compliments on Missie’s part; and as the delighted child stood beside her she made her hold her frock, and poured into it a delicious *mêlée* of bonbons, crackers, and games; after which they sorted and inspected them until the tea bell rang very furiously, making Poppie start and say they must hurry down.

As Alison came down the staircase with the child still clinging to her, Mr. Merle suddenly made his appearance from the study. He almost started at the sight of his daughter, and an expression of pain crossed his handsome, careworn face. In the dim light, Alison recalled her mother too plainly to his eyes. How often in their happy life he had stood just there waiting, as she came down to him with one of her children holding her hand, and with such a smile on her face!

‘Oh, papa,’ she said, hurrying to him, and putting up her fair young face to his. He kissed her kindly, patted it, told her that she had grown into a woman since he had seen her, and questioned her with some interest about her journey.

The dining room, a large, handsomely furnished room, looked sufficiently cosy as they entered it. Though the daylight was not gone, the lamp had been lighted, and the table fairly groaned with all the good things that were necessary to a heavy Lancashire tea. Missie was in the seat of honour; she gave a little simpering laugh as Alison entered with her father. ‘I suppose this will be your place to-morrow,’ she said, rather with the hope of being contradicted, Alison thought; for, as Alison replied simply, ‘I suppose so, but I need not disturb you to-night,’ a vexed look crossed Missie’s face; but as Rudel was already grinning in hopes of a row, she prudently disappointed him.

Alison sat by her father, and gave him most of her attention; it would take time, she felt, to reconcile her to look on at Missie’s airs and graces with anything like tolerable equanimity. Alison’s

refined taste grafted on Miss Carrington's opinion could ill tolerate the young girl's appearance. Missie was certainly very pretty; she had regular features and a good complexion, and her figure promised to be pretty too. But she was singularly overdressed for so young a girl, and not in the best possible taste; there were rings on her childish hands, bangles on her round bare arms, a fair, untidy-looking fringe hid her nice white forehead, and a mass of ragged-looking plaits over-weighted her small head. In fact, as Roger afterwards observed, she generally looked like a gaudily dressed doll, pretty in a dollish way, if she would not spoil the good looks with which Providence had endowed her by her conceit and silliness. Alison was not looking at her much to-night. Her father's altered looks were making her anxious. How much older he had grown in these two years! How pale and grey he looked! His manner was more absent and dreamy than she remembered it. He seemed more self-absorbed; now and then an irritable nervous light came into his eyes at the sound of the boys' voices, and he would speak a sharp word or two; but Miss Leigh's plaintive remarks, her attempts to lead him into anything like connected conversation, always failed. Poor Miss Leigh was evidently a nonentity in his eyes.

Missie's 'dear papa' always roused him in a moment. Alison tried hard not to feel a pang of jealousy as she saw his loving glance at his favourite. How Missie had managed it no one knew, but she could turn him round her little finger; that she could coax him to anything was evident as Alison looked at Missie's sparkling hands. Mr. Merle had not waited for his eldest daughter to come home before he had opened his wife's casket. Alison had her mother's watch and chain, but only one of her diamond rings lay locked up among her treasures. Aunt Diana did not approve of diamonds on girlish hands, and Alison never cared to wear it.

When they rose from the table Missie's first words were a peremptory order for Poppie to put away her toys and go to bed. This led to a feeble protest on Miss Leigh's part.

'It is not so very late, Mabel, and Poppie has not seen her sister for two years. I think she might wait a little longer.'

'I am not going; there, now!' observed the child defiantly, quite oblivious of her father's presence.

'Go it, Pops. I'll back you,' whispered Rudel, rubbing his hands; 'she shan't touch you as long as I am here, or her cat shall rue it to-morrow.'

Mabel's eyes flashed. 'You horrid rude boy! Papa——' But here Alison gently interfered.

'You will go to bed now, dear, will you not?' she whispered in the child's ear, 'and I will come and tuck you up, and wish you good-night.' And thus propitiated Poppie's sullenness vanished, and she trotted off at once.

'Papa dear, you will not go into the study to-night,' observed Mabel in a coaxing tone, as Mr. Merle looked at the door, as though he intended to follow Poppie's example; 'please come with us into the drawing-room, and I will make you so comfortable.'

'Very well, Pussie,' was his good-humoured answer, as he got up a little wearily from his chair.

Alison waited a moment before she followed them.

'Are you not coming too?' she asked, as Roger threw himself down on an easy chair, and Rudel began to play with Otter on the hearthrug.

Roger shook his head smilingly.

'Rudel has got to do his lessons. Missie never admits him into the drawing-room of an evening. She says it is not the room for boys.'

'I would not go if she were to ask me ever so much,' returned Rudel wrathfully.

'But surely, Roger,' pleaded his sister, 'you will come in with me this evening?'

'Well, if you wish it very much,' he replied in a bored tone; 'but you have no idea how stupid it is in there. Father never opens his mouth, and if any one speaks he shuts up his books and goes off to his study, and then Missie flies at us for disturbing him. I generally keep Rudel company, or go out and amuse myself.'

'But not to-night, dear,' she returned gently; and he got up at once, shaking himself like a shaggy dog.

Rudel looked up rather wistfully.

'I have almost a mind to come too,' he muttered; but as Roger said hastily, 'Better not, Rue; we don't want any rows to-night, Alison is tired,' he remained kicking his heels in suppressed ill-humour.

Alison threw a critical glance round the room as she entered it. No changes had been effected since she had last entered it. The furniture had once been costly, but the damask coverings were worn and faded. A few yards of cretonne would have effaced the shabbiness, but neither Miss Leigh nor Missie had thought of such a thing. Missie had worked a few chairbacks, but there all her ideas of re-

novation had stopped. The furniture was not disposed to the best advantage either—the chairs and tables were awkwardly placed, and seemed to have no sort of relation to each other—no cosy nooks invited people to sociable *tête-à-têtes*.

Miss Leigh sat bolt upright by the big round table, with her work-basket and a pile of the boys' socks. Mr. Merle had a little table and a reading lamp to himself; and Missie sat on a stool at his feet with a novel on her lap. Alison guessed at once that this was their ordinary position.

'Oh, is that you, Roger? You don't often honour us with your company of an evening,' observed Missie, with a toss of her pretty head. 'This is a compliment to you, Alison, I suppose?'

'We ought to put our books away to-night,' said Mr. Merle, rousing himself reluctantly, and making Alison feel as if he were treating her like a visitor. 'Mabel, my dear, suppose you give us one of your little songs?'

'No, indeed, papa,' returned Alison eagerly, 'I hope you will go on just the same as though I were not here. Of course, I should like to hear Mabel sing, but not if it disturbs you.'

'Oh, I always sing to papa of an evening,' replied Missie, walking to the piano with much dignity. 'Roger, I think you might offer to light those candles for me, but you boys have no idea of waiting upon ladies. You will find them dreadfully rough, Alison.'

'On the contrary, I am rather fond of waiting upon ladies,' was Roger's nonchalant answer, laying a peculiar stress on the last word that brought an angry flush to Missie's face. 'I always wait on you, do I not, Miss Leigh?'

'Yes, indeed, Mr. Roger. I always say you are so kind and thoughtful.'

Missie struck a chord sharply. 'If you will be good enough to leave off talking I will commence my song,' she said crossly, and as Roger made a low bow and retired, she began the prelude of a German song.

Alison listened with much pleasure. Among her other natural gifts Missie certainly possessed a very good voice, and it had been evidently well trained. Her notes were clear and sweet, and if she could only have got rid of a certain affectation in her style, Alison could have praised her still more warmly.

As it was, her admiration was so sincere that Missie began to thaw for the first time.

'I suppose you sing?' she said, a little bluntly.

'Not much. I certainly cannot compare my voice to yours,' was the modest reply; 'but I am fond of instrumental music, and play a good deal.'

'Then you will be able to play my accompaniments,' returned Mabel, brightening still more. 'Will you take my place, Alison? Papa will like to hear you, I am sure.'

'Not to-night,' returned Alison, feeling as though she were not capable of any further effort. 'I am rather tired; and if papa would excuse me, I think I should like to go to bed.'

'By all means, my love,' observed Mr. Merle, looking up from his book. 'Pussie dear, I hope everything is comfortable for your sister. Never mind singing to me to-night, if there is anything you can do to help Alison.'

'I will come with you and see,' returned Missie, a little ungraciously; and though Alison would rather have dispensed with her company, she thought it better policy to accept this faint offer of help. On the landing, Missie stopped, and said rather awkwardly, 'I hope you don't mind about the change of rooms, Alison; but as you do not live at home, I thought I could please myself.'

'I suppose I have come home to live now,' returned her sister wearily; 'but if you do not want to give it up, Mabel, I will try to be content with my present one; I only want things to be comfortable, and to do my best for you all.'

'Oh, as to that, we have got along very well,' returned Mabel hastily; 'you need not put yourself out on our account. As papa says, I am grown up now—nearly seventeen—and able to take care of myself and other people too. I hope you are not going in to see Poppie; I think it is a pity waking up the child, and she is so excitable.'

'I shall not wake her; but I promised to go and see her,' returned Alison with gentle firmness, as she bade Missie good-night. Missie need not have troubled herself about her little sister's wakefulness. Poppie was sitting bolt upright in the darkness, waiting for Alison.

'Now for a good cuddle and a talk,' she said, stretching out her arms to Alison; 'you are a nice old thing to keep your promise.' And as Alison sat down on the little bed she forgot her weariness, as Poppie laid her warm cheek against hers, and called her her dear, nice Ailie.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISSIE.

ALISON was too tired to lie awake a moment after her head touched the pillow, and she woke so late the next morning that breakfast was already over, and Miss Leigh sent up a message by Poppie, begging her to lie still and rest herself, as her father and Roger had already gone to the mill, and she would send her up some breakfast.

'Aunt Diana would call this a bad beginning,' thought Alison. Nevertheless, as her head still ached, she yielded to the temptation. The sun was shining into her room, making her feel hot and restless, and she begged Poppie to lower the blind, so that the huge crane might not fret her eyes by its hideous unsightliness. If she could only have shut out, too, its incessant whirr and grind! but that was impossible. As she drank her tea she looked round the shabby room with a strange sinking of heart and spirits. 'I must wake up every morning to this,' she thought, 'unless I make an enemy of Missie from the beginning by forcing her to resign my room. Will it not be better to endure any amount of discomfort than to do that? I will ask Aunt Diana what I shall do about it. No, no,' recalling herself, 'I must act now on my own responsibility. Aunt Diana will think me a poor, helpless sort of a thing if I always want her as a moral crutch to support me. Wise as she is, she could not decide for me at such a distance;' and then the words came into Alison's mind—'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.' 'I have not said my prayers; that is why I feel so weak and hopeless about things,' she said to herself; 'thinking only seems to lead me more into the fog. I will not lie another moment fretting over all these troubles.' And with this wise resolution Alison dressed herself quickly, and finished her unpacking, after which she ensconced herself in the deserted dining-room and wrote her first letter to Moss-side.

A sweet, brave little letter it was. Miss Carrington's lip trembled

somewhat as she read it. Alison touched very little on her own feelings ; she did not even speak of her changed room, thinking that piece of unwelcome news might be prudently withheld. Somehow, she had a notion that it would vex Aunt Diana. She talked of Roger's warm welcome, and Miss Leigh's kindness, and tried to make Aunt Di interested in Rudel's and Poppie's droll ways. Missie she barely mentioned, except to say how pretty she had grown and how nicely she sang, and then went on to speak of her father's changed looks. A great many loving messages, a few longing expressions for Aunt Di herself, completed the letter. Nevertheless, Miss Carrington looked grave as she folded it up, as though her keen eyes read between the lines.

'My poor little home-sick child, I wish I were near enough to comfort you,' she said, with a sigh, as she went on with her work ; and the next morning brought Alison just what she needed, a few more wise, kindly words written straight from Aunt Di's warm heart—strong, cheerful words that carried their own healing with them. 'Don't fear to tell me all that troubles you,' she wrote, removing the embargo from Alison's sealed lips ; 'any confidence you repose in me will be sacred. Tell me anything and everything that concerns your dear little self ; it will all interest me. I shall not think you either weak or complaining ; my child has a right to my sympathy, as she surely knows by this time, and a gift not used is a gift abused. Remember that, Ailie. So I hope you mean to draw on me pretty largely.'

The early luncheon hour brought all the family together, but Alison's sense of orderliness and propriety was shocked by Rudel's rough appearance. He came in straight from school with unbrushed hair and unwashed hands, and sat down at the table, until Missie's loudly uttered injunctions, and at last his father's curt command to make himself presentable before he ate his dinner, obliged him to leave the room grumbling ; and his return a few minutes later led to a most undignified scene of recrimination between him and Missie, carried on below their breaths with the utmost bitterness, with Poppie listening with both her ears, in spite of Miss Leigh's gentle reminders to go on with her dinner.

But this was not the only source of discomfort to Alison ; her father was evidently in one of his gloomiest humours ; something had evidently gone wrong at the mills, and, as usual, Roger was bearing the brunt of the annoyance. Alison's heart was full of pity

as she heard the angry words that were launched at his unlucky head ; in her own mind, she was secretly marvelling at Roger's patience. How could he so tamely submit to be openly rebuked after this fashion ? He was two-and-twenty, very few young men would have put up with such treatment, but yet he made no attempt to stem the torrent of his father's wrath, only sat with flushed face, looking down at his plate.

Alison—who was on the verge of tears with suppressed pity, and longing to speak a word in his defence—was moved almost to anger by the unconcern on Missie's face. Evidently she was too used to hear Roger found fault with on every occasion to take any notice of it. She had finished her contest with Rudel, and now sat with her usual self-satisfied look, playing with her rings, and humming a little French air to herself.

'Papa dear,' she said at last placidly, 'do let those stupid saw-mills alone ; you are only exciting yourself and making yourself ill. Come out into the garden with me and Poppie, it is so cool and shady there.' And as Mr. Merle did not at once answer this appeal, she came round to him and touched his arm.

'Come, papa,' she repeated still more placidly ; 'you have scolded Roger enough, and it only puts you out. Come with me ; I want you.' And actually Mr. Merle suffered himself to be coaxed out of the room ; and in another minute Alison saw them sitting together under the lime trees, with Poppie and Otter playing on the lawn.

Alison turned round to seek Roger, but he had left the room, and Rudel had followed him ; only Miss Leigh was locking up the cellarette, and jingling her key basket.

'What does this mean ?' faltered Alison. 'Why does papa speak to Roger in this way ? It is not right, is it ?'

'Come with me into the schoolroom,' was Miss Leigh's sensible answer to this ; 'as Sarah will be in directly to clear the luncheon, and we cannot talk before her. I must speak to you, Alison, I must indeed.' And leading the way to the old room Alison remembered so well, she closed the door in her quick, nervous fashion, and begged Alison to take the only easy chair that the room boasted. 'No, indeed,' returned Alison quickly ; 'Poppie's little stool will do for me. What does it matter where I sit, or whether one is comfortable or not ?' she continued impatiently, as Miss Leigh stood hesitating. 'Please rest yourself in that big chair, for you look quite fagged and tired, and I have had a nice rest.'

'I think I am nearly always tired,' returned Miss Leigh plaintively. 'Is it not dreadful, Alison—about poor Mr. Roger, I mean? If it were not for my poor blind mother, whom I pretty nearly support out of my savings, I do not think I could endure this much longer. My dear,' with the tears starting to her gentle eyes, 'when one gets to my age one values peace and kind words above everything, and that is just what one cannot get at The Holms.'

'Do you mean that this sort of thing goes on daily?' exclaimed Alison, turning her flushed face to the governess. 'Do you mean,' bringing out her words with difficulty, 'that papa often gives Roger all this to bear?'

'Well, my dear, one must not exaggerate. Things are not always going wrong at the mills, of course; and sometimes we can eat our meals in peace; but your poor dear father—one hardly likes to blame him to his own child—is very often hard on Mr. Roger. It seems to me as though nothing Mr. Roger can do pleases your father, and as if Mabel can do no wrong in his eyes. You can see for yourself, Alison, the influence she has over him.'

'Yes, I see; but I cannot understand it. When I was last at home Missie was only a child, and yet, though she is not seventeen, and ought to be in the schoolroom and under your care, she seems completely mistress.'

'She is never in the schoolroom now,' returned Miss Leigh, leaning back wearily in the arm-chair. 'Sometimes she comes in to interfere with Poppie and find fault with some of my arrangements. But she has coaxed your father into giving her French and singing lessons with her friends the Hardwicks, and for months she has refused to open even a history; and yet you have no idea how ignorant she is. Nothing but mischief has resulted from her intimacy with Eva Hardwick. I have spoken to your father over and over again about it, but he listens to Mabel's version of her friend's character, and only the other day he told me I must be mistaken, for Eva was a bright, high-spirited girl; and it was all nonsense what Mr. Roger and I said about her.'

'Roger dislikes her, then?'

'Oh yes; he never speaks to her if he can help it. She is a fine-looking girl, older than Mabel, but vain and empty-headed, thinking of nothing but balls and flirtations; and you know how dangerous a friend of that sort is to a girl of Mabel's age. To do Mabel justice, she was not half so vain and fond of dress and finery until she went

so much to the Hardwicks. They have completely turned her head. Eva tells her how pretty she is, and lends her all sorts of foolish novels, which unsettle her more by their false notions of life; and now nothing is good enough for Mabel, nothing pleases her, and, worst of all, Eva has taken a dislike to Roger because he refuses to pay her any attention and laughs at all their nonsense; and that sets Mabel against her brother.'

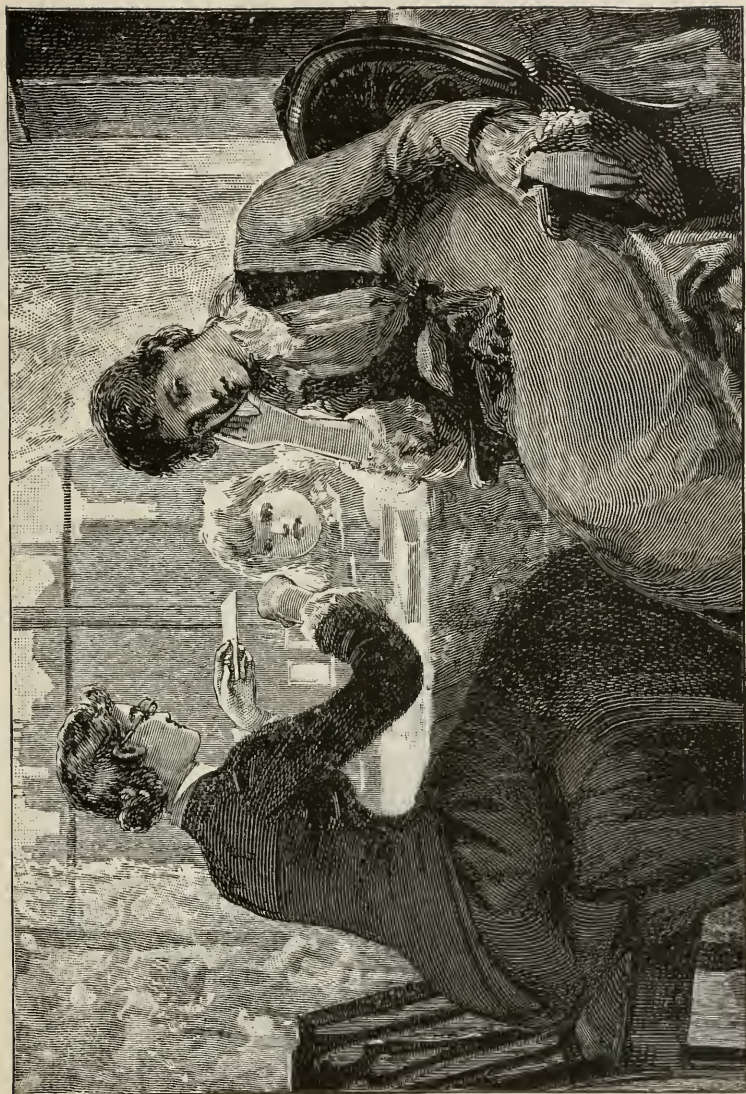
Alison listened with a distressed face, but she was evidently reading Missie's character under a new light; she thought of her conversation with Aunt Diana in the moonlighted garden, and the importance Aunt Diana placed on friendship and its influence over people's characters. She had a horror of 'girl butterflies,' as she called them—girls who lived for social excitements, who had no interest beyond passing pleasures. Surely this Eva Hardwick must be a 'girl butterfly.'

'Oh, they are pretty enough to look at,' Miss Carrington would say, 'if we could only see them in the sunshine; but when a storm comes just look at the poor things, at their draggled wings and miserable plight. One would rather be a working bee then, with a hive full of honey and a nice little wax cell of its own. Girls are never prettier, in my opinion, than when they are hard at work, with plenty of play to follow; and they are ever so much happier, take my word for it, Ailie; and I have been a girl myself.'

'Mabel always had a temper of her own,' went on Miss Leigh, feeling a sort of relief in pouring out her feelings into Alison's ear, 'but she was never so aggravating as she is now. You see, my dear, if a girl does not hold her own home as sacred, if she chooses a giddy young companion for her confidante, and retails to her all that passes in her own household, finding fault with her own people, and listening to her friend's estimate of them, she may end as Mabel does, in thinking her brothers rough and unmannerly, and Poppie a disagreeable little girl.'

'Do you mean Missie is so dishonourable as to repeat to Miss Hardwick all that passes at The Holms?' asked Alison indignantly.

'They do not think it dishonourable,' returned Miss Leigh, with a quiet good sense with which Alison had never credited her. The governess had evidently learned something from her troubles. 'You see, Mabel calls Eva her bosom friend, and refuses to have any secrets from her. If Eva comes this afternoon, all that passed at



ALISON LISTENED WITH A DISTRESSED FACE.

the luncheon table between your father and Mr. Roger will be retailed, as a matter of course. Even if Mabel were disposed to be reticent for once, Eva, who is of an inquisitive nature, and who completely dominates her, would soon worm the whole thing from her. She has a grudge against Mr. Roger, and nothing would please her more than to hear of his humiliation. I have reason to know, Alison, that it is by Eva's advice that Mabel intends to keep your room. I have heard her say myself that, of course, as your home is with Miss Carrington, you have resigned your privilege here as the eldest daughter, and that there is no need for Mabel to knock under completely. Those were her very words.'

Alison looked grave. 'Is Miss Hardwick often here?' she asked at last.

'They are together every day, either here or at Broadlands—the Hardwicks' house. But as your father objects to strangers, or, indeed, to visitors of any kind, Eva very rarely spends the evenings here. They were practising in the drawing-room this morning, and afterwards they went out together. There is another sister, Anna, a nice little thing, rather pale and delicate-looking, but they both snub her. I suppose that makes Mr. Roger kind to her when she comes, for her sister certainly slights her, and Mr. Roger always stands up for every one but himself.'

'But, Miss Leigh, what would Aunt Diana say? Do you mean Mabel and Miss Hardwick go out alone?'

A flush passed over the governess's thin face.

'What can I do, Alison? Mabel will not listen to me; in fact, she sets me completely at defiance, and when I carry a complaint to your father I get no redress, of course. I am seriously uneasy at Mabel going about in this independent way. In my opinion young ladies of Mabel's age ought to be with their mothers and sisters. She is far too pretty, and so is Eva, to go about as they do. It would not matter if they were quiet in dress and manner, but they are two gaily dressed, giggling girls. Mrs. Hardwick has not our nice, old-fashioned ideas; she allows her girls the freedom of boys. Eva is completely beyond her mother's control now. She speaks to her as though they were equals in age, contradicts her flatly, puts her right in the most impertinent way if she thinks her wrong—in fact, reverence to parents, respect to age, is totally at variance with the creed of the emancipated girl.'

'Oh, Aunt Di,' thought Alison, and more than ever she clave to

the memory of those wise, gentle precepts which had bade her pupil watch against the growing evil of the present day, which is to undervalue the lessons of experience, and to induce young people to be their own sign-posts in the road of life. 'Grey hairs are not what they used to be,' she would say with a sigh; 'old age has gone out of fashion, only the young people lead now-a-days. Never go with the herd, Ailie; believe me, dear child, old customs are the best. "Honour thy father and thy mother" never meant "Laugh at them for being old-fashioned."'

'It seems odd, my saying all this to you, Alison,' observed Miss Leigh, after a pause; 'for you are young yourself; but you were never flighty and easily led, as Mabel is. I believe she has her good points; she is really very much attached to your father, and will leave Eva sometimes, if he wants her; and in her own way she is fond of Poppie, though she tyrannises over her. There! Poppie is crying as usual, that is generally the end when she is long with Mabel. I suppose, by that, your father has gone back to the mill. I had better go to her, Alison, if you will excuse me.'

Alison had plenty of food for meditation when she was left alone; a very difficult problem was before her to solve. How was she to gain an influence over her faulty young sister?

Missie was clever enough for her own purposes. Half-educated, she had managed to effect her escape from the schoolroom at an age when girls were generally working their hardest. She had not only thrown off all allegiance to her governess, but she was actually assuming the reins of domestic government. Alison had arrived just in time to see the whole household made miserable by the mismanagement and ignorance of a girl of sixteen and a half. The rôle of mistress was ill-suited to her temper and capacity, and she was daily becoming more exacting in trifles and more domineering. In spite of her filial feelings, Alison could not but feel that her father was most to blame for this state of affairs. Why did he permit a child of Mabel's age to dominate him and his household? Missie might be winning and sweet to him, and he might love to pet her and be blind to many of her faults; but no father ought to be so completely hoodwinked. He had doubtless suffered his natural indolence to gain the mastery over him. A recluse and bookworm by nature, unfit for the work that was distasteful to him—for he had always hated the mill—he had grown irritable and exacting in all matters relating to business, and his leisure hours

were spent in his beloved studies, to the exclusion of all other interests, so that, with the exception of Missie, who adapted herself to his tastes, and never allowed him to be disturbed, he lived as a stranger among his children, letting things take their course, and, like other selfish, self-absorbed people, only seriously put out when his own comfort was impaired.

Alison had always felt most painfully that her father had never taken the trouble to understand her. Even in the old days she had a poignant feeling that she was not to him what other daughters were to their fathers ; even then the childish, fair-headed Mabel had been his favourite. On her arrival he had greeted her kindly ; but all the time Alison felt there was no real welcome for her—no room in his self-engrossed life for the daughter who was almost a stranger to him, of whose thoughts and opinions he knew nothing. ‘Missie has found the key to his heart, but I am left out in the cold,’ thought Alison with natural sadness ; ‘but, after all, it is not so bad for me as for Roger.’ But at this point of her cogitations, Miss Leigh returned with Poppie, who was crying bitterly ; and the rest of the afternoon was spent by Alison in comforting her little sister for Mabel’s tyranny, by playing with her at the novel game of fish-ponds.

CHAPTER IX.

‘ I WANTED TO FIND YOU, DEAR.’

MR. MERLE had suffered great reverses in his life. He had been once an idle man with a tolerable amount of wealth, which, by mismanagement and extravagance, had somehow dwindled away, and had reluctantly donned harness in his early married life by working his own saw-mills, instead of entrusting them to his agent.

In putting his shoulder to the wheel after this manly fashion, and striving to retrieve his fallen fortunes, Mr. Merle considered that he was playing his part nobly in life—that no one could lay the finger of blame upon him ; and yet in his own heart he knew himself to be a disappointed and embittered man. His work was simply odious to him. His ambition had been to distinguish himself in the literary world, and as his talents were of no mean order, and he had the nice discernment and the keen intellect belonging to the practised scholar, nothing but leisure and opportunity were lacking to him. The endeavour to lead the two lives had been fatal to his own peace and to the peace of the household. Late hours, intense thought, and latterly a growing hopelessness of results—for the goal of success seemed as far removed from him as ever—were beginning to tell upon his health. Still in the prime of life, he was becoming haggard and grey before his time. His moods grew captious and irritable ; his baffled consciousness told on him ; his intercourse with his family became more unsatisfactory ; the whole nature of the man seemed warped and out of harmony with his surroundings.

And yet there was a charm about Ainslie Merle, as his sister-in-law knew well, that, in spite of his selfishness, or rather self-seeking, made women cling to him. His wife had been devoted to him.

The dinner-hour was the only time when his children ever found him disposed to be sociable. But Rudel and Poppie were

not admitted to this meal. Rudel's supper was generally placed in the schoolroom, where he learnt his evening lessons, and Poppie would join him.

Alison, who was disposed to pity the poor children in their solitude, soon found that her condolence was thrown away.

'It is ever so much nicer here,' observed Rudel, looking up from his book with his hands pushed through his hair. 'You don't know what you are talking about, Ailie. Old Nanny sends us in a rattling good supper, and Pops and I, and Otter too, have a rare good time of it; don't we, Pops?' and, as the little girl nodded in reply, he went on, 'No, thank you; no late dinners for me. Ask Roger how he enjoys them. He is going to cut it to-night. He told me so.'

'Do you mean Roger is not coming in to dinner?' asked Alison anxiously.

'I don't suppose he has digested his luncheon yet,' returned the boy, with a shrug of his shoulders; but, as the dinner bell sounded, Alison was obliged to hurry away. She was not a moment too soon. Missie was already in her place at the head of the table. Alison coloured a little as she seated herself by her father, but took no further notice; the next day was Sunday; she would begin the following day by taking possession quietly of her proper place.

She was astonished to find that Roger's absence was scarcely commented upon. Mr. Merle talked a good deal to his daughters; he seemed rather surprised at the intelligence with which Alison answered him. 'Your aunt has had you well taught,' he said once, as though he were gratified with her information.

Alison saw directly that Missie was displeased with the notice he took of her, and seemed bent on drawing his attention to herself, but she was too anxious and unhappy about Roger to mind her sister's jealousy.

The moment dinner was over, she went in search of Rudel. The boy, with all his roughness and odd ways, manifested a sort of dog-like fidelity for his elder brother, and Alison was sure that he was acquainted with all his movements, but, to her surprise, he was not disposed to be communicative—in fact, he became exceedingly grumpy on being questioned.

It was no business of hers if Roger liked to go without his dinner; old Nanny would take care of him; he did not want to be fussed over by a lot of girls.

'But, Rudel dear,' persisted Alison, with great sweetness, in return for this rebuff, 'Roger always likes me with him; we have been chums—is not that what you call it?—all our lives. I shall be quite distressed if I cannot find him, for I want a long, quiet talk with him.'

'Want must be your master, then,' returned Rudel, with decided rudeness. 'Girls have no sense of honour; they think a fellow is always ready to peach, but I am not that shabby sort. Roger shall not be bothered if I can help it; he has enough to bear without that.' And so saying, Rudel planted his elbows on the table, and began conning his Latin in a dogged way, as though he were proof against any amount of coaxing.

Alison stood beside him a moment, but she made no further attempts to question him. 'Never mind,' she said cheerfully, 'if you will not help me, Rudel, I must find him by myself; I remember some of his old haunts.' And then, fetching her garden hat, she went quickly through the kitchen garden, and passed through a gate leading to the saw mills. She stopped for an instant on the little bridge that crossed the canal, and looked down at the dark, sluggish water. A barge was coming towards her. An old white horse, with a boy guiding it, was on the towing-path. The old watchman, Timothy, passed her with his rough 'Good evening.' Before her lay the great timber yard, with its silent machinery and masses of unsawn wood, and the long straight aisles with vast wood erections on either side; arches of white planks placed at uniform distances, looking like vague beginnings of some uncompleted works; the white piles gleaming in somewhat ghostly fashion in the dim light.

Alison wandered down them, feeling as though she were losing herself in a forest of dead wood; the silence and sense of loneliness was beginning to oppress her, in spite of her longing to find Roger, when, all at once, in a quiet nook, she came upon him, sitting on a truck with Nettle, the watchman's dog, a large fox terrier, beside him. He sprang to the ground when he saw Alison, and gave a low whistle of surprise, while Nettle, who was a cross old lady, set up a surly bark.

'Why, Ailie! What in the world could tempt you to a timber promenade? You looked just like a ghost, or some such uncanny creature, in your white gown, gliding between the wood-piles; no wonder Nettle is scared.'

'I wanted to find you, dear,' returned Alison, looking at him wistfully; she thought he looked tired and out of spirits. 'Rudel would not tell me where you were, but I remembered your old habits; you see, it is so warm and not very late, and I should like to stop out with you a little.'

'Come and sit down,' was his answer to this. 'I can find you a better seat than the truck; these planks are nice and clean, they will not soil your pretty dress. There, that is comfortable, I hope,' as he put her in a snug corner and stretched himself out beside her. 'Down, Nettle; the ground is good enough for you, old lady, so make room for your betters.'

'Nettle is still your companion, I see.'

'Oh, yes, we are often together; this is a rare place for a good long sulk, Ailie. When I am down in the mouth I generally come here, and Nettle keeps me company, poor old lass.'

'Rudel knew that, I suppose.'

'Oh, yes; but Rudel is a sharp lad, and knows the value of closeness: of course he would not tell you. That boy has a talent for holding his tongue; Nettle is not more trusty. Well, my dear, how often have you wished yourself back at Moss-side to-day? I declare I wished you there myself at luncheon time.'

'Oh, Roger!'

'Of course I know what that means. I just know how you felt about it, Ailie. Is it not hard on a fellow for his own father to be down on him like that?'

'It is more than hard,' she returned, laying her hand caressingly on his shoulder, for his face was averted, as though he did not care to meet her eyes; 'it ought not to be, Roger. Why, why—I don't want to hurt you, dear—but why did you not speak, if only to own your fault?'

He turned in some surprise at this. 'Why? because it was not my fault, Ailie. Didn't you know that all the time he was putting the blame of other people on me? That is what he always does. What is the use of my speaking, when he will not believe a word I say?'

'Oh, Roger!' in a still more grieved voice.

'Oh, Roger! indeed. I do believe, Ailie, I am the most unfortunate beggar that ever breathed. Don't you remember how I hated it—the whole place, I mean—when father took me from school and made me learn the business? I wanted to be a farmer or an

engineer—anything, in fact, but to lead this plodding sort of life. If I had known then what I had to go through, I would have run away. I would, as sure as my name is Roger.’

‘Please do not talk so.’

‘I do not see what hinders my cutting the whole concern now,’ he went on, with a gloomy light in his blue eyes. ‘Sometimes I think I cannot stand it a day longer, what with the business worries and the nagging that goes on at home. Alison, I do not know if I am right in telling things to a girl like you, but I believe you can keep a silent tongue as well as Rudel.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ she assured him eagerly; ‘I would not repeat a word, even to Aunt Diana.’

‘Aunt Diana!’ in a startled tone—‘no, of course, Alison; it is bad enough to know that everything that passes at home reaches the ear of that girl Eva Hardwick. Honour among thieves, Ailie; but apparently not among young ladies when they have bosom friends.’

Alison sighed, but she thought it best to let this statement pass uncontradicted. Evidently Roger’s notion of young ladyhood was suffering largely in consequence of Missie’s injudicious conduct, but he was too much engrossed at the present moment for more than that passing sarcasm. ‘You know our manager, Fergusson?’

‘Yes; I have an indistinct remembrance of him: a pale-faced man, with reddish hair and spectacles. I don’t think I liked him, Roger; his manners were so subservient.’

‘I have reasons for pretty nearly hating him,’ returned her brother, with unusual vehemence, ‘for he is at the bottom of all this mischief; and, thanks to him, I am the scapegoat of all my father’s wrath.’

‘Do you mean that he absolutely dares to find fault with you, his master?’ asked Alison impetuously.

‘Not openly, of course; but he is a complete adept in the art of innuendoes. He has a way of hinting things and implying blame; and ever since I found out a little scheme of his and frustrated it the fellow has been my enemy.’

‘But, Roger, if Fergusson is not honest, papa ought to know it. Things should not be allowed to go on in this way.’

‘That is what I say to myself every day,’ returned Roger, in a hopeless tone. ‘Fergusson is doing our business no end of harm, but I cannot bring my father to see it. The fact is, Ailie,’ dropping

his voice cautiously, 'the poor old governor is just a bookworm, and nothing else. He has no head for this sort of thing, and Fergusson, who is clever and shifty in his way, makes a tool of him, and has got influence over him. He believes all that Fergusson tells him, though he is only a low-bred, half-educated fellow—a mere servant—and yet he will not credit me with common sense! Things go wrong, as they did to-day. Of course, Fergusson is to blame, but he got my father's ear, and then it was all up with me. It is my belief the fellow wants to get rid of me altogether. He is always telling my father what a pity it is Mr. Roger is not a better man of business, but that I am young, and may improve, and all that sort of thing, and, you know, it tells in the long run.'

'Of course it does; but this is worse than I expected. How can you go on bearing it day after day?'

'Well, I have made up my mind to-night to go on bearing it as well as I can. I have been sitting here turning the whole thing over in my mind. I think it would be cowardly going off, knowing that I should leave everything in Fergusson's power. I mean to hold on as long as I can, and circumvent him.'

'But, Roger, if you should fail—if his dishonesty should triumph? You know wicked men succeed sometimes.'

'Never mind all that. A man must do his duty, whatever happens, and I have made up my mind that my duty is not to desert what may be a sinking ship. I mean to act rightly by my father, however he treats me. The poor old man has an awful lot of worry to bear. He is pinning his faith on an unscrupulous rogue, and he will find out his mistake before long; and then, I suppose, I shall get righted; but just now—well, life might be a deal pleasanter,' giving Nettle an inadvertent kick as he delivered himself of this sentiment.

'I wish Aunt Diana did know,' observed Alison quietly.

'On your peril——' he began hotly. But she stopped him at once.

'I have given you my word, Roger; there is no need for you to excite yourself. I only wanted her to advise you as I do. Oh, Roger, I never felt so proud of you before.'

It was too dark to see the surprised flush that swept over the young man's face, but there was no mistaking the grasp of Alison's little hand on his arm.

‘I think this is real heroism, Roger. No, don’t whistle, it is rude when I am talking to you. You have preached a nice little sermon to me to-night, dear, and I feel all the better for it. It has made me less discontented and unhappy to know how you are bearing things. We must help each other, Roger, you and I.’

‘Oh, things won’t be half so bad now you are at home,’ he returned, evidently touched by her honest sympathy. ‘It is only unbearable when one has not a soul to take notice of one, when every one seems at sixes and sevens in the house. Hark! is not that Rudel?’ as the clumsy imitation of a blackbird’s whistle sounded near them. ‘All right, old fellow, here we are, and I only hope you have come to tell me supper is ready, for I am half-starved.’

‘Oh, you’ve found him,’ was Rudel’s greeting. ‘There is nothing like a girl’s cheek, after all. Well, I hope you have cheered him up a bit. Come along, old fellow; father is shut up in his study, and Missie is with him, finishing her novel; but, as Mother Leigh is still up, old Nanny thought you had better take your supper in the kitchen; she has sent the other lassies to bed, and Missie might come prying into the schoolroom. I thought you would not mind, just for once, Roger.’

‘My good lad, I mind nothing if I can get rid of this feeling of famine. I am as cold as charity, too. Give me your hand, Ailie; you will not walk safely in the dark without my help. Nettle, go back to your master.’ And, speaking cheerily, Roger hurried his companions over the bridge into the dark garden, and in another minute they were all three in the great stone kitchen of The Holms, with its bright fire shining on the brass and pewter that garnished the huge dresser.

‘Coom, Master Roger!’ exclaimed old Nanny, as she drew a little black table before the fire, and placed on it a Yorkshire pie and a knuckle of ham, with a breakfast cup of savoury coffee, ‘eat and drink like a gude lad, and bring your bonny looks back;’ for old Nanny had lived there before Roger was born, and they were children still in her eyes.

Roger did not need a second invitation. Rudel watched him with delight as he fell upon the viands. Nanny gave Alison some coffee to warm her, for she looked cold and tired, and they soon grew more cheerful as they gathered round the fire, chatting with each other and Nanny.

The next day was Sunday, and in some respects it passed tran-

quilly with the family at The Holms. Rudel had put on his best behaviour with his Sunday jacket, and Mabel looked unusually amiable. Nevertheless, a few words exchanged with Roger, as they stood at the gate waiting for Miss Leigh and Poppie to join them on their way to church, increased Alison's secret burden of anxiety.

'Is not papa ready?' she had asked Roger.

He looked at her rather gravely—'So you were waiting for him? I am sorry to say, Ailie, father seldom comes to church now. He has been growing more irregular during the past year, and now not even Missie can induce him to come.'

Alison's grieved 'Roger!' was all she ventured to say; but a tight sense of oppression seemed to gather round her heart.

It was a painful contrast to return to The Holms and find Mr. Merle, in his old velveteen coat and slippers, standing on the threshold of his study. Alison had no idea how full of reproach her eyes were as she went up and kissed him.

'Dear papa, I wish you had been with us,' she said softly; 'we have had such a beautiful sermon from Mr. Herbert.'

'Oh, I have heard plenty of sermons in my life,' he returned brusquely; 'one may get too much of a good thing.' But though he answered her in this cool, sarcastic fashion, something in the innocent wistfulness of the brown eyes raised to his seemed to stir his slumbering conscience, and, with a muttered excuse of a headache and being busy, he turned away and shut himself into his study.

CHAPTER X.

ROGER ENJOYS HIS BREAKFAST.

‘**H**ERE beginneth the first chapter of Alison’s failures,’ whispered Alison, in a funny little voice, as she encountered Roger on her way downstairs on Monday morning, and she laughed merrily as she shook her key basket exultantly in his face. Roger opened his eyes very widely at this, then he stepped back a few paces and looked at her admiringly.

‘However did you get possession of that thing?’ he exclaimed. ‘Do you know, Ailie, my dear, that shabby little brown basket has been a bone of contention between Miss Leigh and Missie for the last month. Miss Leigh clings to it as her sole hope, and refuses to give it up. It has ended by Missie’s neatly abstracting it at night. She has done it three or four times. Poor Miss Leigh! I verily believe this has been the last straw that has broken the camel’s back. She has grown quite pale and thin over it.’

‘Yes, I know. Poppie told me all about it. Well,’ in an amused tone, ‘I have only paid Missie in her own coin. Thanks to my good habits, I was dressed before she thought of waking; so I stole in, got my key basket, and wished Missie good morning at the same time. I am afraid she will come down dreadfully cross.’

‘As though that were anything new,’ returned Roger contemptuously, as he took up the paper and retired with it to the window, while Alison busied herself with the coffee pot. She thought he was too much engrossed with his news to pay attention to her movements. She little knew the quiet looks that followed her as she flitted about the room, placing chairs, arranging the breakfast-table, giving little finishing touches. She even brought in a vase of flowers from the other room.

‘I do not think any meal looks well without flowers,’ she said cheerfully. ‘If I were ever so poor, I would go without things and

buy a plant or a basket of ferns to set off my table. Ever since I have been at home I have missed flowers in the dining-room.'

Roger's answer was an inexplicable sort of grunt. Flowers were not much in his line. He liked to see them 'all a-growing and a-blowing,' as he often said, but he hated to assist at what he termed 'a wholesale slaughter of the innocents'; and it was a favourite theory of his that things were best in their places, and that he never could rid himself of the idea that plants had feeling as well as life, and that those feelings could be wounded. He always groaned over a dismembered rose-bush, and would insist that not even a turk's-cap enjoyed decapitation, and that a lily shed white blood when she was gathered from her stalk. But, in spite of this Philistine fancy, a subtle sense of comfort stole into the young man's heart as he watched his sister's brisk movements. Alison's graceful young figure was such a contrast to poor Miss Leigh, with her fussy ways and mournful voice. Miss Leigh always rattled the spoons; her long black draperies seemed in everybody's way. Latterly she had retired from taking any active part at the breakfast-table. Missie had absolutely routed her from the field. The result had been disastrous as regards their comfort. Miss Leigh's coffee had been good, though she poured it out with such a lugubrious face. She had been punctual, too, as befitted an instructress of youth; but latterly Missie had rushed down at the last moment sleepy and cross, and, after a quarter of an hour of bustle and fault-finding, her long-suffering brothers found themselves furnished with weak or gritty coffee, for which Missie was never to blame: there was something the matter with the strainer, the water had not boiled—Nanny, every one was in fault, except lazy Missie, who did so enjoy her morning nap. Roger had a presentiment that the coffee would be good this morning, and that, though he was no gourmand, he would undoubtedly enjoy his breakfast if Alison sat smiling at him behind the urn. He had often puzzled himself why Missie, a fine, healthy girl, looked so heavy-eyed and unamiable in the morning. Roger, who was a bit of a philosopher in his way, and who sometimes speculated on the future, as young men will, often vowed to himself that he would never choose his wife from a ballroom. Girls were amiable enough there, and the majority contrived to look pretty. The way to judge of a girl was to see her in the morning sunlight. Roger had a shrewd notion that the girl he could fancy must look bright and fresh and sweet at that hour of the day; a sluggish and lethargic nature would not suit his;

for, in common with many ordinary young men, his standard for his future wife was proportionately high ; for there is nothing that men worship more in women than goodness and moral—not mental—excellence.

He roused himself from these reflections at an unwonted sound on the stairs.

‘ If it were not perfectly incredible, I should say that was Rudel’s footstep,’ he observed in a doubtful tone.

‘ Oh, yes, it is Rudel,’ returned Alison brightly. She was determined to be cheerful to-day, whatever happened, and to put herself and her feelings in the background until night, and then perhaps she might indulge herself with a groan or two, if things were pretty bad. ‘ I woke him, and made him promise to get up. Miss Leigh says he has got into sad ways.—Good boy,’ as Rudel entered, looking very much pleased at himself, and he bore without making a very wry face his sister’s kiss on his forehead. Poppie, who came in a moment afterwards with Miss Leigh, was not quite so reticent.

‘ What is that for ? ’ she asked, with a child’s innocence of grammar, but in much surprise, as Alison kissed her warmly, and said—‘ Good-morning, Poppie dear.’

‘ Poppie means that we are not accustomed to these little civilities,’ put in Roger, as Alison looked perplexed for a moment ; ‘ nobody says good-morning to anybody else at The Holms, except Miss Leigh and I ; we always do, don’t we ? ’ shaking hands with her as he spoke. ‘ Father just gives an inclusive good-morning at the door.’

‘ I am afraid you are very much shocked, Alison,’ observed Miss Leigh mournfully. ‘ Mabel sets Rudel and Poppie such a bad example in this ; no one thinks of such a thing except Mr. Roger, and he is always so very thoughtful.’

‘ Oh, we are a bad lot, ain’t we, Missie ? ’ began Rudel in his rough fashion ; but Alison promptly silenced him by preparing to say grace. Perhaps this was also an innovation, for Poppie only stared at her. Alison took no notice of the little girl’s or of Rudel’s involuntary grimace ; she would bring them into better order presently ; she had already heard from Miss Leigh how morning prayers had been discontinued. Things were becoming very lax at The Holms, in spite of the governess’s efforts to preserve the old discipline.

When Mr. Merle came into the room a few minutes later, he seemed quite surprised at the unwonted cheerfulness. He nodded to Alison, and then took up his letters ; but she was not satisfied.

'You have not kissed me, papa,' she said as she carried him round his cup of coffee.

'Oh, I thought only Pussie cared for kisses,' he said good-humouredly; 'Poppie never comes to me for one.'

Poppie reddened, and bent over her plate in much confusion. Roger, who was next to her, saw the child's eyes were full of tears.

'I expect Poppie is afraid of bothering you,' he observed. 'You would like father to kiss you sometimes, as he does Missie,' he said, kindly.

'Is that true, my little girl?' asked Mr. Merle, who had just caught sight of Poppie's quivering lip. The poor child, who was very sensitive, was on the point of bursting into tears; but Alison happily interposed.

'Papa is too busy to think much about such things. You must go round to-morrow and ask him for one, as I did to-day; he won't refuse either of us,' and she looked laughingly at him from behind her urn.

The brightness seemed to rouse him effectually. He had looked pale and weary when he had entered the room, but good-humour is infectious.

'You look very nice, my dear,' he said approvingly. 'I like to see you there, Alison.'

'I like to see her there, too,' observed Roger boldly; 'it is her proper place.' Missie, who had just opened the door, caught both these remarks; they did not evidently conduce to her amiability. She gave Alison a withering glance as she passed by her, to greet her father; and, taking no notice of her or the others, desired Rudel rather crossly to give her more room, and began her breakfast rather sulkily.

But for once her humours were disregarded. No one troubled themselves about her; and the conversation was renewed with scarcely a break. Perhaps both Roger and Alison were doing their best to carry it on, but their sense of effort was lost in the general good.

When breakfast was over, and Rudel had rushed off to school, and Mr. Merle and Roger had gone over to the mill, Alison asked her sister pleasantly how she proposed to spend the morning.

Mabel tossed her pretty head at the inquiry.

'That is my affair,' she answered, very rudely. 'I am not accustomed to give an account of myself, to gratify people's curiosity. I may as well tell you, once for all, that I dislike interference.'

Alison felt inclined to laugh—there was something comical in Missie's mode of showing her temper; but she knew nothing provokes people more than to laugh at them, so she prudently refrained from showing her mirth. 'I am just going round the house with Miss Leigh while Poppie prepares her lessons,' she returned, as coolly as though Missie had given her a fair answer. 'In another hour I shall be quite at your convenience, if you would like to practise with me.'

'Thank you,' returned Missie, with freezing politeness. 'I have no need to trespass on your valuable time; Eva will be here soon.'

'Oh, very well,' returned Alison, still in perfect good-humour; 'then I will get my easel ready in the schoolroom and paint a little, if Miss Leigh will allow me.'

'Of course you must paint in the schoolroom,' returned her sister tartly; 'I suppose you do not intend to litter up this room with that great ugly easel; and Eva and I will be in the drawing-room.'

'I dare say when I have finished you will let me join you there,' replied Alison, in a conciliatory tone. As she was bent on making Miss Hardwick's acquaintance for her own purposes, she took no notice of sundry remarks in an undertone that were fully meant to reach her ears, about people never knowing when they were not wanted, and two was company and three none. She knew Missie was only revenging herself for her lost dignity and the two speeches that had been overheard. She must give her time to recover herself. Discretion is often the best part of valour, so she went out of the room as quickly as possible, with the wordy missiles still flying about her, and laughed a little when she got outside—though the tears were in her eyes too.

'How absurd!' she said to herself. 'How small, and stupid, and paltry it all is! I do think there is something so mean in little tempers. Gnats are mean little insects, but how they sting; so do midges sometimes. Aunt Di was right when she once told me that tongues were too often like lancets. They do puncture pretty deeply too.'

Alison was soon too busy to remember Missie's existence. Miss Leigh, who was desirous of resigning her household duties into Alison's hands, keeping herself in the background and only acting as aide-de-camp, was soon explaining to the bewildered girl all her little pet theories with regard to kitchen and store-room.

Alison listened patiently, but she became more perplexed every minute.

'I have never been used to housekeeping,' she said at last, in an alarmed voice. 'I have been too much engaged with my studies at Moss-side. Aunt Diana taught me a little, but not much; she said I was too young for that sort of thing. I am afraid I shall make dreadful mistakes if you leave all these things to me.'

'My dear Alison,' returned the governess solemnly, 'I have made up my mind that my proper place is in the schoolroom. As long as you and Mabel were too young, I promised your father to superintend his household, but the duties are too onerous for me under the present circumstances. It is true you are young, not much over eighteen; but, my dear, some girls are married at that age—not that I hold with youthful marriages, far from it; I only say this to encourage you. You are the eldest daughter, and the rightful mistress of the house. I know your aunt will approve of my resigning everything; there is nothing I will not do to help you, you may command me in everything, so that you relieve me from a responsibility that is too much for me.' Miss Leigh's lip trembled as she spoke, and her eyes were so full of beseeching wistfulness that Alison was quite touched.

'Oh, don't look so unhappy about it,' she exclaimed, with sudden youthful energy, 'I will do all I can. I am afraid papa will be dreadfully dissatisfied with his new housekeeper, but that cannot be helped, and, of course, I shall improve; now, cheer up,' kissing the governess's thin cheek; 'you shall sit in your nice schoolroom and teach Poppie, and I shall come in about fifty times in a morning to ask your advice. When I get into a muddle you will have to come to my assistance, and you shall teach me to mend. I am afraid I am not very clever with my needle, and we shall be a model household.'

'Oh, my dear,' returned Miss Leigh, as she wiped away a quiet tear or two, 'if you only knew how much good you do me! Things have been dreadful lately. If your poor dear mother only knew the trial that Mabel would be to us all, and your dear father never entering a church, or keeping the Sabbath-day holy—no family prayers, nothing to show we are a Christian household. I sometimes used to fear a judgment would overtake us, for such bickerings and quarrels and unbrotherly love would be more befitting to the heathen.'

'It is very sad,' replied Alison, with a sigh, as Miss Leigh paused in her somewhat incoherent lament; 'but it is no use fretting ourselves over past troubles; what we have to do is to try and make

things a little better. We must be thankful for small mercies, as Roger was for his cup of hot coffee.' And Alison laughed again as she remembered how Roger proposed saying his grace over again, for his first enjoyable breakfast for two years.

When Miss Leigh and Poppie went back to the schoolroom, Alison settled herself and her painting apparatus in the farthest window, and tried to forget all her perplexities in hard work; but while Poppie droned over her lessons Alison's thoughts would stray to a far different scene—to a shady room full of sweet flower scents, with a tall figure standing before an easel. She could see the grand, still face intent on its work; the firm white hand moving so deftly over the canvas, then a little gleam of fun coming into the grey eyes; 'always dreaming, Ailie; the night is the time for dreams, little one,' she seemed to hear in the crisp tones she remembered so well. 'Oh, Aunt Di, Aunt Di, if I were only painting beside you now!' she thought, with a sharp, involuntary pain.

'Oh, how beautiful! if I could only paint like that.' The words were spoken, with a sigh, just behind her. Alison started; she had been dreaming indeed; the mid-day sun was streaming into the room. Poppie had put away her lesson books, and had run off; and Miss Leigh's place was empty; and standing just behind Alison's chair was a young lady dressed very simply in a grey linen dress and a broad-brimmed hat.

At Alison's obvious start, the young lady blushed and seemed confused.

'Oh,' she stammered, 'I am afraid I startled you. You were so busy that you did not see me come in. I have been watching you ever so long.'

'I must have been painting in my sleep,' returned Alison, with a frank laugh; but as she put aside her palette and rose, she cast a scrutinizing glance on the young girl beside her.

She was a slight, pale girl, evidently a little younger than herself; somewhat plain in feature, but with a pleasing, gentle expression, though a painful hesitation in her speech, almost amounting to a stammer, marred the effect of a singularly sweet voice. Even in that first moment, Alison, who had a true artistic taste in all matters pertaining to dress, wondered at the bad judgment that could select dull, neutral tints for a complexion so colourless; the large hat overshadowed her features, and hid the soft fair hair that was her only beauty.

'You are Miss Hardwick, I suppose?' observed Alison, with a shrewd guess that this was the young sister of whom Miss Leigh spoke.

'Not Miss Hardwick,' corrected the younger girl; 'I am only Anna. Eva and Mabel sent me in here because they wanted to talk to each other, and they always find me in the way. Will it trouble you if I stop here a little and watch you painting?'

'Oh, no, not at all. We shall be nice company for each other,' returned Alison, in a friendly voice. 'I have only this little bit of background to finish, and then I shall be free to talk to you.'

'Oh, it does not matter about talking,' rejoined Anna hastily. 'I shall be quite happy if you will only let me sit and look at you. I never like to feel in the way, and it makes me so uncomfortable to be with Eva and Mabel. They are always whispering to each other when I am in the room. I always feel they want to get rid of me.'

'That is not a pleasant feeling,' observed Alison, somewhat amused at the childish way in which Anna aired her little woes. She had seated herself in a low chair, and her hat lay in her lap. Alison had a full view of the neatly-coiled hair; it was very beautiful in colour and texture, and might have been arranged with greater advantage, instead of being brushed back so unbecomingly from the face. Evidently vanity was not Anna's besetting sin, or else she had too humble an estimate of herself to take much pains with her appearance.

Alison painted for a few minutes silently; she was thinking. Then she laid aside her brush.

'If you will excuse me a moment, I want to speak to your sister and Mabel,' she said, rather quickly, 'and then, if you like, we will go and sit in the garden until luncheon is ready.'

CHAPTER XI.

‘SHE IS A NICE, SIMPLE LITTLE THING.’

MISSIE looked up with a frown as her sister entered the room, but Alison took no notice of her. She walked up straight to Miss Hardwick, and held out her hand with one of her pleasant smiles.

‘I have just made acquaintance with your sister,’ she said, with quiet tact; ‘we are going in the garden, as the house feels so close this lovely day. I shall be so glad, and I am sure Mabel will be, too, if you will both stay with us to luncheon.’

Missie stared at her, as though she could not believe her ears.

‘I thought you knew better, Alison,’ she interrupted pettishly, before her friend could speak. ‘Dear papa is so nervous and worried about business and Roger’s wretched management that he is not able to bear luncheon visitors. Eva understands this; don’t you, dear?’

‘Oh, yes, darling,’ returned Miss Hardwick, with effusion; ‘but perhaps your sister, being a stranger and not quite used to all the ways at The Holms, has made a mistake. That is very natural.’

‘Oh, no,’ returned Alison, trying to keep cool, though she was inwardly nettled by both the girls’ remarks. ‘I am making no mistake. Papa will not be in to luncheon, or my brother either, as they have business a little way out of town. So I thought, as we should be quite alone, that it would be a good opportunity, Mabel, for you to have your friends.’

Missie’s pink cheeks became crimson with vexation; it aggravated her to see Alison taking upon herself so quietly the duties of the mistress of the house and dispensing hospitality; and she was still more injured that her father’s movements had not been first notified to herself. She took no notice of her sister’s remarks, and added no word, as Miss Hardwick accepted the invitation with great

alacrity. When Alison left them, after a few more words, she listened reluctantly to Eva's criticisms.

'I had no idea your sister was such a stylish person,' she said, when the door closed on Alison; 'she has fine eyes and a good figure, and she knows how to suit her own style in dress. She is not so pretty as you, darling, of course'—as Missie's sulkiness was obvious, and must be soothed away at any cost—'but she has some claims to good looks.'

Alison did not return these moderate compliments; she was not at all attracted by Miss Hardwick. She was a large, heavy-looking girl, rather handsome, but her face had no play of expression, and her manner was decidedly artificial.

If she would only have let herself alone, she would have been a good-looking creature, for nature had endowed her with many beauties, but the last thing that ever entered Eva Hardwick's head was to let herself or any one else alone, until she had transmuted herself and them into fashionable dolls. Her figure would have been good, only artifice had reduced her waist until it was too small to match the breadth of the shoulders, and so the lines of beauty were lost; the pretty, fair hair, that was really as soft and fine as silk, was roughed and tangled, and fringed with infinite pains until it was reduced to the fashionable untidiness of the day.

'Oh, if I could only dress them both! I am sure their mother would not recognise them,' thought Alison, as she went back to Anna; 'the one thinks too much and the other too little of her appearance.' And she thought gratefully of the wisdom that had taught her to see no beauty in anything unnatural, and that bade her be no mere copyist in fashion, but to choose her own style and have courage to abide by it.

'Be as modern as you like,' Miss Carrington would say; 'nothing is so hateful as eccentricity in women; and, my dear, do not be shocked at what I am going to say, but a woman without vanity is a monstrosity in nature. It is your duty to make the best of yourself, remember that; no one ought to be plainer than they can help, for the sake of other people; suit your dress to yourself, not yourself to your dress. Do not turn yourself into a peg to hang your neighbour's clothes on. A little woman in a big plaid always seems to me to have something wanting in her intellect; she has no brains; she is an imbecile. My dear, I hope better things of you. Cultivate the true art of dress. When you choose a gown, give your mind to it;

study it as you would the different parts of a picture. Spend little money, less time ; but what you do, do thoroughly. I never could bear patchwork, and some women are dreadfully patched.'

Alison spent a pleasant hour with her new friend under the lime trees, both before and after luncheon. She soon grew interested in Anna's artless talk. She was evidently very young for her age ; though she was seventeen, she was still childish in manners. Probably she had been repressed and kept in the background by her sister.

Eva was evidently a great personage in Anna's eyes ; she spoke of her with a sort of admiring awe. Eva was so handsome. Did not Miss Merle think she had a beautiful complexion and lovely hair ? Then she was so clever ; she could talk French as well as a Parisian. Cousin Anthony often said so. Then she played so well, and sang such difficult German and Italian songs. She was sure Miss Merle would enjoy hearing her. And she painted Christmas cards, and worked in crewels so exquisitely ; and she could dance, and play tennis. Cousin Anthony always said what an accomplished creature she was.

'I dare say you can do many of these things, too,' suggested Alison kindly, when Anna had run through the gamut of her sister's perfections. But the girl shook her head, and a cloud passed over her gentle face.

'Oh, no ; I am dreadfully stupid. Mamma often says that she does not know how she could have such a daughter. Mamma likes people to be clever and strong, and full of life ; she says, sometimes, that I am such a low-spirited, foolish little thing.'

'Oh, no,' exclaimed Alison involuntarily ; 'I am sure she could not mean that.' But, nevertheless, she conceived a strong dislike to Mrs. Hardwick from that moment. She knew her already, by reputation, to be a gay, pleasure-loving widow ; but she had also understood that she was a good-natured woman. Alison had yet to learn that even good-natured people can sometimes be hard and unsympathetic to their own flesh and blood.

Anna had retailed her mother's opinion in a most matter-of-fact way ; she was far too used to be depreciated and set on one side to be sensitive over it. Alison's kindness and warm interest had put her at once at her ease. For the first time in her poor little shady life, she experienced the pleasure of true sympathy.

'It is so good of you to let me talk to you,' Anna went on.

'Mamma and Eva say I am such a chatterbox, when I begin to ask them questions. I think I am fonder of talking than most people. Anthony says that makes me so troublesome.'

'Who is Anthony?' queried Alison, a little curiously.

'Oh, he is our cousin; he is staying with us now. Eva says it is so nice, because we have no brothers, and he can take us about. Eva and he are great friends; she always calls him Tony. He is such a handsome fellow, with a big black moustache like a cavalry officer. He is in the army, you know. I am dreadfully frightened of him, because he laughs at me; but it is only his way, he means to be good-natured.'

'Tell me what you do with your time?' asked Alison quickly. She was not particularly interested in this description of Anna's cousin.

Anna's blue eyes opened rather widely at this; she was evidently surprised at the question.

'My time,' she repeated helplessly, as though it were a new thought that she had anything of her own; indeed, it was doubtful, if the truth were known, whether the poor child really possessed an hour for her private use. 'I suppose you mean, how do I spend the day?'

Alison nodded.

'Oh, I don't know,' wrinkling her brow; 'that is how mamma and Eva please to spend it. They are always wanting me for something. —Once upon a time,' she continued, twisting her hands a little nervously—she had all sorts of nervous ways—'I used to make grand resolutions; that was just after I was confirmed,' dropping her voice a little. 'I made up my mind never to waste a minute. I would practise and read something solid, and do a little work for the poor, and keep it up even after I had finished with lessons; but I found I had to give it all up.'

'But that was a pity, was it not?'

'I suppose so; but then it could not be helped. I left school nearly a year ago, because the doctor said I was too delicate to learn, and mamma and Eva thought it did not matter, because I was not clever; so mamma told me that I had better shut up my books, as I made such a poor use of them, and do the best I could to help her instead.'

'Perhaps that was wise,' returned Alison, hardly knowing what to say.

'Of course, mamma always knows best,' replied Anna, drooping

her head a little; 'but I was so fond of my History and English Literature, and I liked sums, and Euclid; and I was just beginning to get on with Latin. Eva says I ought to have been a boy, for I never can learn anything suitable for a lady. I am stupid at French, and I play badly. And, oh dear! if only one could make oneself clever,' with a sigh.

'But you have not told me yet what you do with your day,' said Alison, with playful pertinacity.

'Oh, I do little things just as they come to hand,' returned Anna, rather dejectedly. 'I get a little time to myself before breakfast, because mamma and Eva are always down late. I read then, or do some Latin; afterwards, there is always so much for me to do.'

'What kind of things?'

'Well, there are the plants to water in the garden, and Eva's birds to feed; and mamma has always some fine needlework for me to do, or Eva wants a dress mended or some lace washed; then sometimes there are the china and ornaments in the drawing-room, or the books in the morning-room to dust, or Eva's drawers to turn out, and flowers to arrange for the luncheon table, and little odds and ends of that kind. Then perhaps mamma wants me to do some errands in the town, matching silks for her fancy work; or Eva has an afternoon's shopping, and then she likes me to accompany her. I often get a quiet evening when they are out at some party; but mamma expects me to do a little of her fancy work then. She and Eva are re-covering the drawing-room chairs, and they leave the plain parts for me. I am fond of needlework, but it is a little dull to sit alone of an evening. I think I should like a nice interesting book sometimes, but mamma always thinks I am wasting my time.'

Alison prudently refrained from all comments, but she inwardly exclaimed,—'Oh, you poor little ill-used child! This mother and sister of yours are turning you into a drudge. You have positively no life of your own at all.'

But what she said was,—

'I think, Anna—may I call you Anna? you look so young, somehow—that you lead a very useful, self-denying life.' And as the girl flushed at the unexpected praise, she continued lightly, 'Now we have talked all this time, and I wonder what has become of your sister and Mabel?'—for the two had sauntered away, arm-in-arm, the moment luncheon was over. 'As I am housekeeper—you know I have come home to make myself useful—I propose that we have



‘THE PLANTS TO WATER IN THE GARDEN.’

afternoon tea under these trees, and that you and I, with Sarah's help, should prepare a little surprise for them. Will not Poppie be delighted?’

Anna might have been a child from the way she clapped her hands; she had never enjoyed herself so much in all her life as during the next half-hour, as she and Alison dragged chairs across the lawn, and arranged the little tea-table, with the nice basket of hot cakes that old Nanny had prepared, some fresh strawberries, and a little vase of roses in the centre.

Even Missie looked pleased when, on returning from their hot walk—for they had gone out without informing any one of their intentions—she caught sight of the snowy cloth under the trees.

‘That is really a good idea,’ she observed, in a grudging tone, however; but Eva very nearly made her cross again by saying, ‘How delicious of your sister! I really would hug her for this. What a pity we never thought of this before, dear! and then Tony might have joined us.’

Missie never praised anything heartily in which she had not had a share.

But even Missie was not proof against the pleasant influence of the hour; Nanny's cakes were so good, and the strawberries so cool and refreshing after their dusty walk. When Roger returned from his work, an hour earlier than he expected, he stood quite transfixed on the gravel walk; for certainly such a pleasant little picture had never been seen before in the garden of The Holms.

Alison, in her crisp summer gown and broad-brimmed hat, might have been taken for a modern Hebe dispensing nectar. Missie, flushed and merry, was sitting on the grass beside her friend, with Otter between them, and Rudel on the other side,—all in good humour; and poor little pale Anna, for whom he had always felt such pity, was offering a saucerful of milk to Missie's beloved cat. Poppie came dancing over the grass to meet him, and caught hold of his hand.

‘You may have my chair by Miss Leigh,’ she exclaimed eagerly. ‘Oh, the cakes are so nice, Roger, and there are two left.’

‘I must make you some fresh tea, you poor tired day-labourer,’ observed Alison, as Roger threw himself into the wicker chair, and removed his hat.

‘Oh, let me do it,’ exclaimed Anna eagerly. ‘I know the way to the kitchen quite well.’

‘Yes, and I will go, too,’ added Poppie. ‘There are some more strawberries, I know.’

‘Bring me a big plateful,’ called out Roger, as Poppie frisked away; but he looked after them both rather curiously. His little friend looked different, somehow, he thought. Was it Alison, he wondered, who had put those coquettish-looking roses into the little grey gown?

Anna’s face looked dimpled and smiling. Her blue eyes quite shone when she came back. She and Alison and Roger had a long talk, while Miss Leigh listened and knitted industriously. Missie and Eva had wandered away again—most likely to avoid Roger. He had addressed Miss Hardwick with studied politeness, but she had tossed her head and hardly answered him. She would make no terms with the enemy who had wounded her vanity so grievously.

‘We will take one more turn, darling, and then we must really go,’ she had said to Missie; and in a few more minutes they heard her calling for Anna.

‘Come, Anna, don’t dawdle. We must really go now.’

‘Good-bye. I have had such a happy afternoon, thank you so much,’ whispered Anna, with a timid kiss that Alison warmly returned. ‘One day you will have me again, will you not?’

‘Come whenever you like, dear. I am sure we shall be good friends,’ returned Alison, forgetting the necessity of lowering her voice.

Miss Hardwick laughed affectedly as she heard the speech.

‘You are a lucky girl to have got a friend so quickly. Is she not, Mr. Roger? Oh! I forgot; you are her friend, too,’ with a little spice of venom in her tone.

‘I shall be most happy to be considered Miss Anna’s friend; and I am sure Alison will say the same,’ rejoined Roger, in his downright manner. ‘Good-bye, Miss Anna. You see I have not forgotten you. Here is the groundsel for your birds that I promised you.’

‘They are my birds,’ observed Eva, her colour rising with annoyance at this little mark of kindly consideration to her sister, when all her airs and graces had never succeeded in attracting even an admiring look from Roger, and Eva was one of those girls who expected admiration and attention from every one.

‘Yes; but Miss Anna feeds your birds,’ he returned quietly, ‘and I dare say they will be very grateful to her, and love her all the better for this groundsel.’ And he handed it to Anna, who was standing beside her sister, looking shy and distressed.

She knew quite well by Eva's voice that she would be well scolded all the way home for her forwardness and want of manners ; and most likely a formal complaint made to her mother about her always trying to attract notice ; for baffled vanity is capable of even this meanness, and when people choose to consider themselves aggrieved they seldom take the trouble to measure their words, or pause to consider whether they are true or not ; and it was not the first time poor Anna had all sorts of strange charges laid to her share when Eva happened to be in a bad humour.

'Poor little thing ! I hope you will be her friend, Ailie,' observed Roger, when he had closed the gate after them, and found Alison alone under the lime trees. 'I am afraid she has a hard life of it, with that mother and sister.'

'I am afraid so, too,' returned Alison gravely. 'I wish they would let me have her here a little, for I am sure we should get on together. She is a nice, simple little thing.'

'Yes,' he returned thoughtfully ; 'but she is more than that. She is clever, too ; though you could not find it out in one afternoon. It is a pity she hesitates so. It is only a nervous habit, I expect, but it spoils her.'

'She loses it entirely when she gets interested and forgets herself. Yes ; I like her. I wonder what Aunt Di would say about her ? But, Roger, how have you been getting on to-day ? No fresh worries, I hope ?'

He shook his head.

'No, thank goodness ! and as for past troubles, by your leave, we will not talk about them just now. Do you know, little woman,' putting his arm round her, 'I feel in a more cheerful mood to-day. That cup of coffee was very potent, Ailie,' with a flash of his eye ; 'it lasted nearly all day.'

'You absurd boy ! What do you mean ?'

'Oh ! I am perfectly serious. It seemed to brace me up, and gave me courage. I said to myself once when I had a tough job in hand, "Well, Ailie and I are both hard at work to-day, and by-and-by we will have a rare good talk." And so we will ! After dinner you and I and Rudel are going for a walk. It will be like old times, won't it, Ailie ?' looking so affectionately in her face that Alison could only smile and assent, and try to enter into Roger's pleasure, though she had meant to devote her evening to writing a long letter to Aunt Diana.

CHAPTER XII.

ROGER'S APPENDIX.

MISS CARRINGTON received a letter from Alison soon after this, the conclusion of which made her smile; but that was not Alison's fault. Roger had taken possession of the half-finished sheet of note paper, and had filled it after his own fashion, adding a lengthy message from Rudel. Alison protested in vain, the letter must go with Roger's appendix or else a day's post would be lost.

'Dear Aunt Diana,' wrote Alison, in her pretty girlish hand, 'I had hoped to have commenced a long letter to you last Monday, and now it is Saturday, and yet not a word written. Last week I behaved better, did I not? But you cannot scold me, lest I quote your own words against you, "Duty before pleasure." Is not that what you always said, and is not the greatest pleasure in the world, except talking to you, to write to you and tell you everything? But then you would not have me neglect all my little duties even to enjoy this, would you, dear Aunt Di?'

('As though Ailie ever neglected her little duties!' observed Miss Carrington, with a tender smile, which it was a pity Alison could not see.)

'I have been at home three weeks now, and you will want to know if I feel satisfied with the progress I have made.' You asked as much in your last letter—and what a dear letter that was; but indeed, Aunt Di, I feel that it is a question that I hardly know how to answer. "The world goes up and the world goes down," especially at The Holms. The old grievances remain; Missie still asserts her own sweet will, in absolute disregard of all other wills. This causes floods of tears on Poppie's part, when Miss Leigh and I are not by to take her part; and a day never passes without a quarrel between Missie and Rudel. I am afraid they are both rather fond of wrangling, for they begin on the smallest pretext. Missie is often

cross with me, but I take very little notice of that ; it is her behaviour to Roger that troubles me most. Sometimes I feel so angry at her innuendoes and sarcastic speeches, that I hardly know how to refrain from speaking, but Roger says our silence punishes her most ; she wants to rouse him into a passion, but he has wisely resolved not to indulge her. "What does it matter?" he always says, when he sees me unhappy about it ; "hard words break no bones," but all the same I know how often she pains him ; and, Aunt Di—you know I tell you everything, as you said I ought—I am afraid she makes papa harder on Roger than he would be if he were left to himself, and this makes me more angry and miserable. I think there is no one in the world so good as Roger, except one or two people who shall be nameless, and I long—oh, how I long!—to make him as happy as he deserves to be for his own sake. I am glad I have come home. Yes, indeed, dear Aunt Di, you were right, as you always were, and my duty is here at present.'

('Only three weeks, and she has already learnt her lesson,' said Miss Carrington, with a sigh. 'Poor little Ailie ! yes, I was right to give you up.')

'But I am turning the dark side to you first. Now for a bit of brightness.

'I am really getting on much better with my housekeeping this week ; the first week I made dreadful blunders, in spite of Miss Leigh's help. Papa was rather annoyed once or twice, only I begged him to have patience, as I was so new to my duties, and then he said no more. It vexes me when Missie calls his attention to any little oversight on my part, as I do not think he would notice it of his own accord ; but I try to follow Roger's example and bear it as patiently as I can, and I have made less mistakes this week.

'I think breakfast time is the pleasantest hour of the day. Missie never comes down until the meal is nearly over, and so I get papa and the boys to myself, and we are often very merry. Rudel is always down in time, for I call him myself, and as I help him to find his school-books he is never in disgrace with his master. Poppie, too, has learned to say her grace and to bid us all good-morning very prettily. She seems less afraid of papa, and talks to him as nicely as possible. My greatest difficulty is to fit in all my duties. Do you remember giving me quite a long lecture once on making a better use of my time? You called me a sad spendthrift, and declared all the quarters of an hour that I wasted would mount up

dreadfully at the end of the week ; but I find I must husband even my minutes now if I am to do all I wish.

‘So much is taken up by housekeeping and necessary needlework, in spite of all Miss Leigh’s valuable help, that very little remains for my own pursuits. I am giving Poppie drawing lessons, which pleases her very much, and I help Rudel with his Latin. How glad I am that Mr. Moore got me on so well with it ; it has given me such an influence over Rudel ; he respects me twice as much, I believe ; and he was very backward with his Latin, and that made papa angry. I have another pupil, too, and that is Roger. One evening papa remained in his study, and we all gathered round the piano and sang rounds and glees. I discovered then that Roger really had a magnificent voice, only it was perfectly uncultivated, so I am doing my best to train it. I wanted Missie to teach him, because she really sings most beautifully, but she will not take the trouble, so we shut ourselves in the schoolroom and practise scales nearly every evening.

‘I wish our evenings could be more sociable, but I hardly know how to make them so. Papa always brings his books into the drawing-room and that hinders all conversation. Missie has quite left off singing to us ; she always shares papa’s lamp and little table, and reads all the evening, too. She and Miss Hardwick are reading French novels, to improve themselves in the language. Miss Leigh has spoken to papa once or twice about it, but she cannot induce him to put a stop to it. One evening he did question Missie, but she was reading *Corinne* then, and of course he could not disapprove ; but only the other day Miss Leigh was dreadfully shocked to find her over one of ——’s novels ; they had quite a battle over it, but Miss Leigh cried, and declared she would go to papa that instant if Missie did not give it up, so she promised to take it back to Miss Hardwick ; but do you know, Aunt Diana, I am afraid they read it together at *Maplewood*.

‘When papa and Missie read, Miss Leigh and I have to work in silence, unless we read, too. Roger brings in his book sometimes, but he finds it very dull, so we go off to the schoolroom to practise, or we fetch Rudel for a walk, and once or twice I have taken my work out to the timber-yard ; it is so cool and quiet there, and Roger talks to me. On Sunday evenings papa always remains in his study, so after church we sing hymns, and Poppie sits up to hear us. Missie was very angry about it at first, but I quietly told her that

Poppie was in Miss Leigh's charge and in mine, and that I would allow no interference ; and that answered, for she has said nothing about it since.

'With Missie I have simply no influence ; she refuses to walk or practise with me, and holds herself aloft from our pursuits. She is always with Miss Hardwick ; they go out together, and Missie is over at Maplewood three or four afternoons in the week. When Miss Hardwick comes over here, they show me pretty plainly that my society is not wanted. I have an idea that Missie is mostly to blame for this. Miss Hardwick has always come alone since that first afternoon, and when I beg her to bring her sister Anna she always makes some civil excuse or other ; but I believe the poor little thing is not allowed to come, and I have not yet been asked to Maplewood. There is talk of a garden-party there soon, and of course Roger and I will be invited then, and I shall see Anna.

'Oh ! what a long letter I am writing, but you see I have so much to say. One thing more. You will be grieved to hear that when I took your advice and spoke to papa about coming with us to church last Sunday, he was very, very angry with me. He said it was no business of a girl of my age to interfere with him, and that I was to attend to my own duties and leave him to his. I should have been quite unhappy about it, only that, in spite of his anger, I could see such a sad look in his eyes, and that made me all the more sorry for him. Roger says—— But here he comes, looking very mischievous, as though he meant to hinder me. Oh, Aunt Di——'

'Ailie has written at least six sheets, and I mean to have this last page. Nieces are all very well, but I am sure you would like to hear sometimes from your nephews. Here is Rudel dying to send a message to Aunt Diana. Well, sir, what is it ? Never mind, he is a good boy, as boys go, but he is not gifted with a huge amount of brains, and he has not hammered out a very elegant message ; but I am sure you will excuse it and give him credit for warm feeling. "Tell Aunt Diana that she is no end of a brick." Do please forgive me for a literal transcript of his words. "Yes, she is a brick, and no mistake, for sparing Ailie to us, and Ailie is a regular trump ; things are not half so horrid, and a fellow has some pleasure in his life when he is not being chivied all over the place and riled until he is pretty nearly mad." Hold there, my good lad ; I am sure Aunt Diana will spare you the rest. Seriously, my dear aunt, we are all, from Poppie upwards, as grateful to you as possible for sending back Ailie to us ;

good girls are not as plentiful as blackberries'—('For shame, Master Roger!' from Miss Carrington)—'and we mean to make much of Ailie now we have got her.

'The Holms is not the most peaceful spot in existence. "Birds in their little nests agree," so Dr. Watts says; but, my dear aunt, every schoolboy will tell you that is false; though we will let it pass, and suppose the baby beaks do not peck each other. Still, at The Holms there is a vast amount of pecking.

'There are "wills and won'ts, I shall and you shan't," in this happy abode, and Ailie does not like it at all. She has dreadfully old-fashioned notions about family life, and thinks brothers and sisters ought never to quarrel; she is all for kissing and making up, but, bless you, one can't do that sort of thing alone. For instance, if I wished to embrace Missie during one of her tantrums, I should find my arms full of thin air, or the real, substantial Missie might scratch at close quarters. There is nothing your fair-haired vixen will not do.

'Never mind: poor little Ailie does her best for us all, and some of us are properly grateful. We have good times now and then, and get up a laugh and astonish ourselves. One thing, I have enjoyed my breakfast for the last three weeks. No more lukewarm coffee, poured out with an acidulated smile; we have the real thing in smiles now. There, I think I have inflicted enough on you, so I will subscribe myself

'Your affectionate and grateful nephew,
'ROGER.'

When Miss Carrington read this letter to Mr. Moore, on the old bench by the river, a pleased look came over the old man's face.

'I like that lad,' he said, striking his ivory-headed stick into the ground. 'I remember his voice pleased me when he was here some years ago; a good honest voice it was. Mark my words, Miss Diana, our little sunbeam is fulfilling her mission.'

'I think Roger is all the happier for having his sister,' returned Miss Carrington, with a sigh.

'Oh,' he said, turning his sightless face towards her quickly, 'you are missing the child, and so am I. Sunny is beyond our reach just now; one cannot help wishing her back sometimes. For my part I had no idea how sorely I should miss my little pupil.'

'I always knew what her loss would be to me,' returned Miss Carrington, with some emotion; 'that is the worst of isolating one's affections. I have so few who are absolutely necessary to me; only

you and Greville and Ailie—three out of this worldly of millions ; it seems wrong somehow.'

'The fewer to love—the fewer to leave,' replied the old man somewhat dreamily ; 'but,' rousing himself, 'I believe you are right, Miss Diana. We ought to open our hearts wider, and compel the many to come in. There must be something niggardly in our natures if we find it so difficult to care for people. Love begets love, so they say. We lose both principal and interest if we lay up our talents in a napkin.'

'Do you know,' observed Miss Carrington, a little abruptly, 'that Greville is very angry with me for sending Ailie away?'

'Oh, he has written to you, has he?' with a half smile, for he had already received a stormy letter from his grandson on the same subject.

'Yes ; he is as indignant as possible about the sacrifice, as he terms it. He calls me shabby for not letting him into the secret ; he declares he shall go round by Chesterton on his way home and have it out with Alison ; but I have put a stop to that.'

'What ! you deprived him and Sunny of that poor little pleasure ? What a hard-hearted woman you are, Miss Diana ! and yet you were young yourself once.'

'My dear friend, it would not do at all,' returned Miss Carrington, in her most resolute tone. 'You spoil that boy so dreadfully that you give in to all his whims. You want me to keep you all in order.'

'But where would be the harm?' persisted Mr. Moore, smiling. 'Just a call and a chat ; why, it would do Sunny good.'

'No, no ; it would only unsettle her. Greville shall go down to The Holms some day, but not just yet. Ailie will get on better if we leave her entirely to herself the first few months. Why, unless things go very wrong, I do not intend to go down myself until next spring. But Greville, oh, no ; I told him on no account to do it.'

'And you expect him to obey you, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes, he will obey me now. Later on, perhaps—but we shall see. I am sure it would be only cruel kindness for Greville to unsettle her. She frets enough after us, I am sure of that, and seeing him will only bring us more vividly before her. Besides, there are other reasons ; but, my good old friend, you do not often distrust my wisdom.'

'Nor do I now,' he returned slowly. 'I was only putting myself

in my boy's place, and thinking how he must long for a glimpse of Sunny. Have it your own way, Miss Diana; Greville is almost as much your boy as he is mine, and I know you would not cross him if you could help it.'

'No, indeed,' she replied, very gently; 'I think you, and Greville, too, may trust me.' And then the conversation dropped.

It was an odd thing, but when Greville read Miss Carrington's letter, his face first clouded with disappointment, but after a second perusal it suddenly cleared.

'All right, my dear old Cara,' he said to himself. 'I understand more than you think, perhaps more than you intended; well, you shall be obeyed this time, and without much grumbling; but next year, if I pass this examination, you and grandfather shall see.' And then he took up his straw hat, thrust the letter into his pocket-book, still smiling, and went down to the lake, where his boat was waiting, whistling as merrily as a blackbird all the time.

'Ailie,' asked Roger suddenly, as they sat together in the timber-yard one evening, 'what has become of that fellow, Greville Moore? I never hear anything about him now.'

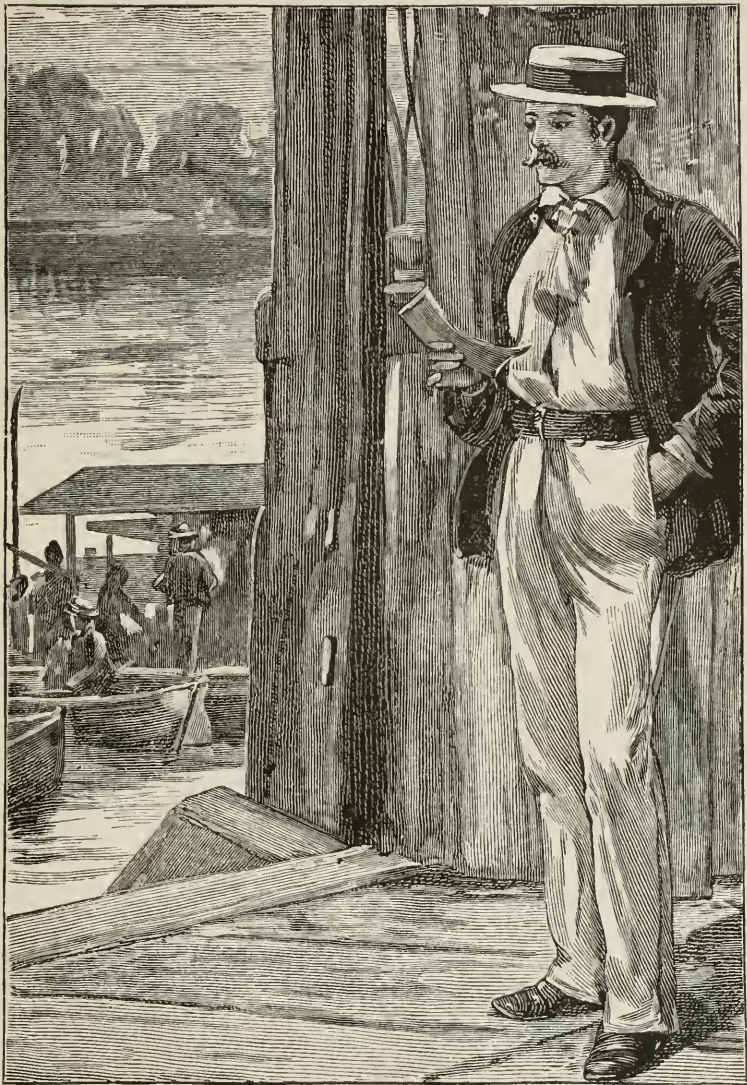
'He has joined a reading party at Keswick this vacation,' returned Alison, throwing a stick into the canal for Otter to find; 'and after that I believe he and Mr. Moore are going to Cornwall. Aunt Diana said something about it in her last letter.'

'And Aunt Di is going to the Swiss Tyrol, is she not?'

'Yes, I believe so,' returned Alison, turning her face away. Roger thought she was only interested in Otter's movements, and he rose lazily to find another stick.

But Alison's dark eyes were suddenly full of tears. Roger knew nothing of those long winter talks in the twilight, when she and Aunt Diana were having blind man's holiday until the lamp was brought in. How they had planned out that delightful trip that Aunt Diana was now to take alone; the weeks that were to be spent among the Swiss mountains, when she and Alison were to fill their sketch-books, and Aunt Diana was to find a scene for her new picture. Alison had never been abroad, and the previous year Mr. Moore had been ill, and Miss Carrington had refused to leave him, and they had only gone to Hastings later on with him and Greville. It was a happy time, she remembered, and full of pleasant recollections; but Greville would have joined them in Switzerland.

Miss Carrington had said very little about it in her letter; it was



'ALL RIGHT, MY DEAR OLD CARA,' HE SAID TO HIMSELF.

a painful subject to both. She was going quite alone now ; some friends of hers were in the Engadine, and would join her, if she wished it, but she would miss her dear little companion all the same.

'Come along, Ailie,' exclaimed Roger, drawing her arm through his. 'It feels cold and damp. It is hardly prudent to sit so long. Come into the schoolroom and give me a lesson.'

Alison rose silently, and in the dim light brushed something from her cheek, but Roger noticed nothing amiss when she asked him in her usual voice what song he would try. 'It would only vex him if he knew how disappointed I am,' she thought, 'so I will not tell him, and perhaps some day, if I am very good, Aunt Diana may still take me to Switzerland.' And with this thought she resolutely set herself to play Roger's accompaniment.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONVENIENT THUNDERSTORM.

‘**R**OGER, does it not seem strange that Miss Hardwick never brings her sister to The Holms?’

‘Well, no, Ailie. I am too profound a student of human nature to think anything strange. You women know how to tyrannise over one another. Revenge is sweet, even to the feminine mind. Poor Miss Anna is expiating the offence of having excited our commiseration. The fiat has gone forth—her days at The Holms are numbered.’

‘Oh dear, I hope not,’ returned Alison, in an anxious voice; ‘I took rather a fancy to the poor little thing, and I hoped to have been of some use to her—she seems so utterly devoid of friends.’

‘I perfectly agree with you there. I never see Miss Anna without recalling the old story of Cinderella. I only wish we could improvise a pumpkin coach and carry her off. I should like to set her to play, and do nothing else for three months at least.’

Alison laughed at Roger’s energetic tone as he struck the hedge-row with his stick. They were walking down a country road. The evening was sultry, and Roger had invited his sister to accompany him in one of their pleasant strolls. There was a moment’s silence after Roger’s speech, and then he began again—but this time there was a glimmer of mischief in his eyes.

‘Ailie, what should you say if I should promise to bring you and Miss Anna together in less than half an hour?’

‘I should say you were a magician,’ returned Alison carelessly, for she did not believe him in earnest.

‘Nevertheless, the thing shall be done,’ was his oracular reply; and then he said quickly, ‘Look at the clouds, Ailie; we shall have a thunderstorm directly.’ Alison gave a startled glance at the sky; there was no mistaking the gathering blackness overhead.

‘What shall we do?’ she exclaimed, in a disconcerted voice. ‘I



'WE SHALL HAVE A THUNDERSTORM DIRECTLY.'

have my new hat on, and this nice clean cambric, and we have no umbrella, and there is not a house in sight.'

'All right,' was Roger's cheerful response; 'things are just as they should be. Walk as fast as you can; in less than ten minutes we shall be at the gate of Maplewood. Could anything be more cleverly arranged? Of course, we must take refuge from the impending storm. You are afraid of lightning, are you not, Ailie? They will be compelled to house us for an hour at least.'

'Oh, Roger, what a good idea!' exclaimed Alison, still laughing. 'Please let us make haste, though, or we shall never reach Maplewood in time.' And Alison quickened her walk into a run. But the heavy drops pelted on her before she took refuge in the portico.

Before Roger could lift his hand to the knocker the door was flung open, and Anna stood on the threshold.

'I saw you both running down the road,' she exclaimed, eagerly. 'I knew you would take refuge here from the rain; there is going to be such a heavy storm, and I was just beginning to feel frightened at the thought of being alone in it, but I don't mind a bit now.'

'Do you mean that Mrs. Hardwick and your sister are out?' asked Roger, as he shook Alison's light mantle, which was already wet.

'Yes, they are dining at the Allans'. There is to be a dance afterwards, so they will be very late. Do you mind my taking you into the morning room? I have some work that I must finish, or Eva will be disappointed; but I can talk to you all the same. Oh, it is so nice to see you again,' looking at Alison affectionately.

'Is it not nice to see me, too?' asked Roger, in a comical tone. 'I don't think you ought to leave me out in the cold, Miss Anna.'

Anna laughed and blushed at this; then she said, very prettily, in her childish way, 'Oh, I am glad to see you, too; but I never thought of telling you so. Will you ring, Mr. Roger? and then Morton will bring us some tea. Please take that easy chair by the window, Miss Merle—it is Eva's favourite seat, because there is such a pretty view of the garden.'

'No, indeed, I am going to help you,' returned Alison, laying her hat aside, and pulling off her long gloves. 'Oh, you poor child, what a task!' as she inspected Anna's work. She was trimming an Indian muslin gown with coffee-coloured lace.

'Yes, is it not pretty?' returned Anna, innocently. 'Eva means to wear it at our garden-party on Thursday. You and Mr. Roger are both coming, are you not?'

'We are not invited,' returned Alison, a little gravely, as she took a thimble from her pocket, and helped herself unasked to a needle and thread. 'I am going on with that flounce,' she continued quietly, 'so you have nothing to do but to talk to me and Roger.'

'Oh, how kind you are!' returned Anna, gratefully. 'The thunder always makes my head ache a little, and I have been working all the afternoon, and it was so hot; indeed,' interrupting herself, 'Eva was writing out your notes of invitation to-day. I think she gave them to Mabel. I am sorry,' flushing a little as she spoke, 'that you should have them so late, but Eva is always so busy.'

'So is some one else always busy,' observed Roger, with a pitying glance at the girl's tired face. Both he and Alison thought she looked thinner and paler than when they saw her last; her blue eyes looked large and heavy, and the veins of the forehead were marked too clearly; her fair hair was strained from her face and coiled somewhat untidily, and her grey linen dress looked tumbled and far from fresh. Poor little Anna! she had been too busy all day to think of her appearance; and then, no visitors ever asked for her. Roger, who was a keen observer in his quiet way, could not help comparing the two girls as they sat together—Alison looking so dainty and neat in her pretty summer gown with her lace ruffles, and Anna in her unbecoming grey dress, with a tumbled collar, and her little thin hands and bare wrists unrelieved by any whiteness; and again Roger thought of Cinderella sitting among the ashes; then he jumped up and wheeled the easy chair towards the table.

'I am afraid you will have to house us for a good hour or more,' he observed, 'for the weather means mischief, and in this climate it never rains but it pours, so while Ailie acts the part of a good Brownie, and does your work, you may as well make yourself comfortable. I suppose you will not mind my going into the library for a book, for I am not much of a hand at talk? You may summon me when tea is ready.' And Roger marched off, muttering to himself, 'Two is company, three is none; she shall not be bothered with making company talk for me, poor little girl!'

'How good he is!' whispered Anna, almost before the door had closed behind him; 'he thinks I want to talk to you alone, and so I do. Oh, how quickly you work! your needle seems to fly. My head was aching so with stooping over the muslin that I could hardly see; but when I told Eva so, she said I was always full of fancies, and that I was so dreadfully idle. But I don't think I really am idle, do you?'

‘No, indeed,’ returned Alison, with something of Aunt Diana’s abruptness; ‘I am sure you have been working too hard, you look so thin and unsubstantial. Tell me, Anna, why have you never come to see me again, as you promised?’

A painful flush overspread the young girl’s face.

‘Eva does not want me to come,’ she half whispered; ‘at least, I think so; she always raises difficulties when I ask to accompany her; and—and—’ her eyes filling with tears—‘she was so angry that afternoon when you and Mr. Roger were so kind to me—when he brought me the groundsel, you know; she said I was so forward that people could not help noticing me, and that she was sure Mr. Roger thought so.’

‘What a shame!’ was on Alison’s lips, but she prudently refrained from uttering the words aloud; she only said very kindly,—

‘Never mind, Anna dear—may I call you Anna? and please remember I am only a girl myself, and my name is Alison, and not Miss Merle. Never mind, if what your sister says is not true; people often say things when they are put out which they do not really mean. No one could think you forward; I am sure Roger would laugh at such an idea if I were to tell him.’

‘You must not do that,’ returned Anna, quietly; ‘he would be so angry with Eva; they are not good friends, you know. Oh, how glad I am to tell you this; it takes quite a load off my mind. I was afraid you would think me so ungrateful after pressing me so kindly to come; you might have thought I did not care—I cried about it so often.’

‘You must never do that again,’ replied Alison, quite pained at this; ‘if you do not come to The Holms I shall quite understand where the fault lies; we will not make things worse by fretting over them. Aunt Diana always says fretting never helps any one, and only undermines our strength. We must try and be patient for a little—things may be better by-and-by.’

‘That is what I often say to myself,’ returned Anna, more brightly. ‘Do you think it wrong to make up stories about oneself, Miss Merle?’

‘Miss Merle has no thought on the subject, or on any subject,’ returned Alison, gravely.

‘Do you think it wrong then, Alison?’ repeated Anna, with a shy laugh.

‘My dear’—very briskly—‘you are asking a very strange question

of a dreamer of dreams like myself. I am afraid I must refer you for an answer to my usual authority—Aunt Diana.'

'Oh, dear!' returned Anna, with a pleased smile, 'how nice to think that you are not wiser than myself in that! I mean, that you make up stories, too.'

'Well, you know,'—in rather an amused tone—'eighteen is not quite the age of Methusaleh, and I possess a few of the sins of girlhood; but I must give you the same dose of wisdom that has been administered to my unfortunate self. Aunt Diana used to say to me, "What is the use of dreaming in the daytime? It is drowsy work, and only makes real life look harder by comparison." And she often quoted Kingsley's words, "Do noble things, not dream them." "Why, it is like building a house with eggshells, to go dreaming through life," she would say; "hard work is better than such flimsy thoughts. You will never be a heroine, Ailie, my dear, so it is no use fancying yourself one. When I was a child, I once fancied myself Joan of Arc, and tied myself so tightly to the nursery table that I could not undo the knots. I suppose my mother wanted to teach me a lesson, for she would not let any one come to my help for an hour. 'No, my dear,' I remember her saying, 'you courted martyrdom, as poor Joan did, so you must not expect such an easy deliverance. Undo your own knots, and never mind about hurting your fingers. Joan had to expiate those dreams of hers, and you must do the same, Diana.' It actually cured me of my fancies for a long time.'"

Anna laughed merrily at this.

'I should like to know your aunt, Alison; she seems so clever and so good. I do not wonder you are so different from other girls. No one ever told me such things,'—a little sadly. 'Somehow it makes the time pass, and the world seems less tedious if I imagine all sorts of stories about myself—castle-building, is not that what you call it?'

'Yes, it is very nice,' returned Alison, with a sigh; 'but nice things are not always wholesome—one may be surfeited with sweets. If I were you, Anna, I would have an interesting book beside me, and read a page or two every now and then, when you feel restless; it will refresh you, and give you food for thought; a book is such a companion, and takes off all dulness. Yes, I am sure that would be better for you than dreaming, unless you compose poetry; that would do as well.'

'Oh, I could not do that; I am not a bit clever,' returned Anna,

in quite a frightened voice ; ‘ but I like your idea about the book. I am reading the *Water Babies*, and I was longing to get to it all the afternoon ; it is just the sort of book for a hot day. Yes, I think you are right about castle-building being a foolish sort of habit ; I will try to break myself of it, and think other people’s thoughts instead. But here comes tea, and we must summon Mr. Roger.’

Roger was not sorry to be called. The library was rather a gloomy apartment this wet evening, as it looked on the darkest part of the shrubbery, the evergreens coming far too close to the windows. But, as no one sat in the room, this was not considered a grievance. He thought the morning room looked snug and cozy when he went back to it. The muslin dress still reposed on the centre table, but a smaller one was placed in the bay window, round which the three young people were gathered.

Anna quite forgot her headache and fear of the thunder as she performed her simple duties of hostess. She looked so pleased when Roger told her that he had never tasted better tea, that he laughingly accused her of never having entertained company before. To his surprise, she answered him, quite seriously—‘ Oh, no ; I never had a tea-party before. How nice it is ! Eva has her friends sometimes, but I do not seem to know any girls.’

‘ Or young men,’ put in Roger, mischievously. He seemed bent on teasing her to-night.

‘ Well, there is Cousin Anthony, you know,’ she replied in her usual naive fashion ; ‘ he is a young man, of course ; but I don’t think he would like to come to my tea-parties. Eva always says that I am such a child that people don’t care to talk to me. I am afraid I am not very clever.’

‘ I am glad of that,’ returned Roger promptly. ‘ I detest people who think themselves clever. You are quite clever enough for Alison and me. By the bye, Miss Anna, how do you get on with your Latin ?’

‘ Oh, pretty well,’ she answered, with one of her varying blushes, which made her almost pretty. ‘ I have so little time, and you have not given me a lesson for so long, Mr. Roger.’

‘ Why, you never come to The Holms now,’ was his reply to this. ‘ I believe Ailie has frightened you away. You must not mind her, Miss Anna ; she is a sort of epitome of Aunt Diana’s sayings now. As Macaulay has it, “ Nothing is more unattractive than an epitome ” ; so, of course, Ailie is a sort of Gorgon to you.’

‘Oh, no, indeed! I am so fond of your sister,’ returned Anna, in her gentle, impulsive way; but she made no excuse for herself in return for Roger’s implied reproach.

‘The rain is over now,’ observed Alison, in a regretful voice, ‘and it is growing so dark, Roger, we ought not to stay any longer.’

‘Never mind, I shall see you on Thursday,’ replied Anna. ‘I am looking forward to the day so much. I have a new dress, too,’ she continued, as Roger left the room to find Alison’s mantle; ‘it is not so pretty as Eva’s dress—such a beautiful muslin; mine is only cream-coloured nun’s cloth.’

‘I am sure you will look very nice, and I shall bring you some flowers,’ returned Alison, kindly, with a vivid recollection how well Anna had looked with the knot of roses fastened in her grey dress.

‘Now, good-bye, dear. Promise me that you will not put in another stitch to-night; perhaps your sister will be able to help you to-morrow.’

Anna looked surprised at this. ‘Eva never works,’ she said, simply, as though it were an uncontroverted fact; ‘she hates the very sight of a needle. When she was quite little, she cried so about it, mamma would not let nurse teach her; and Cousin Anthony says it would be a waste of time for such an accomplished creature to do what any uneducated needlewoman could do for her.’

‘Yet she wastes your time.’ Alison could not help saying this; but Anna only shook her head.

‘It is not waste of time for me. I am not clever, like Eva; and I am fond of work. One may have too much of it sometimes; but I like to feel of use to somebody.’

‘Well, dear, you will have your reward some day, I hope,’ returned Alison, gently; and then they joined Roger in the hall.

‘Well, Ailie,’ he observed, as they walked briskly down the wet road, ‘have you had a nice time with your new friend?’

‘Yes, indeed, Roger. I am so thankful for the rain. I am getting quite fond of Anna. There is so much goodness under that shy, childish manner.’

‘I knew you would appreciate her,’ he returned, heartily. ‘Poor little girl! One is glad to do anything to help her. There is not much a fellow like me can do, except say a kind word when people snub her, or leave her to sit alone in corners. That is almost all I have done.’

‘But you teach her Latin, Roger.’

'Nonsense!' was the hasty reply. 'A pretty sort of teaching! The poor little thing once confided to me her difficulties, and so whenever an opportunity came I gave her a quarter of an hour's construing. She used to come rather often to The Holms once upon a time. Well, I shall leave her in your hands now, Ailie. A girl friend of her own age will be far better for her.'

'I am sure you have been good to her, Roger, or she would not be so grateful to you.' But as Roger only said 'Nonsense!' rather impatiently, Alison, with her usual tact, changed the subject.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FETE AT MAPLEWOOD.

‘**W**HAT a lovely afternoon ! Eva is always so fortunate in weather,’ observed Mabel, as she and Alison stood at the gate of The Holms, waiting for Roger. ‘You look very nice, Alison,’ she continued condescendingly. ‘I suppose Aunt Diana employed a good dressmaker ; your dress is not new, but it looks quite fresh.’ And Missie, who was in high good-humour, regarded her own gown with infinite content.

Missie was certainly looking very pretty, in spite of her many friperies. Her pink cheeks were pinker than ever, and her bright eyes shone with contentment and pleasure. Nevertheless, many that afternoon turned from her to look at the graceful dark-eyed girl dressed so simply yet so becomingly in soft Madras muslin, with the shady hat with its long ostrich feather, a gift from Aunt Diana. Alison’s perfect simplicity always seemed such a contrast to Missie’s finery.

‘Yes, you look very nice,’ continued Missie, complacently. ‘Eva is right, and you have a style of your own. I only hope poor Anna will not make a guy of herself, but she always does ; she is such a plain, dowdy little thing.’

‘I wonder her sister does not try to improve her taste,’ remarked Alison, rather severely. ‘Anna is one of those people who have no natural talent in dress. Aunt Diana always says there is an education even in this ; the eye and the taste must be properly cultivated. I think Miss Hardwick should take her sister in hand.’

‘I told her so once,’ returned Missie, ‘but she said Anna had no complexion and no good looks, and that dress would be of little consequence in her case ; she always seems to me rather ashamed of Anna, and I don’t wonder at it.’

Alison was silent. She was resolving in her own mind to appeal to Missie’s benevolence on behalf of Anna. In spite of her temper



'YOU LOOK VERY NICE, ALISON.'

and vanity, Missie had many good points; she was kind-hearted and capable of a great deal of affection. She would try to interest her in the poor child.

‘Roger does not seem coming; he was detained so long at the mill. Let us walk on slowly, and he will soon overtake us.’ And as Missie consented to this, Alison took this opportunity to relate their visit to Maplewood, and she dwelt long and feelingly on poor Anna’s solitary task and her jaded looks.

To do her justice, Missie appeared extremely shocked. ‘That was too bad of Eva,’ she said, gravely, ‘to go out and amuse herself, and leave all that work for Anna.’

‘I am afraid it is too often the case,’ returned Alison, following up her advantage rather eagerly. ‘Anna has no time to amuse herself, or to carry on her own studies; she is always slaving for her mother and sister. They are rich, and could easily afford to keep a maid. It is not fair that one sister should be a drudge to another.’

‘No, indeed; I must speak to Eva,’ replied Missie, in a rather displeased voice. ‘I have often told her that she puts too much on Anna.’

‘And, Mabel dear,’ continued Alison, coaxingly, ‘you have such influence with Miss Hardwick that I wish you would ask her to bring Anna with her sometimes when she comes to The Holms. I have no friends of my own in Chesterton, and I have taken rather a fancy to Anna; I should like her to come and see me sometimes.’

Alison could not have been more diplomatic. Missie was sure to respond to such an appeal. In the first place, she liked Alison to ask her a favour; it confirmed her own sense of importance; then she had always boasted of her influence with her friend—here was an opportunity of testing it; thirdly, for even Missie was capable of generosity for its own sake, she was quite willing to do a good turn for Anna, who was a harmless little creature, and was never in her way.

‘Of course I will talk to Eva,’ she said, rather consequentially. ‘I will tell her that Anna must come to amuse you. I rather wonder at your taste, Alison; I cannot imagine any one more uninteresting than Anna; but we do not always think alike.’ And then, as Roger came up with them, she broke off her sentence to reprimand him sharply for his delay.

Maplewood owned a garden of very tolerable dimensions, but it was already crowded when the Merles made their appearance. The

lawn was covered by gaily dressed people; tennis had not yet begun, but the band was playing. As soon as Alison had greeted her hostess she looked round anxiously for Anna. She had no desire to linger beside Mrs. Hardwick; the handsome, talkative widow had already excited her aversion. As she turned away in search of her friend, Miss Hardwick came up to them in company with a tall, dark man.

'Mabel dear,' she said, almost ignoring Alison, 'I must introduce Tony to you—my cousin, Captain Harper. Tony, this is my especial friend, and I shall expect you to pay her a great deal of attention, on peril of my displeasure.'

'I am too happy to perform such a pleasing duty, I am sure,' lisped Anthony; but his bold black eyes passed over Missie's simpering pretty little face to Alison's.

'Is this another special friend of yours, Eva?' he observed, twisting his moustache and looking full at her as he spoke. Miss Hardwick made the introduction somewhat reluctantly; Alison bowed a little haughtily; she was not prepossessed with Captain Harper's appearance, and she determined to have as little as possible to do with him; he seemed about to speak to her, but she turned suddenly to Miss Hardwick.

'I do not see your sister,' she said, in a low voice.

'Oh, I dare say not,' she answered, carelessly. 'I never knew Anna ever ready for anything; she is not half dressed, I suppose. Now, Tony,' turning her shoulders on Alison, 'you must take Mabel for your partner in the first set, and Edgar Dawson and Miss Freeland will play against you.'

'We had better take our places, then,' drawled Captain Harper; and, left to herself, Alison turned to Roger and asked him to walk with her to the house.

'I am going in search of Anna,' she whispered as she left him, and she asked one of the servants who was just entering the tea-room to take her to Anna's bedroom. The maid looked surprised, but she put down her tray at once, and preceded Alison upstairs.

'That is Miss Anna's room,' she said, pointing to the door; 'she is dressing, I believe. A hamper of flowers came, and she has only just finished arranging them.'

'I dare say I shall be able to help her,' returned Alison, knocking at the door.

A weary voice said, 'Come in.'

'My dear child,' exclaimed Alison, in a surprised voice, as she entered, 'why, you have not begun to dress,' for Anna was standing at the window in her grey linen gown, evidently watching the gay scene, but the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

'Oh, I cannot dress now,' she sobbed, as Alison kissed her, 'it is so late, and I am so tired; Eva said the flowers must be done, and I have only just finished them. I saw Mr. Roger and you and Mabel come in, and I did so long to come out, but now I am just tired out, and I can't stop crying.'

'Oh, you will cheer up directly, and I am going to stop and help you,' returned Alison, brightly. 'Bathe your eyes with some eau de Cologne and water; I will be back in a moment.' And running downstairs, Alison made her way into the tea-room, and after a few words with the good-natured maid she had already accosted, she was soon provided with a cup of coffee and some delicious-looking cake.

'Now you are to leave off crying and take these good things I have brought you,' coaxed Alison, 'and then I will help you to dress. You are tired and worried; but the coffee will refresh you.' But Anna's answer was a fresh burst of tears as she threw her arms round her neck.

'Oh, how kind you are to me! I do love you so; no one ever took such trouble for me before.'

'Then you must thank me by enjoying the coffee,' laughed Alison; but a sympathising drop hung on her own lashes. Nevertheless, she talked on cheerfully until Anna had dried her eyes and drunk her coffee, and then she coaxed her to let her brush her hair and arrange it. Anna sat quite patient and docile under Alison's hands; she did not even look at herself till the pretty cream-coloured dress was fastened, and the flowers arranged, and then Alison led her to the glass.

'Why, I look quite different; what have you done to me?' observed Anna, in a bewildered tone. 'I am not like myself at all.'

This was the opportunity for Alison to deliver her little lecture.

'You have never taken enough pains with your appearance,' she said, seriously. 'You have such pretty hair, but you dress it in such an unbecoming way; very few faces can bear to have the hair so tightly strained from the forehead. Look how naturally and prettily it waves, now I have given it a little liberty. Your forehead is too high and prominent to be uncovered; but these little curly rings are far better than your sister's fringe, and you will soon learn to plait

your hair more smoothly. Grey does not suit you at all. You must never choose a dress of that colour, and when you wear cream or white always have a knot of ribbon or a flower to give you a little tone of colour.'

Anna opened her blue eyes rather widely at this harangue.

'You are talking quite seriously, as though you thought I had neglected some duty,' she said, in a perplexed voice. 'Of course it would be very nice to look like this always; but the less one thinks about dress the better.'

'I do not agree with you, Anna,' returned Alison, with much decision; 'every one ought to make the best of themselves. There is a great deal in the Bible about dress. See how minutely every detail of Aaron's robes was settled.'

'Oh, but he was the high priest, and of course his dress was symbolical.'

'Well, dress with us ought to be symbolical too. Oh, I am not repeating my own words. Every girl's dress, Aunt Di says, ought to be symbolical of beauty, neatness, and purity. Why, Anna, the Bible is full of descriptions of women's dress. Think how beautifully Esther dressed herself when she wanted to ask a favour of the king; think of the white robes of the saints! It seems to me that only undue vanity is rebuked, and that dress is not of itself sinful.'

'I never thought of it in this way before,' replied Anna, scrutinising herself thoughtfully. 'Perhaps I ought to have taken more pains with my hair, and chosen my dresses more carefully. I thought,' hesitating over her words, 'that no one cared how I looked, and so it did not matter; but perhaps I have been only indolent.'

'Never mind; you will take more pains with yourself now, to please me,' returned Alison, perfectly satisfied with the result of her lecture. 'Now, as I am longing for a game of tennis, suppose we go down?' And Anna cheerfully assented.

They were met in the hall by Roger and Captain Harper; the gentlemen were evidently in search of them.

'I thought you had lost yourself, Ailie,' observed Roger; and as he turned to her companion a low whistle of astonishment broke from his lips, and was at once promptly suppressed.

'I did not know you, Miss Anna,' was all he ventured to say; but both Alison and Anna coloured with pleasure under the approving look he bestowed on them.

'Miss Merle, I hope, now I have taken all this trouble to find you, that you will not refuse to be my partner in this set,' asked Captain Harper, so eagerly that he had almost forgotten his usual drawl.

Alison assented rather coldly; but her reluctance vanished when she found Roger and Anna meant to oppose them. She almost forgot her dislike to her partner during the long, well-contested game, which soon drew a crowd of spectators round them; her skill and animation delighted Captain Harper. Missie was watching them rather curiously.

'I did not know Alison was such a good player,' she said at last, when Eva joined her. 'Captain Harper did not exert himself quite so much when he played with me!' with a displeased toss of her head.

'He knows we are watching him, darling, and that puts him on his mettle,' returned her friend, soothingly; and she proceeded to whisper into Missie's ear some of those artful flatteries which some girls love to impart to each other. Miss Hardwick was certainly a most undesirable friend for a girl of Missie's disposition. Her foolish little head was soon turned by Eva's smooth, plausible speeches, and the smiles came to her face again.

'Really, Eva,' she said presently, adjusting her eyeglasses coquetishly—for just then it was rather fashionable to be short-sighted, and Missie, who had eyes like a hawk for strength and clearness, must needs dangle her pince-nez, with other misguided young ladies—'really, my dear, I never saw Anna look so well.'

Miss Hardwick turned her long neck superciliously, and regarded her sister with surprise.

'That must be Alison's doing,' she said with evident displeasure. 'Anna never did her own hair, I am sure of that.' But her handsome face clouded still more when Missie proceeded to take her to task.

'You ought to look after her a little more, Eva,' said Missie, who was certainly not deficient in courage. 'You have so much taste yourself, you ought to help her to choose her dresses. I should be ashamed if my sister looked as dowdy as Anna generally does.'

Miss Hardwick bit her lips to keep back an angry retort; but she was really fond of Missie, as the little monkey knew, for she went on quite coolly with her list of grievances.

Dear Eva was wrong to give Anna so much work. Both she and Alison thought Anna looked very ill. 'And, darling,' continued

Missie, in a smooth, cajoling voice, 'Anna must come to The Holms sometimes. Alison has taken a fancy to her, and it will keep her out of our way if she has Anna sometimes, and I like to have you to myself, and—and——' But the rest of Missie's speech was only whispered into Eva's ear, only it was evidently more potent than the rest, for her moody countenance relaxed, and she nodded.

'Very well ; she can come if she likes,' she said, somewhat ungraciously ; but Missie, who had gained her end, cared nothing for Eva's sulkiness.

The rest of the afternoon passed like a happy dream to Anna. She played another game with Roger, who seemed bent on having her for a partner ; and afterwards, when Alison had succeeded in shaking off Captain Harper by infusing into her manner a fine degree of girlish hauteur and coolness not easily to be mistaken, the three sat together, passing kindly remarks on the rest of the company.

But the crowning happiness of the afternoon to Anna was when Missie addressed her in the condescending manner of one who confers a benefit.

'You have not been to see us lately,' she said, quite graciously. 'I have told Eva that she must bring you sometimes to talk to Alison.' And after this Anna's cup of joy seemed overflowing.

Alison enjoyed her party moderately. The sunshine, and the music, and the gay scene quickened her young pulses ; but once when she was left to herself another scene rose before her eyes.

A group of light-hearted girls gathered round a boat, going to pick forget-me-nots on the Long Island. The feathery splash of the oars seemed in her ears ; Greville's gay laugh seemed to penetrate through the strains of the music ; there were golden lights on the water, swans ruffling their plumage angrily ; purple shadows ; the flickering of tall reeds in the sedgy banks.

'Ailie, the band is going to play "God save the Queen." What were you dreaming about, little woman ? Come with me and say good-bye to Mrs. Hardwick ; she is holding her court under the acacia.' And Roger took her by the arm and led her away.

CHAPTER XV.

ROGER RESOLVES TO WATCH.

THANK you, Mabel dear, for what you have said to Anna,' whispered Alison gratefully, as they left the grounds of Maplewood.

Missie looked gratified.

'Oh, of course, I gave Eva a piece of my mind. She is always so reasonable and sweet-tempered that I never have any difficulty. Anna may come to The Holms as often as she likes.' Then, with a perceptible effort to seem at her ease, she continued hurriedly: 'Eva is going to bring her cousin to afternoon tea to-morrow. I hope it will be fine, and then we can set the table under the lime trees; our drawing-room is such an ugly room.'

'Do you mean Captain Harper is coming?' returned Alison, with a strong accent of disgust in her voice. 'Oh, Mabel! how could you ask him? I am sure papa will not be pleased. I do not like him at all; his manners are so artificial and disagreeable.'

Missie looked sulky in a moment.

'It is a pity you did not stop at Riverston,' she returned, in an injured voice, 'for none of our Chesterton folk, with the exception of that stupid little Anna, seem good enough for you. I think Captain Harper charming, and I am sure papa will be pleased with him, unless you set him against the poor fellow.' And here Missie looked decidedly cross. Her temper was rising under this unexpected opposition.

'You may be sure that I shall say nothing to papa,' replied Alison, with so much dignity that Missie was silenced; but she sulked so perceptibly all the evening that her father noticed it, and asked more than once what was the matter with Missie; but tale-telling was beneath Alison, and she said nothing.

But she was terribly annoyed, all the same, and took Roger into

her confidence, exacting from him a promise that he would be present at all risks.

‘Perhaps I am wrong,’ she remarked candidly; ‘I am always so ready with my likes and dislikes. But I cannot bear Captain Harper, and it is odious to me to pour out his tea for him.’

Alison’s anxiety was soon set at rest. The party from Maplewood, including Anna, had not long been gathered under the lime trees before Mr. Merle made his appearance, greatly to her delight and Missie’s discomfiture. Alison never found out if Roger had betrayed her trust and given his father warning of the expected guest. But there was no mistaking the coolness of his manner to Captain Harper. That unlucky individual was clearly not at his ease, and certainly no inducement was held out to him to repeat his visit.

As soon as the unwelcome visitor had departed Mr. Merle expressed himself as much displeased to find Captain Harper there; indeed, his severity quite overwhelmed Missie, and she retired in floods of tears.

‘Papa is never angry with me,’ she sobbed; ‘this must be your fault, Alison. You have come home to stir up strife and turn papa against me.’

‘Don’t be absurd, Mabel,’ returned Alison, a little crossly; ‘you have brought it all on yourself. Papa seems angry with me too, and yet you know I am not at all in fault. If you do wrong you must bear to be scolded. Papa says he is quite shocked at our forwardness. You see, he blames me, too. He says no one but himself or Roger ought to invite gentlemen to the house, and Miss Leigh says the same. He told me after you left the room that he would take care that Captain Harper should not repeat his visit, as he was not the sort of man whose acquaintance he could approve for his daughters.’

Missie dissolved into fresh tears on hearing this. ‘I am sure it is not papa’s real opinion,’ she persisted in saying. Roger had put him up to it to spite her and Eva. What would Eva say if she were forbidden to bring her cousin to The Holms? She wished Alison would go back to Aunt Diana, and not stop here to make her so wretched. She did not see the use of having a sister who hated and thwarted her.

‘Oh, you silly child!’ exclaimed Alison, kissing the wet, ill-tempered little face that still looked so pretty. ‘What a storm in a teacup! I don’t hate you a bit. I am very fond of you, though

you will quarrel with me about every trifle ; but it takes two to quarrel properly, and I do not mean to take up the cudgels to please you !' And here she gave her a playful shake, that so astonished Missie that she speedily grew more amiable, for her tempers had never been so set aside before.

Alison consoled herself for her sister's variable moods by trying to make Anna happy. That little person came frequently to The Holms now, and she began to consider how these visits might be turned to account. 'For it will never do to waste so many afternoons in talking about just what comes into one's head,' she decided.

So she proposed to give Anna painting lessons twice a week. She could teach Poppie at the same time, and go on with her own work. And as Anna gleefully acceded to this, the schoolroom was transferred into a studio, much to Miss Leigh's delight. She thought it was the prettiest sight possible to see Alison in her picturesque holland blouse, standing behind Poppie's chair or putting in a background for Anna, pupils and teacher all laughing and talking together.

Anna was growing a different creature under Alison's healthy influence. She was one of those sensitive human plants that need sunshine before they can grow. The depressing atmosphere in which she lived had made her meagre and colourless. Her mother and sister had no sympathy with her want of vitality ; her very meekness had predisposed her for slavery. If she could have asserted herself, Mrs. Hardwick would have recognised her rights ; but the pale shadowy resistance that was all Anna could bring in her defence only angered her mother. Mrs. Hardwick's fond partiality for her handsome daughter disposed her to see with Eva's eyes ; and the result was a course of maternal snubbing.

But Anna was not so oppressed now. Eva had been much offended by Missie's interference. She ceased to demand her sister's services, but she also ignored her personality. Anna might do as she liked and go where she liked ; Eva had simply no interest in her. Anna was somewhat confused at this sudden freedom ; she was like a prisoner restored unexpectedly to the outer world. But for Alison, she would have been at a loss to occupy herself ; but her friend gave her many useful hints.

Mrs. Hardwick began to take some notice of her younger daughter. Two or three people at the garden-party had spoken of Anna. One

of them had called her a nice amiable girl, and had prophesied that she would be a comfort to her mother when Eva was married. The idea struck Mrs. Hardwick. Of course, Eva—her handsome high-spirited Eva—would marry, and then there would be only Anna for companionship. Mrs. Hardwick began to think that it would be as well to bring Anna on a little. She commenced by a serious review of her younger daughter's wardrobe. Many of Anne's gowns were confiscated, as being tasteless and old-fashioned. Poor Anna was conveyed on shopping expeditions that filled her with gratitude and amazement.

'Mamma is always buying things for me now,' she said, with a deprecating blush, as Alison joked her about her extravagance. 'I don't know what makes her so kind to me. She often takes me for a drive, and talks to me about what we are to do when Eva is married; and she was so pleased the other day because Miss Owen, the dressmaker, told her I had a good figure. Poor mamma! I wish I were not such a plain little creature, for she can never be so fond of me as she is of Eva. One day I may be some comfort to her.'

Alison was much pleased at this account; and she needed cheering just now. Roger had been looking very worried and careworn for some days, and Alison was afraid, from her father's grave face and silence with his son, that things had gone wrong again at the mill, and that, as usual, the blame had been laid on Roger. She was waiting for an opportunity to speak to him, for his engagements had taken him out several nights, when one evening she met him as she was returning from the town.

He was walking along rather moodily, with his eyes fixed on the ground, and did not see Alison until she called him by name; and then he looked up and his face brightened in a moment.

'Where have you been, Ailie?' he asked, smiling at her; and Roger's smile was very pleasant. 'The house felt as dull as a vault without you, so I came out for a solitary prowl.'

'Very well, you shall have your prowl; only it will not be solitary any longer, for I am not tired in the least, and mean to come too.'

'Really and truly not tired, Ailie?'

'Not a bit,' returned Alison stoutly, for she was a good pedestrian; but even if she had been, she felt she could have walked on gladly till she was ready to drop with fatigue, when she saw that pleased look on Roger's face.

'Very well, then,' he said, leading the way towards a quiet shady road, 'I am just in the right mood for a talk, and you are the right sort of company.'

'I am so glad I satisfy you, Roger,' she said, looking at him affectionately. 'I wish all brothers were like you, and cared as much for their sisters.'

'So they would if all sisters were your sort,' was his flattering answer, only Roger meant what he said. 'Ailie, of course I know you will go back to Aunt Diana one day, but you must promise me not to leave us just yet.'

'Oh, Roger, of course not. How could I go while you wanted me?'

'My dear, in that case you would never leave us at all. No, no, I am not quite so selfish as that. One day you shall go, Ailie, but not just yet, not till things are more settled, and we are all happier. Do you know, dear, I wonder sometimes how I held on those two years without you; your absence made me miss mother more.' And Roger's lip trembled a little. Alison pressed his arm without speaking; there was no need for other words between them, they were so sure of each other's sympathy.

When she broke the silence it was to speak on a different subject.

'Roger, I wish you would tell me what has been troubling you for the last few days.'

He shook his head and began to whistle.

'Something has gone very wrong,' she went on quite steadily; 'you have been terribly grave all the week, and yesterday you were too worried to eat properly. I hope you mean to take me into confidence, dear; perhaps I could find some way of helping you.'

'I wish you could, Ailie,' he returned sadly; 'I *wish* I could see a way out of our terrible difficulties. Promise me you will be as secret as a statue, and I will tell you a little of what has happened.'

'Oh, you may trust me,' she replied, lifting her honest brown eyes to his face.

'I believe I may, and it will be a relief to speak. Ailie, Fergusson is going too far; I am convinced in my own mind that he has been tampering with the accounts; we shall come to a crash directly.'

'What do you mean?' turning a little pale. Roger spoke so vehemently.

'It would take too long to tell you all, but something very unpleasant has happened this week. You know my father went to

Lancaster the other day. Well, a cheque in payment for a consignment of timber was unexpectedly paid in during his absence. Of course I endorsed the cheque, wrote out a receipt, enclosed it in an envelope, and put it in the usual rack for postage. I then made an entry in the ledger, and was just going to lock up the ledger and the cheque in the safe, as it was nearly time for closing, when the sudden cessation of the machinery told me some accident had happened, and of course I ran out of the office, and so did Fergusson.'

'Oh, I know! when poor Mitchell was hurt,' returned Alison, with a shudder. 'I remember seeing both you and Mr. Fergusson standing bareheaded among the men in the yard; you were sending Timothy for a doctor.'

'Yes, I was detained for nearly half an hour. Fergusson must have gone back to the office—at least, I missed him after the first few minutes. When they had taken Mitchell off to the hospital, I went back to lock up things for the night. Fergusson was just coming out of the office, and handed me the keys. Everything was locked up, he said, and the messenger had fetched the letters. I had put the cheque into my father's private drawer, and had locked the drawer, but the ledger had been left open on the table, with my entry written on the top of a blank page. I had noticed the page was a little loose, as though the corresponding one had been cut out some time previously; but I was in a hurry, and I thought it did not matter. When Fergusson told me everything was locked up for the night, and handed me the office keys, of course there was nothing for me but to take them. Ailie, what do you suppose were my feelings when we opened the private drawer the next morning and there was no cheque there? Neither was my entry in the ledger; the loose page was gone, and, to add to my perplexity, the firm who had paid in the cheque wrote to complain that there had been no acknowledgment or receipt: and yet I had written both myself, and placed the stamped envelope among the other letters for postage.'

'Roger,' exclaimed Alison passionately, 'this must be Fergusson's doings; he must have tampered with your letter and cut out the entry in the ledger, and of course the cheque is in his possession.'

'Wait a moment, Ailie,' returned Roger, looking very stern and pale. 'The cheque was cashed the next morning by a clerk of ours who was turned away for dishonesty; but the bank did not know that, and thought him still in our employ, so the money is lost to

us. My father is dreadfully angry and puzzled about the whole affair, but he does not suspect Fergusson. He flew in a perfect rage when I hinted about his gambling debts. He blames me for carelessness ; he says I ought not to have left the office without locking up both the ledger and the cheque in the iron safe. Fergusson has told my father that he saw Ibbotson (that is the name of the clerk we dismissed) hanging about the yard, talking to the men. He declares that while we were in the yard Ibbotson must have got into the office, turned over the letters, and abstracted my receipt ; he must have read the entry in the open ledger, and he knew all the keys, and would easily find the cheque. He has gulled my father completely ; he has actually made him believe that, in ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour at the most, Ibbotson could cut out the page in the ledger, track the cheque to the private drawer, hunt out my receipt, and make his escape—and all this without any preconceived plan. Why, the whole thing is monstrous and utterly improbable. I am positive that the only thing Ibbotson has done is to cash the cheque.'

'Roger, oh, how dreadful it all is ! Of course, there can be no doubt in your own mind who did it all ?'

'There is not a shadow of doubt in my own mind, Ailie ; but how am I to bring my father to believe it ? Ibbotson has left the place, or he was actually going to set the detectives on him. Fergusson has completely hoodwinked him. Circumstantial evidence is strong against Fergusson, to my thinking. Judge for yourself, Ailie. He was with me in the office when I opened the cheque ; he saw me make the entry in the ledger, as well as write the receipt ; he also must have seen me thrust the cheque hastily into the private drawer before I ran out into the yard. No doubt he returned to the office as soon as my attention was engrossed with poor Mitchell. A few minutes was all that was needed to accomplish the job, Ailie. I have found out to-day that he is terribly involved, and that his creditors are threatening him. I told you things are coming to a crash. I am afraid we shall lose more than the sum we received from Simmonds Brothers.'

'Oh, Roger, how blind father is ! What are you to do to open his eyes ?'

'I am going to watch Fergusson,' returned Roger, with a frown of anxiety. 'Ailie, I never meant to have told you this. I have been about the town gleaning facts to-day, but I mean to keep them

to myself for the next four-and-twenty hours. Fergusson has arrived at some sort of crisis in his affairs. I am afraid he will do something desperate. A sum of money has come into our hands to-day after banking hours, in notes and gold. I wanted my father to bring it up to the house, but he scouted the idea as ridiculous, as though any thief could open an iron safe; but, Ailie, I am not comfortable in my mind. Supposing Fergusson has a duplicate key? My father is so hopelessly duped that it is no use saying any more to him. I have made up my mind to watch the office to-night.'

'But not alone, dear?'

'Yes, of course. Timothy will be there, if I need help; but I don't mean to take him into confidence. There is a barge that passes at ten to-night. The bargee is an acquaintance of mine. I told him to look out for me by the bridge. I will get him to land me at the lower end of the yard. Timothy will be in his shed by that time, thinking about his supper. I don't want him to see me, or he will enlighten Fergusson. There is a handy wood-pile just outside the office where I can lie snug.'

'Roger!' exclaimed Alison, in a quick, determined voice, 'you shall not go alone; I shall watch with you.' And as he was about to interrupt her she went on quietly, 'You know Missie and Miss Leigh will be out until half-past ten. Papa is always in his study. They will think I am in bed. I can lock my door and put the key in my pocket, and you have the latch-key. I will be no trouble to you. I will be as quiet as a mouse, and not hinder you. I could not rest—I could not sleep, knowing you were with that bad man. I will be useful as a witness. You must take me, Roger.'

'Are you sure that you mean it—that it will not hurt you?' he asked slowly.

'What should hurt me on a summer's night? And the barge will be such fun.'

'Very well, you shall come if you like. You are a plucky girl, Ailie.'

And Alison was so pleased with the permission that she gave his arm a little squeeze of gratitude.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

IT was still early in the evening when the young conspirators returned to the house, and the next two hours passed very slowly to Alison.

Her nerves were in that fine tension that precedes an expected crisis. She was restless and excited, and any sort of employment seemed impossible. Rudel's Latin was tiresome, and presented itself in the light of an irksome duty. Poppie's fun and caresses—for the child was as frolicsome as a kitten, especially at wrong times—jarred on her longing for quiet. It was a relief when the little girl went off unwillingly to bed, and especially when Rudel shut up his books on the pretext of sleepiness, and went upstairs, slouching heavily, after the fashion of school-boys.

It was then past nine, and Mr. Merle was shut safely in his study. Alison went quickly into her room and made her little preparation. A brown hat she had discarded as being too shabby would just suit her nocturnal purpose; her dress was dark, and a warm jacket was all she needed; and, carefully turning down her gas and locking her door, she crept quietly downstairs, to find Roger waiting for her in the dark entry.

He nodded and held out his hand to her without speaking, until they were outside the gate and were walking rapidly down the road that would lead them to the bridge.

'I have brought this plaid,' he observed presently, showing it to her. 'I was so afraid you would find it cold if we should have to watch many hours. I don't think I ought to have brought you, Ailie; but you would come, you know.'

'I could not have stopped at home,' was Alison's quick answer. 'Is this the bridge where we are to wait, Roger? How black the canal looks! Are you glad it is such a dark night—no moon, and hardly a star to be seen?'

'I am afraid we are going to have rain,' he returned, in a vexed voice. 'I do not mind the moon being absent; the darkness is in our favour. But what am I to do with you, Ailie, if we have a wet night? You will catch your death of cold.'

'Nonsense,' replied Alison stoutly. But, nevertheless, she felt an inward twinge of discomfort. Neither of them had thought of the weather. How weird and eerie everything looked in the obscure light, the dark towing-path and the sluggish canal, the tall factories, and beyond them the dim wood-piles and sheds stretching away into the distance. Now and then the sudden splash of a water rat broke on their ear, then the heavy tramp of some belated passenger passing over the bridge; the very barge that came floating towards them out of the darkness seemed to hold dark grisly shapes upon it. She almost shuddered when the men's faint 'hulloa' answered Roger's signal. Fragments of old mythological tales seemed to rise to her memory. She thought of Charon rowing his boat full of souls across the sable Styx, as she took her place in the barge.

In a few minutes Roger was helping her to scramble on shore. They were now at the extreme end of the timber-yard, and had some way to walk.

'We must not speak above our breath,' whispered Roger cautiously in her ear. 'I hope Timothy is safe in his shed eating his supper; but if he and Nettle were to meet us it would be rather awkward to account for our presence at this time of night; in fact, my little game would be frustrated. I am more afraid of Nettle than of Timothy. Give me your hand, Ailie; there are awkward bits of wood every now and then, and you may stumble.'

And Alison soon verified his prediction, for only Roger's strong hand saved her from falling again and again.

Long before they had reached their destination the heavy patter of raindrops warned them to make haste; but in the uncertain light, and with so rough a path—for Roger had chosen a narrow by-path instead of the main road—their speed was greatly retarded.

'Here we are at last,' whispered Roger; 'follow me closely, Ailie.' And as she obeyed, holding his coat to give her courage, it really seemed to her as though she were entering a dark cavern. A pitchy blackness was round them; Roger's groping only led them still farther into the darkness. Alison experienced a sense of suffocation until a ray of murky light showed her where she was—at the farther

entrance of one of the wood-piles, with the office windows within a few yards of them.

Alison breathed more freely when she recognised her position. The interlaced planks formed an arched chamber, where they could move with comfort and be sheltered from the rain—unless it were continuous and heavy, and then it would find its way through the wide gaps; but for a little while they would be safe. Roger spread the plaid near the entrance, and bade his sister make herself as comfortable as circumstances permitted, while he went a little way to reconnoitre.

Alison longed for him to stay where he was; it was wonderful how soon her feminine timidity asserted itself directly she was left alone. In spite of all her reasoning, she found the darkness behind her appalling. When she was swallowed up in it, her thoughts would run upon gloomy subjects, such as dungeons with mere eyelets in the wall for windows, or the narrow labyrinthine galleries of mines plunged deep in the recesses of the earth; her mind took exploring flights into all sorts of dreary places before he came back to her, with his face wet with raindrops, and took his allotted share of the rug.

Alison slid a very cold little hand into his, and would not be deterred by his wet coat-sleeve from imperceptibly lessening the distance between them, until she found his shoulder a support, and then she declared in a cheerful voice, without much feigning, that she was quite comfortable, and would not mind how long she stopped there.

‘I hope I have not brought you on a wild-goose chase,’ returned Roger, a little ruefully. ‘Timothy is eating his supper; it looks like cold tripe and onions, but one cannot be sure of anything in this world, so I may be wrong, and Nettle is gnawing a bone with much gusto. We shall have to be careful when he goes his rounds, for the least movement will attract Nettle. Hush! What is that?’ as a slight sound was plainly audible. ‘Don’t move, I implore you, Ailie!’ And Roger cautiously raised himself on his hands and knees and crept a few paces nearer to the entrance, but in a moment he returned, and bade Alison in a whisper move farther into the darkness.

‘It is Fergusson; I heard his voice,’ he whispered; ‘Nettle barked, and he spoke to her. Come a little farther; Timothy has his lantern, and he might turn it on us; and now not a word if you can help it. Are you frightened, dear?’

'No,' returned Alison, a little unsteadily, but at that moment she was certainly wishing herself and Roger safely at home. He seemed to comprehend her feelings, for he patted her cheek, and called her his good, brave little Ailie, which restored her good opinion of herself, and gave her fresh courage. Roger's caution was not in vain: a sudden flare of light penetrated the entrance of the wood-pile; they could see Nettle trotting on in front, and behind her the two men; but at the moment the lantern was lowered, and Timothy's face was turned to his companion.

'A wet night, master,' he said, in a grumbling voice; 'there's no fear of sparks or fireworks to-night from the Cremona Gardens. Nettle and me will just go on our beat, and then we'll go back to the shed again.'

'All right, Timothy,' returned the manager briskly. 'I must just hunt for the paper I told you about. Possibly I may be a quarter of an hour in the office; but I will call out to you when I am ready for you to let me out of the yard.'

'Ay, ay, I will let you out, sure enough, Master Fergusson; if so be as you strike upon the little window in the shed. Now, Nettle, lass, we'll be going.' And the old man moved on slowly.

'Don't move, Ailie; I'll be back in a moment,' whispered Roger in her ear.

And Alison remained where she was, feeling the dampness all round her, an unpleasant moisture beginning to trickle down her neck. The rain was pouring in torrents outside; its very violence promised short duration. Presently Roger crept back to her.

'It is just as I said,' he began hurriedly. 'He is unlocking the safe; he has a duplicate key—I was sure of it. There is not a moment to lose. I dare not trust Timothy. I must go for my father. Ailie, may I leave you here? You are perfectly safe—no one would harm you. But one of us must watch Fergusson; which shall it be?'

'You must go, Roger,' she exclaimed, pushing him from her, but speaking with chattering teeth. 'You will go more quickly, and will know how to avoid Timothy.'

Alison did not add that her limbs were trembling so with sudden fright and excitement that she doubted their efficiency in carrying her so far. Her private opinion was that, after all, she was not fit for such an emergency, and she could help Roger best by quiescent watching.

'Yes, go ; no one can hurt me,' she repeated, panting a little over her words. But the darkness, though abhorrent to her feminine nerves, was useful in hiding her paleness and trembling lips from Roger.

'Very well ; keep up your courage, Ailie, and do not lose sight of the villain,' he returned, creeping gently past her. 'I will bring father back in no time. Wait where you are until Timothy has passed again.'

Alison's reply was inaudible, but her mute assent testified obedience. That moment she was literally beyond speech ; the horrid darkness seemed to swallow her up again ; a nervous oppression made her heart beat with distressing quickness. It was quite a relief when Timothy passed again ; the familiar figure in the heavy watchman's coat gave her a comforting sense of human support, and took away the appalling sense of isolation with only criminal dealings near at hand.

'What a coward I am,' she thought, 'as though a watchful Providence were not near me !' And Alison whispered to herself the comforting collect, 'Lighten our darkness,' feeling as though the mere utterance of the familiar petition, used nightly from her childhood, brought a sense of safety to her. 'And now I must only think of Roger and papa,' she said to herself, as she groped her way towards the entrance. Timothy had retreated to his shed with Nettle, and there was no danger of being surprised. There was another wood-pile overshadowing the office roof. No doubt Roger had stood there when he had peeped into the window. Perhaps she might safely do the same. Roger had told her to watch, and here she could see nothing.

She stole cautiously across the open path, and in another moment she was standing outside the office window. There were two windows, for this one was necessarily darkened by the wood-pile, but over the other the blind had been lowered to shut out prying glances. Alison supposed, as Roger had, that he had locked himself in to carry on his unhallowed work. The dark background of piled-up planks quite overshadowed the white girlish face peering in at the uncurtained window.

She was frightened at her own daring, but she remembered that she was Roger's witness ; it was necessary for her own eyes to testify of Fergusson's dishonest doings. Now there could be no mistake ; the open safe was conclusive, and so were the notes and gold that

he was stowing away in that great black bag. Alison watched, half fascinated by horror. He had nearly finished ; yes, he was locking his bag and closing the safe, the candle stood guttering beside him on a chair, not on the table ; he almost pushed against it as he went to the door and set it open. Yes, he had locked himself in, for she could see him take the key out and fix it carefully in the outer lock, and then he went back into the room. Oh, what had become of Roger ? In another moment he could have escaped with his booty. The main entrance to the timber-yard was in the opposite direction to the private door opening into the garden of The Holms. Even if Roger and her father were coming in this moment, Fergusson would have no difficulty in eluding them. It was true the door was locked and Timothy had the key, but he could easily swim across the canal and reach the towing-path unseen.

Alison's agony was rising to a pitch that almost justified rashness. She was becoming desperate in spite of her terror. A sudden thought came to her, thrilling her with horror—could she do it ? yes, for Roger's sake she would try. Another second she was gliding round the little building and passed the curtained window with a gleam of light shining through the crevice. As she passed it there was sudden darkness ; he had extinguished the candle. In another instant Alison had shut the door, almost knocking Fergusson back, if she had known it, and had turned the key in the lock. Alison had felt a quick hysteric sob rise in her throat as she heard the key turning under her hand. Had she really done it ? Had some unseen presence beside her given her the needful strength ? Was the dishonest servant a prisoner, and she his captor ? But Alison had no time to do more than ask herself these questions, for Timothy came out of his shed, and was hobbling towards her, and the next moment the key was in Alison's pocket, and she was standing at bay.

'What does this mean, miss ? How came you here ?' exclaimed the old man suspiciously, while Nettle jumped up and licked her hand.

'I have locked Mr. Fergusson in ; he is stealing papa's money out of the safe,' returned Alison, turning her white face to Timothy, and the sob rising in her throat again. 'I will not give up the key until papa comes.'

A fierce kick at the door behind her drove her from it a few paces.

'Let me out, Timothy!' thundered Fergusson. 'The girl is mad; she must be out of her mind to say such things. Mr. Merle desired me to look over some papers for him; they are most important, and there must be no delay.'

'You hear what he says, miss,' returned Timothy, rather roughly; 'we must not keep the master's manager locked up. I warrant you it is all right; they keep them papers in the safe. Give me the key and I will open the door for the gentleman.'

'Not until papa comes,' was Alison's reply; and, in spite of Timothy's surly remonstrances and Fergusson's imprecations, she remained firm. Timothy was driven to his wits' end what to do with the daft lass, as he called her, when sudden footsteps were heard, and Alison darted forward to meet them.

'Papa, I saw him at the safe; he was putting the gold and notes into his bag. I saw him do it!' she cried excitedly. 'He blew out the candle, and then I locked him in. Here is the key.'

'Timothy, go at once to the police-station!' exclaimed Mr. Merle, in a voice they had never heard before; it was so hoarse with indignation. 'Roger, take your sister into the house. There is a fire in my study; I will wait here.'

'No, no; I can go alone,' returned Alison. 'Roger must not leave you, papa.'

But he repeated in the same curt way, 'Take your sister away, Roger, and be back as soon as you can.' And Roger, who understood his father, hurried her across the yard and the garden, and did not leave her until she was in the warm, brightly lit study.

'Take off your wet jacket, Ailie,' he charged her, as he left her; but there was no time to say more.

Alison obeyed him. She took off her dripping hat also; and then she sat down on the rug and laid her head against her father's chair, and a flood of tears relieved her over-wrought nerves. Roger found her still in the same position when he came in half an hour later; but the tears were flowing more quietly. In his boyish exuberance, he lifted her up as though she were a child.

'Here she is, father, crying her pretty eyes out! And no wonder, when she is so cold and tired. Ailie, do you know you are a perfect heroine! You have done a plucky thing, and no mistake!'

'Come and kiss me, Alison, my dear!' said Mr. Merle. 'You are a brave girl, and have saved your poor father's credit. Roger and you have done nobly to-night. I have let myself be duped by

a dishonest rogue. Give me your hand, boy; it does not become a man to ask his own son to forgive him, but I think we shall understand each other better from this day.'

Roger's eyes glistened as he wrung his father's hand.

'I knew it would come all right some day,' he said, with an honest blush, as Mr. Merle looked at him, half sadly, half proudly; 'it was only Fergusson who made mischief between us.'

'Yes, but I ought not to have believed him,' returned Mr. Merle, in a contrite voice. 'I was too hasty, Roger; and, after all, you are the better man of business. I have always been too much of a bookworm. Well, well, you have broad shoulders, and we must make them serviceable. Now, Alison, my dear, you had better bid us both good-night, for your cheeks are much too pale. Go to sleep and forget everything except that you have been a good child. Roger and I must have some talk together.' And, kissing her with a greater degree of affection than he had ever manifested for her, he dismissed her to seek the repose she so much needed.

CHAPTER XVII.

‘YOU MAY LEAVE MABEL TO ME.’

THERE is a certain narrowness in human nature. One may not object, for example, to be considered in the light of a heroine; there may be even inward promptings that corroborate the general opinion, whispering that we are only receiving our due. But it is quite another thing to have to regard one’s sister in that luminous character.

Missie’s feelings were decidedly mixed when Roger, in his father’s temporary absence, related at the breakfast-table the whole story of the previous night. Poppie’s eyes grew very wide, and Miss Leigh cried a little; but Rudel’s excitement was a sight to behold.

‘Well, if that is not the cheekiest thing,’ he exclaimed, with school-boy eloquence, drumming with his elbows on the table for once unrebuked by the governess. ‘What a lark! I wish I had been there. So the old cadger is caught, is he? Well, this is a queer start. Ailie has lots of go in her for a girl; I’ll back her against a dozen for pluck, and all that sort of thing.’ And, quite overpowered with the magnificence of his eulogy, Rudel subsided into a series of chuckles.

Alison was a little surprised by the attention she received. Her pale cheeks and heavy eyes secured a good deal of petting. Mr. Merle questioned her anxiously whether she had caught cold; Miss Leigh fairly overflowed with tender inquiries; Roger waited on her zealously, and Rudel sat staring at her, to the obvious neglect of his breakfast, until Alison asked him mildly what he was looking at, and then he blushed in some confusion. Nobody seemed to notice Missie’s perverse silence. Even Mr. Merle was too much occupied with Alison to give his usual attention to his favourite. Missie shrugged her shoulders a little over the whole affair. She thought Roger was dosing them *ad nauseam*. Alison had done very little after all, but they were all making such a fuss over it. She was

doubly vexed when Miss Hardwick came in, full of enthusiasm for that dear clever Alison. She had met Roger, and he had stopped and given her and Anna a full account—a great condescension on his part, but circumstances clearly justified a truce; his old enemy had no power to provoke him on this morning. Missie had to listen to more eulogiums, though Alison modestly disclaimed all praise. Miss Hardwick quite frightened her when she assured her the whole thing would be soon all over the town.

‘You will be a nine days’ wonder, my dear,’ she said, graciously. ‘People will stare at you when you walk through the streets. Fancy locking the wretch in! My dear Alison, how did you know he had not got a pistol? It was quite horrible and romantic. I must run home and tell mamma and Anthony all about it.’

All this was rather a trial to Alison. Perhaps the greatest pleasure the day afforded was when Roger showed her a letter he had written to Aunt Diana.

‘Oh, you foolish boy,’ she said, colouring with gratification as she read the glowing sentences, written straight from Roger’s warm heart. But the tears were very near the surface too. There was a little space left, and she wrote hurriedly across it, when Roger had left the room a moment: ‘Don’t believe all Roger says, dear Aunt Di. I never felt more frightened in my life; heroines are not made of such cowardly stuff. They do not act in a panic; they all make a great deal too much of it.’

Miss Carrington smiled over this last sentence. She had read Roger’s letter with grave and over-mastering interest.

‘Poor little Ailie!’ she said to herself. ‘She has a girl’s notion of what constitutes a heroine. I dare say many a heroine has been horribly afraid before now. It seems to me that being frightened and yet doing the right thing makes a heroine.’

Alison would have been quite happy during the next few days except for the depressing effect of Missie’s ill-humour. Missie was plainly suffering from a bad attack of jealousy. Alison seemed the centre of every one’s attention just then. Her father referred to her judgment and asked her opinion; Roger thought of no one else, and even Rudel began to develop a canine sort of fidelity, which chiefly consisted in following Alison about the house with his hands in his pockets, and hindering her by injudicious questions, relating principally to the state of the larder and what pudding had been selected for luncheon.

All this was too much for Missie's selfish nature to endure, and she withdrew to seek consolation in Eva's flatteries. Her visits to Maplewood were now of daily occurrence. Alison once ventured to remonstrate.

'I do not think papa would be quite pleased, Mabel, if he knew you were so much in Captain Harper's company,' she said, very gently.

'Captain Harper, indeed!' returned Missie, haughtily. 'You need not trouble yourself, Alison. My visits are not to him.'

'No, dear, of course not,' replied Alison, in a pleading tone—she was very anxious not to irritate her. 'But, all the same, you are going every day to Maplewood, and that throws you necessarily into his company. Miss Hardwick cannot well banish her cousin from the room; and, Mabel, I do feel'—hesitating a little, for fear she was speaking too strongly—'that it is not quite honourable to papa. He trusts us to carry out his expressed wishes, and in this you are setting them aside.'

Missie's fair face became suffused with crimson. Evidently Alison's honest speech went straight to her conscience; but in some moods nothing is more vexing than to be put in the wrong.

'I wish you would mind your own business, Alison,' she said, angrily. 'You have no right to lecture me because you are the eldest. Eva says I am quite justified in asserting myself. I hope I know my duty without your always pointing it out to me, and you may leave papa to me. We have always understood each other perfectly, and there is never anything wrong between us unless you choose to go and tell tales.'

'Mabel, how can you be so disagreeable?' began Alison, hotly. But she cooled down on remembering Aunt Diana's advice—'Never get warm over an argument, Ailie. When you begin to feel angry it is time to hold your tongue.' And Alison held hers.

She would have been a little comforted if she had known how ill at ease Missie really was. Her high complexion and cross speech only proved that the arrow had gone home. She knew in her secret heart that she was behaving dishonourably. Her father trusted her, and she was betraying his trust. The very next day she had planned to join Eva and her cousin in a pleasure excursion, though she knew it was an act of tacit disobedience; but self-will only gains strength by indulgence. Missie's imperious temper made her persist all the more because Alison had gently remonstrated with her.

Alison's vague uneasiness that led to her speaking was changed into positive alarm when Roger came into her room that night. He was in evening dress, having just returned from an early party. Alison was waiting up for him. She had put off her dress, changing it for a dainty pink dressing-gown. Her little black Bible lay in her lap. She looked up brightly at him as he entered.

'Ailie,' he said, sitting down by her, 'I am so bothered about something I have heard to-night. Did you know'—looking at her gravely—'that Mabel was going down to Durbans with Miss Hardwick and Captain Harper to-morrow?'

'Why, no!' she said, starting a little. 'What place did you say, dear?'

'Durbans. It is about twenty miles from here. There are woods there where people go for picnics. I meant to have taken you and Mabel one day, only we should have gone by train. Miss Anna was at the Merediths', and she told me all about it quite innocently. It seems that Captain Harper has sent for his dog-cart, and he means to drive them over. They are to have dinner and tea at the Castle Inn; so they mean to be away the whole day.'

'Oh, Roger! what shall we do?' exclaimed Alison. 'If papa were only here, I would go to him at once. Mabel has no right to deceive him in this way, and I should certainly get him to put a stop to it at once; but now he will not be home until to-morrow.'

'He may possibly come by an earlier train; he told me so as we walked to the station. It will all depend how long business will detain him. Of course we should tell him, Ailie; the thing is beyond a joke. Fancy that fellow having the audacity to propose such a thing! I saw him driving the other day, and I did not like the look of the horse, it seemed such a hard-mouthed brute. Supposing he brings them to grief. I wish I knew what I could do about it, Ailie; but father's absence obliges me to be in the office. I must be in the yard early, too. I shall not even be able to speak to Missie.'

'I will tell her what you say, and then, of course, she will be obliged to give it up,' returned Alison, not relishing her task at all, but counting, nevertheless, on an easy victory. Missie had put herself so completely in the wrong that no choice but submission was left to her. Roger, who knew Missie perfectly, was not so sanguine.

'Tell her that if she goes I shall certainly inform father, and then he will put a stop to her visits to Maplewood; and tell her, too, that

I am perfectly disgusted at her conduct. Miss Leigh is no good, or she is the person to speak. I am afraid you must do it, Ailie.'

'Very well,' she sighed. But she lay awake a long time revolving what words she would use. She was determined to be severe and speak her mind very freely; there should be no beating about the bush in this instance. Missie should know what she and Roger thought of such deceitful conduct. Missie considered herself safe. Her father rarely questioned his children about their doings during the day. He took it for granted that they had been usefully and well employed. As for Captain Harper, he had forgotten his existence; he had forbidden his visits to The Holms, and it never struck him that Missie might be meeting him at Maplewood, and no one had yet opened his eyes.

Alison awoke with a strange oppression upon her—a sense of difficulty, that made the daylight seem less bright. She became nervously conscious that she might fail. What if her severity were of no avail, and Missie should persist in going? She was a little later than usual in going down. Roger had already had his breakfast and had gone to the mill, and the meal was half over before she suggested that Poppie should knock at Mabel's door.

'Oh, I forgot,' returned Poppie, in a stricken voice, laying down her slice of bread and jam; 'Missie came into my room before I was dressed, and told me to tell you she would not want any breakfast—she was going to have it at Maplewood. She looked so smart, Alison, in her new blue dress. It was rather funny of her to put it on for breakfast.'

'Miss Leigh, will you come into the schoolroom a moment, if you have finished?' said Alison, quietly; but the governess noticed that she looked rather pale, and rose at once, but she was even more shocked than Alison when she heard the whole story.

'My dear, your papa will never forgive us if we do not prevent it,' she said, very solemnly. 'You none of you know how particular he is; and this will seem dreadful to him. You must go to Maplewood yourself, Alison, and speak to Mrs. Hardwick. She is the only one who can do anything. Anna can go in Mabel's place, but you must insist on bringing Mabel home. I will not answer for the consequences if this affair comes to your father's ears,' continued the governess, moved to tears at this fresh instance of Missie's self-will.

Alison thought this such good advice that she put on her hat at once and walked over to Maplewood. It was not a pleasant errand,

she felt, and she hardly knew what she would say to Mrs. Hardwick. She only knew she would refuse to return without Missie, even if she had to brave the obnoxious Captain Harper himself. But her face fell when she entered the morning-room and found Mrs. Hardwick and Anna alone; the others had just driven from the door.

'You have only just missed them, Alison,' observed Anna, looking anxiously into her face. She thought she had never seen her friend look so grave and perturbed.

'It was very wrong. Mabel ought not to have gone without papa's permission,' burst indignantly from Alison's lips. 'Papa is so particular, he never likes us to go out without Miss Leigh or Roger, and Roger is very much annoyed with Mabel.'

'Oh, my dear, what nonsense!' observed Mrs. Hardwick, tranquilly. 'I always say Mr. Roger is such an old-fashioned young man. Anthony is just like my own son; he is as steady as steady. I always let my girls go about with him.'

'Yes, but Mabel is different, Mrs. Hardwick,' returned Alison, with dignity. 'Captain Harper is a stranger to us, and papa will not think it right. Mabel is so young.'

'So she is, my dear, quite a baby; so what does it matter?' returned Mrs. Hardwick, comfortably. 'They wanted Anna to go, but I could not spare her. What! are you going already, and you have not rested from your walk, and you are looking quite heated, too? Young people ought to take more care of their complexion. But then you never freckle, as Eva does. Well, good-bye, my dear; don't trouble your head about the girls, Anthony will take care of them.'

Alison felt as though any reply were impossible. Mrs. Hardwick was one of those feather-headed women whose brains seem to need ballast. She received impressions vaguely. Anna, who was more sensitive, was keenly alive to the change that passed over Alison's face as she left the room, and she followed her into the hall.

'Oh, Alison,' she began timidly, 'I can see how vexed you are about this, and it is very wrong of Mabel to treat you all so; but you must not be angry with mamma; she does not see things very quickly, and Eva told her it was all right.'

'I am afraid I do feel angry with every one,' replied Alison, and a big tear rolled down her face. 'I know trouble will come of this. Papa is not easily roused, but I know what he will feel. I cannot share Mabel's deceit; I must and will tell him.'

'You must do what you think right, and Mr. Roger will help you,' returned Anna, in her soft, sympathising voice. 'Perhaps Mr. Merle will forgive Mabel, he is so very fond of her. I am sure I hope he will; I cannot bear to see you so worried.'

Alison shook her head sadly; she could not comfort herself with any such hope; her father's anger, she knew, would be in proportion to his love. Missie's disobedience and deceit would touch him very closely.

She gave quite a frightened start when, on her return to The Holms, Roger met her at the gate with the news that Mr. Merle had returned.

'I have not seen him yet, Ailie; I have only just come across from the mill,' he continued. 'Would you like me to tell him, dear, or do you think you can do it better?'

'We will go together,' returned Alison, uneasily. 'I am so afraid that he will put himself out, and then you will know what to say.' And Roger acquiesced.

They found Mr. Merle in his study, looking somewhat fagged and weary, but he held out his hand with a smile, as though he were pleased to see them after his brief absence.

'Where is Pussie?' he asked; 'she is generally the first to welcome me.' And he looked round as though he were disappointed.

'Dear papa,' returned Alison, bravely, 'I am afraid you will be vexed about something. We have none of us seen Mabel this morning; she breakfasted at Maplewood. Roger met Anna at the Merediths' last night, and she told him that Mabel had promised to join Eva and her cousin in an excursion to Durbans. I went over to speak to Mrs. Hardwick and bring Mabel back, but they had already started.'

'What!' thundered Mr. Merle, and the blackness of his brow was dreadful to Alison, 'do you dare to tell me that Mabel has gone over to Durbans in that man's company, when I forbade any intercourse with him?'

'Captain Harper is driving them in his dog-cart,' rejoined Roger, coming to his sister's relief. 'It seems a very silly affair, and I told Alison so last night, and begged her to stop it; it is no fault of hers or of mine, father. Missie slipped out of the house while they were at breakfast, and though Alison started off to Maplewood as soon as she could, she was just too late.'

'No, it is not your fault,' returned Mr. Merle, gloomily. 'Mabel

must bear the brunt of her own disobedience. Miss Hardwick shall never enter this house again.'

'Would you like me to take an early afternoon train to Durban?' interrupted Roger, who had already conceived this plan, 'and then I could join them; there is a vacant seat in the dog-cart.'

Alison looked eagerly at her father; she thought this an excellent idea on Roger's part. Miss Hardwick and Captain Harper must be made aware of Mr. Merle's displeasure; and though Roger's presence would be a severe punishment to Missie's pride, placing her in the light of a naughty runaway child, she richly deserved the humiliation; but unhappily, as it afterwards turned out, Mr. Merle did not share his son's moderate opinion.

'Look out a train in the time-table,' he said, suddenly; 'I will go myself, Roger. Mabel shall not return in the dog-cart; I shall bring her back by train. I know how to deal with a disobedient child, and there is no good in your mixing up yourself in this unpleasant affair; you may leave Mabel to me.' And Mr. Merle looked so stern and resolute that neither Alison nor Roger dared to dissuade him, though Roger looked anxious and uneasy as he went in search of the railway guide.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'DON'T BE FRIGHTENED, AILIE.'

ALISON passed an anxious and solitary afternoon, and as she sat alone at her needle-work, she could not divest her mind of all sorts of gloomy anticipations. She knew her father to be a man of strong passions ; she dreaded the effects of his displeasure on Mabel. His severity would be tempered with justice ; but still the weight of his anger would be crushing. Alison's tender heart was full of compunction and pity for poor Missie. She was deprived of the solace of Roger's company, for he had gone back to the yard before Mr. Merle had left the house, and later on he had some business in the town. It would have been a relief to talk to Miss Leigh, but the worry had brought on one of the governess's nervous headaches, and she was lying down in her room. Rudel was spending the afternoon at a schoolfellow's house, and Poppie's society was about as comforting as a kitten's, so Alison sent her out with one of the maids, and tried to interest herself in her work.

It was a lovely afternoon ; the soft September sunshine lay on the lawn, and on the beds of scarlet geraniums and dark red verbenas. All the doors and windows were open, a faint sweet smell of clematis stole into the room, mingled with the scent of late-blooming roses. In spite of her heavy thoughts, the coolness and silence, and the busy twittering of the sparrows in the ivy, brought a sense of refreshment to Alison. A verse she had read that morning came into her mind—

Let us gather up the sunbeams
Lying all around our path ;
Let us keep the wheat and roses,
Casting out the thorns and chaff ;
Let us find our sweetest comforts
In the blessings of to-day,
With a patient hand removing
All the briars from the way.'

'The briars are in poor Mabel's way,' she thought; 'but perhaps I may help her to put them aside. There is always something for one to do or bear, as Aunt Di once said; the daily sacrifice is still for us, if not, perhaps, a whole burnt sacrifice, yet there is still the need of a peace-offering, so many little offices to do for others; even pulling up a briar or two out of their way may do something to lighten their daily journey.' Alison was cheering herself up bravely, and when the tea-things were brought in she carried Miss Leigh a cup, and sat down by her bedside and talked to her a little.

'What a comfort you are to us all, Alison, my dear!' said the governess, gratefully, as the girl turned her pillow, and bathed her throbbing head, and lowered the blind, that the evening sunshine should not obtrude too strongly. 'No one has ever waited on me so nicely; really, my head is rather better, and I think I shall be able to sleep a little until your father and Mabel come in.'

'They cannot be long now,' returned Alison; 'but you must not trouble yourself about anything more to-night. I will come in again by-and-by, and see if you have rested.' And then she softly closed the door. It was impossible to go back to her needlework, so she took her book and seated herself under the lime trees within view of the gate. Poppie had come home from her walk, and was playing about the lawn with Otter and Sulky. The jackdaw's solemn gait, as he walked down the garden path, amused Alison, and she laid down her book to watch him. Now and then Poppie claimed her attention, or Otter flew to her side to hide his ball in her gown. She soon grew so interested in their play that the time passed unheeded, and she woke up with a start to the conviction that it was nearly eight, and the early autumn twilight was creeping over the garden.

So late, and they had not arrived; and what could have become of Roger? She called to Poppie hurriedly to put Sulky in the yard, and run into the house, as it was bed-time, and her supper was waiting in the schoolroom; and the little girl had hardly left her before the latch of the gate was raised, and in another moment Roger came rapidly towards her.

He looked heated, as though he had been walking fast; but it was a white heat, and it struck Alison suddenly that he was ill, or that he had heard something.

'Don't be frightened, Ailie,' he said, in a quick, nervous voice,

that certainly did not reassure her, neither did the touch of his cold damp hand. 'I have come first to prepare you; be as brave as you can, for your help is wanted.'

'Something dreadful has happened! Oh, Roger, be quick!'

'I have no time to tell you much,' he returned, still more hurriedly. 'They came back by train—oh, why did he not send me?—there was an accident. I was down at the station and saw them come in. They are both hurt; at least, I am afraid Missie is, only she will not say so, but father is the worst.'

'Oh, Roger!' and Alison's figure swayed for a moment on his arm until he made her sit down, for the sudden shock had turned her lips white. She could not say more at that moment.

'We do not know yet,' he half whispered; 'there are two doctors with him, and they are bringing him home. He had a blow, and was insensible, but they cannot tell yet; there is no wound. There, I hear them coming, Ailie; pull yourself together; we must not think of anything but him.'

'No, no,' and she gave a quick gulp, and the colour came back to her lips. The sparrows were twittering sleepily in the ivy. 'And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father,' seemed to come into her mind, like the sudden flash of a sunbeam out of a passing cloud. He was in the Divine hands; she must remember that. As Roger went down to open the gates she compelled herself to return to the house.

'Sarah, there has been an accident,' she heard herself say, only her voice did not seem to belong to her. 'Send Eliza to the schoolroom, to keep Miss Poppie out of the way, and you and Nanny be in readiness for what is wanted. Hot water, I suppose they will want that, and I don't know what besides.' And here her voice suddenly failed, for wheels were evidently coming up the gravelled sweep. The next few minutes were simply horrible to Alison. The two doctors and Roger, and some man from the railway, were all helping in removing her father's inanimate figure from the vehicle. Alison recognised the family practitioner, Dr. Greenwood, but the other was a stranger. There was nothing to do; her father's room was in readiness, and Roger was there to show them the way. She could only lean against the wall as they passed with a fleeting consciousness that her father's eyes were still closed, and that there was something terrible in the inert heavy droop of the limbs. 'Very gently,' she heard Dr. Greenwood say.

‘Yes, I know the room; that is the door, Cameron.’ And then it closed after them, and she felt some one grip her arm.

‘Help me upstairs, Alison,’ said Missie, hoarsely. She had crept out of the fly unaided, and now stood by Alison’s side in the dark hall. Alison had almost forgotten her in that moment’s agony; but then Roger had said surely she was not much hurt, yet there she was clinging to her sister with a white stony face.

‘Lean on me, dear!’ exclaimed Alison, passing her arm tenderly round her; but to her alarm Missie uttered a sharp cry of pain.

‘No, don’t touch me, not that side; I will hold your arm. I want to be in my own room if I can only get there.’ And leaning heavily on Alison’s shoulder, she toiled slowly up the staircase, her faintness and difficulty evidently increasing at every step, but her strong will supporting her until they reached the threshold, and then she suddenly tottered, and if Alison had not caught her in her arms, she would have fallen. Alison dared not call loudly for assistance, for they were close to her father’s room; but she was young and strong, and she just managed to drag Missie to a chair, and summon one of the frightened servants, when Missie revived. Alison mixed a little sal volatile and water and gave it to her. Missie tasted it, and put it down, shuddering.

‘It was the pain; you touched it, and I am so bruised all over,’ she said, with a sort of sob. ‘I did not want them to know; they had to look after papa; but I am afraid my arm is broken.’

‘Oh, Mabel, my poor dear!’ And Alison knelt down by her. She had not noticed how helplessly the left arm hung down, and now Missie would not let her touch it.

‘It is all bruised and cut,’ she said, her forehead contracting heavily with pain. ‘The doctor must see it presently, when he has finished in the other room; not now. Oh, Alison, where are you going? You shall not disturb them. What does it matter? If only——’ But here her fast whitening lips refused to utter her fear.

‘Let me go, darling,’ returned Alison, anxiously; ‘I will not disturb them, you may quite trust me.’ And without waiting for Mabel’s answer she slipped away.

As she entered the dressing-room, the stranger, a dark, grave-looking young man, came out of her father’s room. He listened to Alison’s account, and promised to attend to her sister as soon as possible.

‘We must finish the examination,’ he said, dismissing her, ‘but I

will come as soon as I can. I thought there was something wrong, but she deceived us by hiding her arm under her mantle. She was bruised, that was all, she told us. Keep her quiet, and I will be with you directly.'

Missie was leaning back in her chair, with her eyes closed, but as Alison entered she opened them full on her sister, and the blank miserable look in them convinced Alison that she was dreading the worst.

'Do not look so, Mabel darling,' she said, kissing her softly. 'Indeed we do not know; they have told me nothing. Dear papa is in God's hands; we must leave him there, and hope for the best.'

A low groan broke from Mabel's lips.

'Oh, it is easy for you; even if the worst comes, you can bear it; you have nothing with which to reproach yourself. If he dies, I shall have killed him. How am I to go on living, and know that?' And here she burst out into hoarse sobs.

'Mabel, my poor dear, oh! how am I to comfort you?' exclaimed Alison, unable to restrain her own tears at the sight of her sister's anguish.

'You cannot comfort me,' returned the unhappy girl. 'What is the pain of my broken arm and my bruises compared to what I shall feel if he dies, and I am not able even to tell him that I am sorry for my deceit and disobedience? and I would not say so, because he was angry. Oh, papa, papa, and I loved you so!' And the poor child hid her face on Alison's shoulder. It seemed a relief to her to pour out her feelings. He had been so angry, and she would not own herself in the wrong, and then the horrible accident had happened, and she thought at first her father was killed. 'When they said he was alive, and they must bring him home, and see what could be done, I thought I would not add to the trouble, and so I managed to hide my broken arm.' But here she broke off, as Mr. Cameron entered the room.

'Papa?' she said, faintly, as he came up to her.

'His consciousness is returning; we shall know more to-morrow. It is not the head, as we feared,' he said, evasively; 'but now I must look at your arm, please. Your friend Dr. Greenwood will be here directly, and we will soon put it right.' But, in spite of his cheerful words, 'Poor child!' came pityingly from his lips as the blackened shoulder was revealed to his view. Missie must have suffered exquisite pain during the drive home. The arm was broken, and the

shoulder dislocated, and the bruised condition of the limb filled Alison with horror.

It was a painful ordeal for Alison, but she bore it as bravely as she could. Roger had remained with his father; Miss Leigh was not in a condition to render any assistance; the sudden confusion had brought on accession of pain, and she could only lay her throbbing head back on the pillow, and lie there in utter helplessness. There was no one but herself to wait upon the doctors and receive their directions: the very exigency of the case made her helpful. Her one thought was that she must not hinder their work; there was little for her to do. At the first touch of her wounded arm Mabel had fainted again. Alison could not have borne to witness the poor child's sufferings. Perhaps Dr. Greenwood knew this, for he contrived some errand that detained her for a few minutes out of the room. When she returned the worst seemed over, but the faintness continued, and it was only slowly and by degrees that Alison, with Sarah's help, could assist her to undress and lie down, after which a sedative was to be administered, as the pain of the bruises and the misery of her mind would effectually hinder sleep.

As soon as she could leave her in Sarah's charge, Alison stole into her father's dressing-room. Dr. Greenwood came to her at once.

'My dear,' he said, taking her hand, for he had known her from an infant, 'this is a sad business, but, thank God! things are not so bad as they seemed at first. Your father must have received a blow; he was stunned, but consciousness has returned, and he has spoken. What we fear now is something different. He seems unable to move; but this may be due to the shock and temporary exhaustion. There are symptoms that make us hopeful that the full extent of mischief may not be realized. We shall know more in a few days; but he will require the greatest care. To-morrow I shall send in a nurse from the infirmary. Do you think you and your brother can manage to-night?'

'Oh, yes,' returned Alison, with a painful catch of her breath; it seemed to her as though she were passing through some hideous nightmare; the very horror seemed to numb her sensibilities. She understood that night how people could live through terrible scenes; the very intensity of pain deadened the anguish.

Dr. Greenwood thought her a very brave girl. She listened quietly to his directions, but he took her hand once, and felt her pulse, and

then he kindly bade her take some food and wine before she went into her father's room, and as Roger came out that moment he repeated the charge to him.

'Come, Ailie,' said Roger, taking her arm. 'Dr. Greenwood will stay with father until we come back.' And he led her away.

Alison noticed with some surprise that there was a sort of meal laid in the dining-room; she had forgotten the early supper had been placed there a couple of hours ago in preparation for her father. Roger carved some chicken and brought it to her.

'You must try and eat, Ailie, and I will do the same,' he said, with some attempt at cheerfulness. 'We have a long night before us, and we must husband our strength.'

Alison felt the force of this argument; nevertheless the food remained on her plate.

'Roger, how bad you look!' she said, suddenly; 'but I do not wonder at it. Oh! what a dreadful evening we have had; and I cannot imagine how it happened.'

'Dr. Cameron was there, and he told me,' returned Roger, shading his face from the light, as though it hurt him. 'It was not a collision; something must have given way—the coupling chain, they think—and they were going down a steep incline at express speed. Dr. Cameron says some of the carriages went over the embankment, and were completely wrecked; one or two were turned entirely over. He was in the same compartment with father and Mabel. They felt a jolting sensation, and the next moment they were thrown from their seats, the carriage side was completely smashed, and they were all flung in a heap. Dr. Cameron was on the top, and was happily unhurt, with the exception of a few bruises; father was underneath him; Mabel struggled up somehow unaided, and came to father, and no one knew she was much hurt.'

'Oh, Roger, how terrible!'

'Yes, it does not do to talk of it, and hardly to think of it. Now, Ailie, if you have finished we will go upstairs. By the bye, where is Miss Leigh?'

'Oh, I ought to have gone to her,' exclaimed Alison. 'How dreadful for her to lie there, and not be able to help us! She has been suffering from one of her sick headaches, and, of course, all this will make it worse. Wait for me a moment, dear, I will just speak to her.'

'Is that you, Alison?' asked the governess, feebly, as the girl came

to her bedside. 'I know all about it, dear, Eliza has told me. Poor children, poor children! and I cannot help you.'

'Roger is good and thoughtful; we shall manage nicely to-night, and Sarah will watch Mabel. You must not trouble, dear Miss Leigh; to-morrow you will be better, and then we shall be sure of your help.'

'You must not stay now. Thank you for coming, my dear; but you must go to your father.' And Alison was thankful to be dismissed.

In another moment she was leaning over her father. He unclosed his eyes as he heard her light footstep, and a faint smile came to his lips.

'How is your sister?' he whispered.

'Dear papa,' she returned, tenderly, 'how happy Mabel will be to know you asked after her! She is lying quite quietly, the sedative is lulling her, but she is not asleep.'

'Poor child!' was all his reply, and then he closed his eyes again; but as Alison withdrew into the shadow of the curtain tears of thankfulness came to her eyes; there was no bitterness in her father's heart against poor Mabel. 'As a father pitieth his children,' the words came to her mind, ah! 'so might their Heavenly Father have pity on them.'

CHAPTER XIX.

'I WOULD NOT SAY I WAS SORRY.'

THE dreary night-watching was a new experience in Alison's life, for she had been too young at the time of her mother's last illness to share in the long and tedious nursing; the silence and inaction made the hours drag heavily. Roger, fatigued with his day's work, was sleeping heavily with his head against the wall. Alison pitied his weary position, and fetched a pillow from the other room and put it gently behind his head. 'You may sleep', she whispered, as he rubbed his eyes and looked at her, half ashamed of his drowsiness; 'there is no need for two of us to watch. I will wake you if I see any need.' And then she went back to her seat.

Once or twice she went across the passage to look at Missie. She was glad to find her sleeping. Sarah was at her post, sitting bolt upright and nodding. Now and then her father spoke a few words; once he asked what the doctors had said.

Alison was thankful that they had not informed him of their fears.

'They do not seem to know, papa,' she returned gently; 'they think you have had a great shock, and you are suffering from nervous exhaustion. They will tell better by-and-by.'

'There seems something wrong with my limbs,' he muttered uneasily; 'you are sure you do not know what they think?'

'Quite sure, dear papa,' she replied, so earnestly that he could not disbelieve her; 'but I hope and trust,' her lips quivering a little, 'that you may soon be better.'

He moved his head restlessly on the pillow, as though her emotion disturbed him.

'I have not been a good father to you, Alison,' he returned, a little bitterly. 'I do not think my children need regret me.'

'Oh, papa, papa, please do not speak so!' she implored, and the tears came now; 'your children love you, and would do anything to help you.'

‘You are a good girl, Alison; your mother always said so, and if I am spared —’ He sighed heavily, and turned his face away; and Alison, remembering the doctor’s injunction, dared not say any more, lest it should increase his agitation; she only took his hand and softly laid her cheek against it, as though she would show by this action a child’s love and devotion. Her touch seemed to quiet him, and by-and-by he dozed a little.

Morning came at last, and Roger roused himself with difficulty.

‘I shall take my bath, and dress, and have some coffee, and then I must go to the mill,’ he whispered. ‘You must stop at your post, I suppose, until the nurse comes.’ And Alison nodded as she moved to the window and put aside the heavy curtains. How cool and fresh the garden looked! The dew glittered on the turf; a family of blackbirds were breakfasting on the lawn, and a little brown wren was twittering in the ivy. It was all so still and calm; in another hour the crane would be working, and there would be the whirr of machinery, but at present the birds had it all their own way.

Alison felt weak and jaded; the strain was beginning to tell even on her vigorous vitality. She was glad the night’s inaction was over, but she felt too weary for the day’s work. But Roger had not forgotten her; he came back presently with a refreshed look on his face, and told her that breakfast was all ready in the dressing-room.

‘A strong cup of coffee has made me a different man,’ he said cheerfully; ‘you must try my recipe, Ailie.’ And Alison found the benefit of his prescription.

Her hands were soon full of business. Dr. Greenwood came early, bringing the new nurse with him, and Alison had to make arrangements for the stranger’s comfort. She seemed a pleasant, capable woman, with a neat figure, and a bright face that prepossessed Alison in her favour. She took possession at once of her patient, after a feeble protest on his part that he objected to nurses, but after the first few minutes he ceased to grumble. Dr. Greenwood soon convinced him that Roger was too busy, and Alison too young for such a responsibility; besides, the chief care of her sister must devolve on her.

Missie’s sleep had not refreshed her as they hoped; the pain of her bruises was making her feverish. She could not turn in her bed without suffering, and her anxiety for her father added to her discomfort. Alison tried to console her, and Miss Leigh, who was

sufficiently recovered to sit in her room, spoke reassuring words to her; but it was evident that Missie could take no comfort; only when Alison was alone with her, miserable self-accusing words came to her lips.

'Indeed, dearest, there is no need for you to speak so,' Alison said to her once, with a strong yearning to console her. 'Dear papa asked after you the first moment he saw me. You should have heard how tenderly he said "Poor child!"'

'That is because my arm is broken, and he knows I am suffering such pain. If any one hated me they would pity me now,' returned Missie, in a stifled voice.

'No, no; you must not take it in that way,' exclaimed Alison, quite shocked, as she smoothed Missie's fair hair. She looked so pale and pretty, and the blue eyes had such a pathetic look in them. Alison had parted the soft fringe, and the short curly ends lay quite smooth and showed the broad white forehead. A different Mabel lay there, with the poor wounded arm folded on her breast, and all the little vanities laid aside. As Alison stood looking at her, Missie raised her uninjured arm with a sudden movement toward Alison, and in another moment the sisters were clasping each other close.

'Oh, my poor dear, my poor dear!' whispered Alison, in the softest, most pitying voice. Missie kissed her hastily, and then seemed as though she would push her away, only Alison held her still.

'No, I don't deserve it; please don't be so good to me. I have been altogether horrid ever since you came home.'

'Never mind all that now, dear.'

'Yes, but I must mind it,' turning restlessly away and then uttering a low groan. 'Oh, this pain, Alison! Shall I ever be able to move again without it? I did not want you to come home; I thought you would be in my way, and that made me cross. I was jealous of you, and I did not want the others to care for you. Roger was never fond of me as he was of you, and I wanted him to be fond of me. And oh! how horrid and small it all seems now!' finished poor Missie, reading her past conduct under a new light. In the dark hours when one's strength is low, conscience sometimes flings a vivid torch into the recesses of one's being, bringing hidden faults to light.

'Dear Mabel, we will forget all that now,' returned Alison gently; 'we will try and love each other more.'

'Oh, it is easy for you to love people,' retorted Missie, almost

pettishly ; ' every one is so fond of you, and you are never cross and disagreeable as I am. Roger makes you his companion, and Rudel is less rough when you are in the room, and now papa will love you best.'

' Hush, dear ; what nonsense !'

' It is not nonsense,' she returned, in a despairing tone. ' I have forfeited his love. He will never forgive me now. He told me that he hated deceit ; that he should never be able to think the same of me. He said I should never see Eva again if he could help it. Oh, he was so angry, so unlike himself ! I suppose my obstinacy vexed him, for I would not say I was sorry. He took hold of my arm and almost shook me to make me speak, but I think I was like that man who had a dumb spirit.'

Dr. Greenwood had given Alison strict injunctions that she was to keep her sister as quiet as possible, but it seemed impossible to check the storm of excited talk. Mabel's only relief was to accuse herself, and put all her conduct in its blackest light. A weight of intolerable misery lay on her mind ; she felt her own pains were richly deserved, but the thought that she had risked her father's life by her disobedience was more than she could bear. Every hour she questioned Alison about his state. Would he recover ? Was he in any danger ? What did the doctor fear ? Alison at last called Roger to her aid.

' What shall we do ?' she exclaimed, half crying. ' Missie will not get any sleep to-night ; she is working herself into a fever, and Dr. Greenwood does not wish us to give her an opiate. It breaks my heart to hear her going on about papa. I think if she could only see him she would be more contented.'

' Shall I go to her ?' he asked, hesitating a little, for Missie had expressed no wish to see him.

' Oh, yes, perhaps that will be best,' she said, brightening a little. ' I am so tired and harassed that I probably do not say the right thing.'

' I will come presently ; but, Ailie, I am so sorry you are so tired. Miss Hardwick is downstairs, and she says she must see you ; she seems very much upset. Do you think you could speak to her for a moment ?'

Alison made a gesture of repugnance. It was plain that she did not wish to see Miss Hardwick, but Roger was bent on carrying his point.

'I have to go to my father now,' he said quietly, 'but in about a quarter of an hour I shall be ready to see Missie. I will wait for you here. Miss Hardwick will not detain you many minutes; go, dear Ailie.' And Alison reluctantly obeyed him.

Eva was pacing up and down the long drawing-room, and came up to Alison quickly, holding out both her hands.

'Oh, Alison,' she said, and the tears were running down her face unchecked, 'I know you do not want to see me, but I begged so hard of Mr. Roger to send you. Of course, you hate the sight of me. You think I am the cause of this; but, indeed, indeed, I never knew Mr. Merle would be so angry!'

'You tempted Mabel to deceive and disobey her father,' returned Alison severely, for her heart was hard against the girl. 'You knew that he disapproved of Captain Harper, and then you encouraged and planned this scheme. How could any father fail to be angry when his commands are so entirely set aside?'

'You must not speak against Anthony, Alison,' returned Eva, in a subdued voice. 'I am engaged to him; he is only my half-cousin. Mabel knew this, and she thought it would not matter coming with us. Mamma would have told you, only I did not wish it to be made public. All this has quite spoiled my happiness. Poor, dear Mabel! if I could only see her, and help you to nurse her. But Mr. Roger says it is quite impossible.' And she wiped away some fresh tears.

There was so much feeling in Eva's words and manner that Alison's coldness relaxed a little.

'You must not see her,' she said gravely; 'I believe papa has forbidden that for the present, but I can give her your love, and tell her that you asked after her.'

'Tell her I shall come every evening to inquire; tell her, too, that I shall not have a moment's peace, thinking that I am partly to blame for this. It was wrong of us, Alison; I see that now. I deserve to have something to bear as well as she, poor darling! You and Mr. Roger must not be too hard on me, for, indeed, I am as unhappy as possible; Anna will tell you so.'

'I will try to forgive you,' returned Alison, with a warm kiss, that evidently surprised and gratified her. 'It does not make things better to be hard and bitter against people. We need not add to our own unhappiness in that way. Now I must go, please. Give my dear love to Anna; I know she will be fretting about us.' And with a quick nod Alison ran upstairs.

'Well?' observed Roger interrogatively, as she came to his side.

'I am glad you told me to go down,' was her reply; 'there is good in every one, and Eva certainly appeared to advantage this evening. She is really fond of Missie, and she cried so about it all. She is not a bad-hearted girl.'

'No; and all this will do her a great deal of good. "Evil is wrought by want of thought, as well as want of heart," Ailie. Now let us go to poor Missie.'

Missie flushed up very much when she saw Roger, but the next moment her face grew wan and pale.

'Well,' he said cheerfully, taking her hot little hand, 'this is a sad affair; but at least we may be thankful it is not worse. I almost think father looks a little better to-night; Mrs. Meyrick thought so, too. There was certainly a slight concussion of the brain last night, but this evening he seems more like himself.'

'Oh, Roger!' and Missie's eyes were filling in a moment, 'do you really think so?' But the last word became a sob.

'Yes, dear, and Nurse Meyrick said the same; he spoke more clear and articulately. Now,' kissing her forehead, 'you will be easy about him, and will try to sleep?'

'There is no sleep in my eyes,' she returned, with a little of her old excitement. 'Oh, Roger, you don't know what it is to be bruised and battered all over, and not to be able to turn without pain. If it were not for that I would go to him.'

'Perhaps you will be able to go to-morrow,' he returned, humouring her, for her flushed face and excited look made him anxious. 'You will try to lie patiently until the morning, Mabel dear, will you not? Alison is so worn out, she must sleep to-night, and, indeed, we are all over-tired and harassed.'

'Yes, and I am the cause,' she returned restlessly. 'Oh, Roger, I will not ask you to forgive me; Alison has, but then she is different. But you, of course, you can never care for me again!'

'Indeed, you are wrong, my dear little sister,' he said soothingly; 'I do care for you very much, all the more that you are so unhappy. When you get well again, you shall see how proud I shall be of my two sisters, and what nice times we shall have.'

'Oh, no,' she returned, bursting into tears, 'I never expect any one to be fond of me again. I have made your life miserable, Roger; I have tormented you just for love of teasing. If I were not so wicked I should like to die, and then perhaps you would be sorry

for me. If anything happens to papa, I could not live. Oh, if I could only see him, and ask him to forgive me!

'My dear, he has forgiven you over and over again,' returned Roger, in rather a husky voice, for he found all this very trying; 'that is the best of it. One need never be afraid of losing a father's love; it is not to be lost, Mabel; the thing is against nature. If I sinned against father ever so, I know he must forgive me, just because I am his son.'

'"I will arise and go to my father,"' murmured Alison, half to herself, but Missie heard it.

'Yes, read that to me; I have been repeating fragments of the verses all day; that is, if you are not too tired, Alison,' with renewed thoughtfulness.

'Roger will read it,' returned Alison, feeling the task would be good for her brother, and distrusting her own voice; and though Roger looked a little shy over it, he did not refuse.

Missie lay with closed eyes and listened, and the harassed expression passed from her face.

'Thank you; that was beautiful,' she said, when he had finished. 'How nicely you read, Roger! Now I will try to be good and not wake Alison. Perhaps, when the light is shaded, I may drop off to sleep.'

Alison was in sore need of rest by this time; her head ached as well as her limbs; but she had one more duty to perform before she laid down in the little bed that had been prepared for her in Missie's room, and that was to bid her father good-night.

He welcomed her with a smile. 'I feel easier to-night,' he said, and his voice was stronger. 'My good nurse has made me very comfortable, and I dare say we shall both be able to sleep a little. How is Pussie?' the old name escaping from him unawares.

'I do not think she is any worse,' she replied cautiously; 'but she still suffers a great deal, and she is making herself so unhappy about you.'

'Tell her not to do that,' he replied, with a little effort; 'she need not take the blame of the accident on herself; she has enough to bear without that.'

'May I give her your love, papa?'

'Oh, yes,' he said, as though surprised by the question, for he knew nothing of the child's misery. 'Tell her I hope she will have a good night.' And then, as he seemed weary, she left him.

Missie received the message in silence, and, as the light was dim, Alison could not see her face. She fancied that just as she was dropping off to sleep there was a sound as though some one was crying; but her senses were too drowsy to take in the fact that it might be Missie sobbing in the darkness. Her last recollected thought was about Aunt Diana. Roger had promised to write a few lines from the office, and she had wondered if he had done it.

'How shocked Aunt Di will be,' she thought, 'and how sorry for us all!' The half-finished sentence was completed in her dream, for she dreamt that Greville was rowing them both among the water-lilies, and Aunt Di was gathering roses and throwing them into her lap.

'Do not cry, child, it will all come right in time,' Alison heard her say; 'there is a silver lining behind every cloud, you may be sure of that.' And then she woke with a start. Something, she did not know what, had disturbed her; she sat up and looked round in bewilderment. The moon was shining full into the room, and Missie's bed was empty.

CHAPTER XX.

MISSIE'S REPENTANCE.

NURSE MEYRICK had a strange dream that night.

She was sleeping on a couch in the dressing-room. It had been placed so near the door of communication that she had a full view of her patient. He had just sunk into a tranquil doze, and she had followed his example, when a faint sound, like an opening door, roused her, and a moment after she caught a glimpse of a white-robed figure with long, fair hair gliding between her and the bed.

For a brief instant she thought she was only dreaming, and that the white shadowy form must be an angel; but as she collected her drowsy faculties, she was sure she heard a sobbing sigh that certainly proceeded from a human being. And the next moment she sprang from the couch.

A young girl in a loose white dressing-gown was standing by Mr. Merle's bed. Nurse Meyrick's quick eyes discerned that one arm was bandaged and in splints. It must be the young lady, she thought, who had been injured in the accident; perhaps she was light-headed. The next minute she touched her softly.

'Come, my dear, come,' she said coaxingly; 'you ought not to be out of your bed at this time of night; let me help you back, there's a dear young lady,' for Missie's wide feverish eyes alarmed her.

'No, no,' returned Missie, recoiling from the nurse's gentle touch. 'I could not stay in bed, I could not sleep until I had seen papa. Let me stay and look at him; I will be good and not wake him.' But the nurse shook her head at this.

'You must not stay,' she whispered, not daring to raise her voice; 'your feet are bare, and you look as bad as possible. Come, my dear, let me carry you back to your room; it will scare your father to see you standing there.'

'No, no,' returned Missie, shrinking still more; 'I must stay with

papa. Why does he look so pale, and lie so still? Is he dead? No one told me he was dead. Papa!' she cried out, for she was bewildered by the dim light and her own feverish fancies. 'Speak to me only one word, just to tell me you are alive.'

'Oh, hush!' exclaimed the nurse; but she was too late. Mr. Merle woke up; but in his weak condition his daughter's presence did not seem to startle him.

'My dear,' he said feebly; 'they ought not to have allowed this. You will make yourself ill leaving your warm bed.'

'But I could not sleep,' she sobbed; 'I could not rest. I thought they were hiding things from me. If you had died, and I had never told you I was sorry, I should have died too. Oh, papa, it must have killed me!'

He smiled faintly, and gathered the hot little hand in his.

'You were sorry all the time, my pet, were you not?'

'Yes, and I am sorry now,' creeping still closer. 'I could not ask God to forgive me until you had forgiven me. Oh, papa! why do you look so kindly at me, when you know it is all through my wickedness that you are lying here? Of course, no one can love me any more.'

'Not love you, Pussie! Come, come, my child, fathers are not like that. I forgive you freely; everything is right between us. But, my poor darling, you are ill and suffering, and if you care to please me, let nurse carry you back to bed.'

'Will you let me kiss you first?'

His only answer was to stretch out his arms to her; but he wondered to see how slowly she came to him. How could he guess each movement was agony to the poor child? How she had ever managed to crawl from her bed and across the passage, only she herself knew.

'I have only one arm to put round your neck,' she whispered, as her long hair fell over his face. 'Dear, dear papa, if I could only bear it all!' And as he felt her tears upon his cheek, he understood how her young heart was wrung with remorse and sorrow, and holding her a moment tried to comfort her, and besought God to bless his pet.

Alison was just sitting up in affright, looking round the empty room, when Nurse Meyrick appeared, carrying Missie in her arms.

'Oh, Mabel, where have you been? You have frightened me so!'

'Go to sleep, Alison,' returned Missie, in a happy voice. 'I have only been to see papa, and he has forgiven me, and now I can rest.'

'She will be quiet now,' whispered the nurse. 'I have covered her up warm, and she will rest until morning.' And she was right. Though Missie lay awake, feverish and full of pain, she gave no more trouble, and poor Alison was allowed to sleep undisturbed until morning.

For the next few days Missie was very ill. Her agitation of mind brought on a slight feverish attack, and when this had yielded to the doctor's remedies her weakness was excessive. Her nerves had been jarred and unstrung by the accident; and the least noise, the slamming of a door, or even a louder voice than usual, made her change colour and burst into tears. It was impossible for her in her shattered state always to repress irritability. Again and again the old sharp tones and words recalled Missie's faulty temper. But there was this improvement—she struggled bravely against her besetting sin, and would ask pardon quite humbly of Alison. 'I have been so cross to-day,' she would say, with tears in her eyes; 'I wish you would not be so sweet and patient with me.'

'I will promise to scold when you are well enough,' Alison would say, in her most cheerful manner, for she knew Missie must not be encouraged to be morbid. 'Just now, darling, I can only remember you are ill, and that your poor arm is giving you trouble. I know I should be cross if I had as much to bear.' But in spite of Alison's assumed cheerfulness, she was growing pale and thin. Her close confinement in Missie's room tried her; no one but Alison suited the sick girl's fancy—no one else seemed to understand her little ways. Miss Leigh's gentle mournfulness irritated her; she had never cared much for Anna, and she had lost all desire for Eva's companionship, and though her father had generously withdrawn his prohibition, Eva had only once been admitted to her room. The interview had been a little embarrassing. Eva had cried and begged Missie to forgive her, and Missie had been kind and magnanimous in her answer; but after the first few agitating minutes their talk had drifted into silence; Missie was languid and out of spirits, and Eva did not possess the art of soothing—the bond of sympathy between them seemed broken. Both of them had yet to learn that similarity of tastes and the boisterous spirits of youth do not lay the foundation of a lasting friendship; while Alison and Anna seemed to cement their intimacy more

every day, as the good qualities of each became more apparent, there were symptoms that Missie and Eva would drift still farther apart.

Missie had plenty of good sense, and she no longer stifled it; her conscience told her that she would never have sinned so grievously against her father if Eva had not undermined her principles by her flattery and playful words of advice to be independent and assert herself.

A veil had fallen from her eyes; she no longer saw Eva's conduct in the same light, and as she grew better, and Eva sought opportunities to be with her, the disillusion became more complete. Missie found herself wondering over her own infatuation. Had Eva always been so loud in her manners, so unfilial in her behaviour to her mother, so unkind to Anna? Missie grew first critical and then reproachful. Strange to say, Eva accepted her rebukes quite meekly—evidently her affection for Missie was sincere in its way, for she took some pains to please her, and even tried to break herself of her faults. But for her unlucky engagement with Captain Harper, there was every probability that Missie might have influenced her for good; but her approaching marriage soon drove all salutary reflection away.

As Missie's violent infatuation for her friend cooled, she turned more and more to Alison for sympathy; and here at least she did not find herself disappointed—Alison returned her affection warmly.

Missie was a little exacting as an invalid, for she was still separated from her father, and, alas! there was still cause to be anxious for him.

Dr. Greenwood never told Alison what he had feared; but after a few days, when he and another doctor had consulted together over the case, he informed her and Roger that there was certainly some degree of mischief in connection with the spine: it would be many months—perhaps a year or two—before he could rise from his couch.

'We certainly hope for his complete recovery in the future,' he continued reassuringly, as Alison turned pale and Roger looked unhappy. 'Another inch and he would never have moved his limbs again; but now things are not so bad. Mr. Merle will have his books, and they will go far to console him in his forced inaction.'

Dr. Greenwood was right in his conjecture; Mr. Merle took the tidings very quietly.

'I told you your broad shoulders were made for something,' he

said, looking at his son with a smile. He and Alison had come to bid him good-night.

The nurse had not yet been dismissed, though it was already arranged that Roger should soon take her place in his father's dressing-room.

'I shall have to leave the mill in your hands. Greenwood gives me no hopes of being fit for business for the next year or two.'

'I will do everything I can, father,' returned Roger sorrowfully; 'but I feel awfully cut up about it all.'

'There is no need for that, my boy,' returned Mr. Merle. 'I should not wonder if you do better at business than I, Roger. Perhaps this will be less a trial to me than you suppose. I do not deny, of course, that it is a trial; but still, with my books and children I shall try to be content.'

'We shall do everything in our power to ease your mind,' returned Roger gravely. But he said no more, and shortly afterwards left the room, leaving his father and Alison together.

'Roger feels this dreadfully,' she said, anxious that her father should not misunderstand his son's lack of words.

'Yes, my dear, I know he does,' returned Mr. Merle, with a sigh. 'I am fortunate to have such a son. To think,' he added, with emotion, 'that I could ever have been so blind as to believe that villain's innuendoes against him—and now the whole business is in his hands.'

'You can trust him fully, papa.'

'Yes, better than I can trust myself, Alison; that boy is true as steel, and will not fail me. I wish I had found it out before. I remember your Aunt Diana once saying to me that "If I studied my children as well as I did my books, I should be rewarded for my pains." By the bye, Alison, what does your aunt say to all this unlucky accident?'

'We have not heard from her,' returned Alison, in a low voice. 'Roger wrote the very next day after the accident, and I wrote the next day; but we have had no reply.'

'That is very unlike Diana,' observed Mr. Merle, in a surprised tone.

'Roger says that she cannot have received our letters, papa; you see, she is in Switzerland, and perhaps she has deviated from the proposed route—that is just her way; if she takes a fancy to a place she will stay there for a day or two, and then she does not get her letters for days. If we do not hear from her soon, Roger thinks I

had better write to Mr. Moore. It does seem so strange'—her eyes filling with tears—'that Aunt Di should not know how unhappy we have been.'

'I believe you are fretting after her, Alison—you are quite thin and fragile-looking.'

But Alison denied this with a great deal of unnecessary energy. She was only a little tired; but now Mabel was getting better she would be able to have a walk sometimes.

'But you must not talk any more, papa,' she finished; 'you are looking rather exhausted. Nurse Meyrick will be here directly; may I read to you a little until she comes?'

Mr. Merle shook his head sadly.

'My dear, I should like it of all things; but you know Dr. Greenwood has forbidden any kind of study for the next few weeks, and I never cared much for works of fiction, except Sir Walter Scott.'

'I meant a chapter or two out of the Bible before you went to sleep,' returned Alison, blushing with timidity.

A sudden shadow passed over Mr. Merle's face.

'I did not understand you, my dear,' he said, with a little effort. 'Well, child, do as you like—that sort of reading cannot hurt one.'

Alison felt the permission was accorded rather ungraciously, but still she dared not refuse to avail herself of it. She brought the Bible—Aunt Diana's gift—and sat down quietly by her father's side.

The voice trembled a little as she read; but she did not know how sweet it sounded in her father's ear. Once when she looked up she found his eyes fixed on her face, and stopped involuntarily.

'Shall I leave off, papa?'

'Yes, that will do for to-night; you may read to me to-morrow. You are so like your mother, Alison; she was fond of her Bible, too. You are a good girl, and take after her.'

'Poor dear mamma! How hard it must be for you, papa, to lie there missing her!'

'Ah!' he said, averting his face; 'it is a life-long loss. I think I never knew any one so good—not even Diana could compare with her. Do you know you reminded me so much of her that day when you wanted me to go to church. Child, your reproachful eyes quite haunted me! Ah, well! if ever I get well——' He paused with a sigh.

'You will come with us then, papa,' she said softly.

'I hope so, Alison; but I fear it will be a long time before I have

the chance. When a man has looked death in the face, as I have, who might have been hurried into eternity without a moment's preparation, he thinks a little more seriously about things. I hope I am grateful for being spared—I think I am. You shall come and read to me every night if you like, my dear ; it is a grand book, the Bible.'

Alison's heart was too full to answer him ; but as Nurse Meyrick came into the room at that moment she leaned over him and kissed his forehead.

'Good-night, dear papa ; I hope you will sleep well.'

'Good-night,' he answered cheerfully, 'and give my love to Missie.'

Alison felt strangely happy as she left her father's room ; it seemed to her as though they were coming closer to each other. There had been a look in her father's eyes and a caressing tone in his voice that told her that she was becoming very dear to him. She said to herself in her young gladness that Providence had accepted her sacrifice—her father's heart was no longer closed to her, and Mabel was beginning to love her. 'Give, and it shall be given to you,' was abundantly realized in her case—so true it is that love begets love, that the Divine seed of charity sown broadcast, even over barren hearts, will still yield some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, some a hundredfold.

Alison's tranquil rest that night was only a preparation for a most trying day. Missie had left her bed for the couch that afternoon. When Alison had placed her comfortably she had gone downstairs for a few minutes to speak to Anna, leaving Miss Leigh in charge. Anna detained her longer than usual—she had so much to say on the subject of Eva's approaching marriage ; and while Alison was still talking and listening Miss Leigh hurried downstairs with a very pale face.

'I wish you would come,' she said, in much agitation ; 'Mabel is so very hysterical I can do nothing with her. Perhaps I have been incautious, but she questioned me so closely as to what the physicians said about her father that I could not avoid telling her.'

'Oh, dear, what a pity ! I meant to have told her myself when she was better,' observed Alison somewhat reproachfully.

Miss Leigh's tact was often at fault, and she had chosen an unlucky moment for breaking the news to Missie—just when she was weary with the fatigue of dressing.

Alison found her in a sad state—sobbing bitterly, with her head hidden in the pillows—and for a long time she refused to allow Alison to raise her into a more comfortable position. To her relief, Roger entered the room and asked immediately, in his downright manner, what was the matter, and why Missie was making herself ill.

This brought on a fresh burst.

‘Oh, Roger! what shall I do? Poor papa!’

‘It is poor Mabel, I think,’ observed Roger kindly; and he raised the sobbing little figure in his arms and brought the wet face into view. ‘I declare, child, you are a perfect Niobe. Ailie, what are we to do with her?’

‘He will not get up for months—perhaps for years—and it is all my fault!’ cried Missie passionately.

‘Perhaps so, my dear; but do you suppose all these showers of tears will do father any good?’

‘I must cry—I ought to cry when I am so unhappy,’ returned Missie impatiently, and trying to free herself.

‘No, my dear, no,’ was Roger’s quiet answer; ‘you have given us all so much trouble that you ought to spare us any noisy repentance; the best thing you can do for us all is to get as well and happy as you can, and help to nurse father.’

CHAPTER XXI.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

MISSIE was so surprised at this view of the case that she left off crying and stared at Roger. He told Alison afterwards that those half-drowned blue eyes made him feel quite bad—but then Roger was such a soft-hearted fellow.

‘You do not understand,’ she said at last, very slowly.

‘My dear little sister,’ he said, taking her hand, ‘I do understand, and so does Alison, and we are both agreed on this point. Repentance is apt to be troublesome if it be carried beyond due bounds—and, in fact, it can degenerate into selfishness—and you are really very selfish about this.’

‘Oh, Roger!’ exclaimed Alison, a little shocked at this plain speaking. But Roger knew what he was about; he was determined, as he said quaintly, ‘to seal up the fountain of Missie’s tears.’

‘Is he not unkind?’ returned poor Missie piteously. ‘He calls me selfish, just because I am so sorry about papa.’

‘We are all sorry, Mabel,’ returned her brother seriously, ‘though we do not go about the house wetting the floors with our tears, like mediæval saints. I declare it makes one quite damp to come near you—it is really bad for your health, my dear.’

‘Now you are laughing at me,’ she replied pettishly.

‘True; and that is the unkindest cut of all, is it not? But I am not laughing when I talk about your selfishness; you see you are just going against the wise old proverb, “Never cry over spilt milk.” The mischief is done, my dear; but every one in the house has forgiven you for being the cause of it; and now you must forgive yourself.’

‘Oh, I cannot,’ she sighed. ‘I shall be miserable until papa is well.’

‘There speaks selfishness,’ he returned quickly. ‘My dear Mabel, why think about yourself at all? why not think how tired Alison looks, and how you may spare her? I am sure a cheerful word from you would do her no end of good.’

Missie seemed struck by his words. She looked at her sister

rather scrutinisingly. Certainly Alison did look pale, and there were dark rings round her eyes. Roger saw his advantage, and went on.

'You have no idea how people in a house act and re-act on each other—a depressing person is like a perpetual fog. I think I shall coin that speech as a proverb. You know I am a bit of a philosopher—Roger the sage—that sounds well.'

Missie's lips curved into a smile; a little dimple came into view.

'Come, that's about the real article—a little more, and we shall have a rainbow effect,' observed Roger in a delighted tone. 'Now we have the whole thing in working order. You have done wrong and been sorry for it—good!'—with an impressive pause; 'now you are going to do better, and not think about yourself at all, but how you are to make us all happier. Good again! Thirdly and lastly, you are to turn over a new leaf and cultivate cheerfulness and that sort of thing.'

'I will try,' sighed Missie, raising her face to be kissed, 'but it will be dreadfully hard.'

'Most things are hard,' was the philosophical reply; 'but we shall never do much good in the world by sitting in the dust and casting ashes on ourselves—that sort of thing doesn't seem to belong to the present dispensation.'

'No; it is "Let the dead bury their dead" now,' observed Alison in a moved voice. 'Now, Roger, you may leave Missie to me; she is tired out, and I am going to read her to sleep.'

'But I am not sleepy,' replied Missie, reluctant to let Roger go; but it showed her new submission to Alison that she made no further protest—only as Alison read, Missie lay quiet, with a softened look in her eyes. Yes, she would try and bear it; they should not be any longer troubled.

'Thank you, dear,' she said presently, as she noticed how Alison's voice flagged; 'the book is very pretty; but I want you to leave off now and take a turn in the garden. Do please, Alison, it is such a lovely evening, and it will do you so much good. Poppie can come to me; she is a good girl and does not tire me.'

'Are you sure, Mabel dear, that you can spare me?' asked Alison anxiously.

'Quite sure,' was Missie's answer; and then Alison consented to leave her. She was conscious that her strength was failing her a little; the close confinement and anxiety for the last fortnight were trying to her constitution; broken rest at night often followed the

long day's work. She was pining, too, for a word from her dearest friend. She had written two days ago to Mr. Moore, questioning him about Miss Carrington's movements, but had received no answer from the confidential servant who acted as the blind man's amanuensis, and, in spite of her efforts to be cheerful, she was feeling dull and deserted.

It was a lovely evening, as Missie said—one of those rare September evenings that come when summer and autumn seem blending into each other. Alison stood for a moment in the hall, debating whether she was too tired to seek Roger in the timber-yard, or whether she should indulge in solitary musing under the lime-trees. A free half-hour was a delicious boon, and she must employ it to the best advantage. She decided after a moment that she was too dull for even Roger's company to cheer her—for she was in one of those moods that the masculine mind finds so difficult to understand—and she was just taking down her garden hat from the peg, when a figure came between her and the evening light, a familiar voice spoke her name, and the next moment Alison was in Aunt Diana's arms.

Miss Carrington's kisses were very grave and tender. They spoke volumes; but she seemed to have no words at the moment. But Alison's, 'Oh, Aunt Di!' was more than eloquent—the quiver of her voice meant ecstasy. But the next moment Miss Carrington put her at arm's-length, and, still holding her, scrutinised her face almost pitifully.

'Ailie, my poor, dear child, what have they done to you? Oh dear, what thin cheeks, what heavy eyes!' And suddenly closing her face between her hands, she kissed her again and again; and Miss Carrington was not a demonstrative woman—her caresses meant something out of the common. They brought Alison's soft colour back, and the happy tears came into her eyes.

'Never mind about that,' she returned unsteadily; 'I shall be quite well and rested now I have seen your dear face again. Oh, Aunt Di, how I have wanted you!'—her voice sinking still lower.

'Yes, I know,' replied Miss Carrington, almost abruptly—all the more because her feelings were not so well under control as usual. 'Ailie, what must you have thought of my silence? Come, let us sit down somewhere where I can talk to you without interruption. I don't want to see any other face but yours for the present—not even Roger's.'

'I think my room will be best,' returned Alison, hesitating a little. 'Miss Leigh is in the drawing-room and Rudel in the dining-room, and Roger generally sits in the study when he comes in of an even-

ing. Wait a moment, Aunt Di, please ; I must ask Sarah to make some tea for you—supper will not be ready for an hour. Oh,' smiling archly, 'I know your taste—Aunt Di cannot go without her tea.'

Miss Carrington offered no remonstrance ; perhaps she was in need of refreshment. She waited to see the cabman deposit her luggage in the hall, and then she followed Alison upstairs.

'My dear,' she observed, looking round her as she entered, 'this is not your old room ; I thought this was Missie's?'

'Yes, but Missie had mine, and I did not like to turn her out—it would only have caused unpleasantness. Please do not look so grieved, Aunt Di ; I have got used to it, and do not mind the crane so much as I did at first—at least, it does not make my head ache.'

'And you never told me. I could not have borne to have thought of you in this room, Ailie. Well, you have spared me many a heart-ache. I should have wanted my child back in her little nest, and have been unhappy because I could not get her.' And Miss Carrington positively shuddered as she looked at the grim lines of the crane, and round the dark, heavily-furnished room.

'I am glad I did not tell you,' returned Alison gently, as she unfastened Miss Carrington's mantle and waited on her. Perhaps Aunt Diana loved to feel the soft little hands busy about her, for she offered no resistance as Alison smoothed her hair, and brought her a footstool, of which she took possession herself.

'That is right,' observed Miss Carrington, stroking the brown head that laid itself in child fashion on her lap. Alison was so very tired there was utter *abandon* in her attitude, and yet she was so happy too.

'Now we will have one of our cosy talks—don't look at the door, Ailie—I am in no hurry for my tea. My dear, I am longing to tell you how it is your letters have miscarried ; I read them all for the first time last night.'

'Aunt Di, do you mean that you have flown to us—only telegraph wires could have done it,' laughing incredulously.

'You may be sure that I should have flown to you if I had the power,' returned Miss Carrington seriously. 'Ailie, I was not in Switzerland, as you thought. I was recalled suddenly, a fortnight ago, by Mr. Moore's sudden illness. Greville telegraphed for me, and I came home at once.'

'Mr. Moore ill!' exclaimed Alison, with a fast paling face.

'Yes, very ill ; but, thank God, my dear old friend is better now. It has been an anxious time for us, darling. Greville is cast down

and unhappy—you need not look at me so reproachfully. I would not write to you—it would have given you useless pain, and I was so engrossed with nursing that letters were impossible luxuries. Little did I think in my night watching that Ailie was anxious and unhappy too.’

‘Aunt Di, that is why you look tired.’

‘Tired! Nonsense, child. It is a blessed thing to wear out oneself for one’s friends. I love that sort of fatigue. I could not have left my patient until he was out of danger; but now I can safely trust him in Greville’s charge. He is a capital nurse, in spite of his boyishness, and he has Burton to help him. By the bye, Mr. Moore sent his love to Sunny. Stay, I must try and remember his message; he bade his little sunbeam remember her mission, and not to be afraid of cloudy days.’

‘Did Mr. Greville send me a message, too?’ asked Alison, a little timidly. Miss Carrington hesitated.

‘Well, I think he sent his love, too—in fact, he sent a great many messages; but I told him I could not be a carrier of nonsense, and should only deliver one—“That he had kept his promise, and had been working famously.”’

‘Oh, I am so glad,’ returned Alison, brightening at this. ‘Aunt Di—it was not good of you to keep Mr. Moore’s illness from me; I should have liked to have shared your anxiety. Dear old man, I am so thankful he is spared!’

‘His character seemed lovelier than ever in his hours of suffering,’ observed Miss Carrington thoughtfully; ‘he was so patient, so grateful to us all for our care of him. I understood then what being like a little child meant—it seemed as though it were we who were blind, not he—he seemed so steeped in the light of heaven.’

‘Do you think he wanted to die?’ asked Alison, in an awe-struck voice. ‘How strange it seems that he should be so willing to go!’

‘Why not?’ replied her aunt. ‘Death has no terrors for him. Why should he fear the summons from the Master whom he loved and tried to serve here, and who died on the cross for his redemption? And yet he was resigned to stay, for Greville’s sake.’

‘“The lad wants me a little longer,” he said once. “Well, I suppose I can spare my boy a year or two out of eternity; I mean to have no will of my own about it. When the Master calls, I shall be ready; but perhaps—for who knows His graciousness?—He may be thinking of my boy too.”’

‘How I should love to see him again!’ exclaimed Alison, with a sigh.

'So you will by-and-by, I hope. He missed you dreadfully, Alison.'

'And you, Aunt Di?'

'I am not going to tell you about that.' Then, as Alison's eyes looked pleading, she continued earnestly: 'Child, I believe we are a sort of necessity to each other—at least, I find my life will not shape itself properly without you. I am always thinking how Ailie will like this or that. Your absence quite took away the pleasure of my trip. You naughty child, you look delighted; but there comes my tea—please make me a cup, and then tell me all about your poor father.'

Alison was soon narrating the story of the last fortnight. Miss Carrington had received hers and Roger's letters late the previous night, and Mr. Moore's had put her in possession of the latest news; still there was much that she wished to hear. She listened attentively, and without interruption, as the girl poured out the history of her hopes and fears. Her grave, interested face, and now and then a tightened grasp of Alison's hand, spoke in mute sympathy, but otherwise she said little.

'It has been a dreadful time,' finished Alison. 'Roger and I were so afraid about papa, and then Missie was so unhappy and ill. That is Roger's whistle, Aunt Di—he is wondering what has become of me. Shall I call him in?' And Miss Carrington nodded.

Roger's look of intense surprise amused them excessively, but he welcomed his aunt with evident satisfaction.

'Now Ailie will be all right again,' he observed, with a smile at her; 'she has been Aunt Diana sick for months. You are not going to take her away from us just at present, are you?'

'No, not just now,' returned Miss Carrington quietly. 'I am going to stop until you are tired of me, and then Ailie and I must say good-bye to each other for a little longer. What should you say to bringing her for a few weeks in the spring, if your father gets better? You look in want of a change, Roger; they are working you too hard, my boy.'

'You must not tempt me, Aunt Diana,' he returned, rather gravely; 'there will be no holiday for me next year. The whole concern rests on my shoulders at present, and our manager is a defaulter. Alison shall go with you, and welcome.'

'Well, well, we must see about it; winter comes before spring. There is plenty of time, and I don't mean to give up my plan of having you and Ailie together. Now I must see your father; will you take me to him?' And Roger consented with alacrity.

In the passage she stopped and laid her hand upon his arm.

'Thank you for taking care of Ailie; I know how good you have been to her.'

'It is she who has been good to us,' he returned, with a sudden flush. 'Aunt Diana, you do not know the blessing she has been to us; we have to thank you for that. Alison would never have been the girl she is if you had not taken so much pains with her.'

'Don't make me vain, Roger.'

'Missie and I have proposed buying her a little red morocco book and presenting it to her,' continued Roger, with dry humour; 'the title will be "Aunt Diana's Sayings," for Ailie brings out a fresh one every day. Missie says she is inventive, and coins them herself; but I have an idea that they are genuine.'

Miss Carrington shook her head at him, and only bade him lead the way to his father's room. Alison had already prepared him for his sister-in-law's visit, and he held out his hand with a pleased smile.

'This is kind, Diana. I said the silence was not like you; my poor girl here has been fretting herself about it; but of course you never got the letters.'

'No, indeed; Alison will tell you all about it presently. It is too late for me to prolong my visit now. Invalids should be quiet at this hour. You see I understand all about it, Ainslie; but I am grieved to the heart to see you like this.'

'You must not make yourself unhappy about it; it is only a case of patience, and I have good, attentive children. I wish their mother could see them; she was always so proud of them.'

'Yes, indeed! Poor Florence, you must miss her, Ainslie.' And Miss Carrington's lip quivered slightly, for her sister had been the object of her dearest affection; she had never felt so drawn to Florence's husband as she did now; her grey eyes rested upon him pityingly.

'Children, you must take care of your aunt; she must be tired with her journey. To-morrow you must come and sit with me, Diana.' Miss Carrington felt herself gently dismissed, but she did not misunderstand him.

'God will comfort you, Ainslie,' she whispered; 'and Alison has Florence's sweet ways and looks. She must learn to take her mother's place; that is partly why I love her so.' And pressing his hand kindly, she followed the others from the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

AUNT DIANA AT THE HOLMS.

MISSIE received the news of Aunt Diana's arrival with an exclamation of dismay, and a hot flush came to her face. 'Oh, Alison, it will be dreadful to see her! I always was afraid of her, you know; she is one of those painfully good people who make one feel small and horrid. Please don't let her come in to-night.' And Missie sat bolt upright in a panic.

Now, Miss Carrington had quick ears, and she caught the most of this speech, and laughed to herself softly; for it is those who try hard to be good who are the most conscious of evil within, and Miss Carrington was one who had often cried with St. Paul, 'The good that I would I do not.' Her heart felt very soft towards the wilful little girl who had brought such misery on herself and others, even before she entered the room, but her first sight of Missie gave her a feeling of surprise. She said afterwards she ceased to wonder at Ainslie's infatuation for the child, for she was certainly a bewitching little creature.

The pink ribbons in Missie's dainty dressing gown were not pinker than her cheeks, her blue eyes shone with uneasy light, and the soft, fair hair lay in delicate rings above the pretty, childish face; her frightened, appealing look would have touched a colder heart than Miss Carrington's, and it was with real affection that she bent over her. But Missie's tender conscience made her shrink from her aunt's kisses.

'Please don't be so kind to me, Aunt Diana—every one is, and it is not right.'

Aunt Diana laughed.

'My dear little girl,' she said, in a droll voice, 'we none of us want to see our poor little butterfly broken on the wheel; we are far too sorry for you. Of course, you have been a naughty child; you have been setting your small world on fire, and have got your

pretty wings singed. Well, now you have learnt wisdom through painful experience, and we must all help you to get the lesson perfect.'

'I don't think any one was ever so wicked as I, Aunt Diana,' sighed Missie.

'Well, my dear,' returned her aunt briskly, 'it is not my concern to go about weighing my neighbour's trespasses in a balance; I don't fancy human scales would be nicely adjusted; but I am quite sure of one thing—that I was a very naughty child myself—the red-cheeked apples I stole give me moral indigestion still.'

It was impossible to look grave over this; Alison's merry laugh was infectious. Miss Carrington stayed a few more minutes, questioning Missie about her arm, and talking kindly to her, until the poor child was quite happy and at her ease.

'I don't know what it is,' she said that night, when Alison gave her the good-night kiss; 'you all seem trying to make me believe that I have not been naughty at all, and that there is nothing to forgive.'

'I thought forgiveness meant that,' returned Alison simply; 'you know how the Bible speaks of sins blotted out—that means the page is white again—one can write freshly across the blank.'

There never was a merrier supper-table than the one at The Holms that night; late as it was, Poppie sat up for it, and no one rebuked her for her chatter. Rudel kept up the character of a bashful school-boy; but even he relaxed his wide-eyed gravity when Otter was admired and kind inquiries made after Sulky. Aunt Diana knew the way to a boy's heart, though she had never had a boy of her own; but there are some unmarried women whose large natures can embrace a whole world of little ones, and such an one was Aunt Diana.

But as she talked and laughed with the others, her keen grey eyes followed Alison's every movement. It seemed to Miss Carrington that her darling was changed somehow—some of the brightness that had always lighted her young face had faded a little; she was graver and more in earnest—like a young knight who had finished his vigil in the church, where he had dreamed strange visions, and was now buckling on his armour that he might prove it.

'Ailie has laid aside her leading-strings, and has learned to walk alone,' she said to herself; 'though she loves me as much as ever,

she needs me less. I ought to be glad to know this, for I cannot expect to live for ever.'

The next few weeks passed happily for Alison; she had her dearest friend with her, and what could she ask for more?

Aunt Diana had settled down quite comfortably in her niche, as though she were one of the family. Without making herself unduly prominent, or in any way trenching on the young housekeeper's privilege, she yet contrived, with quiet tact, to lighten Alison's burthen and procure her the rest she so much needed.

Alison resumed her walks with Roger, while Aunt Diana amused Missie or read to Mr. Merle. During the day Alison was too much engaged to enjoy much of Aunt Diana's company, but Miss Carrington insisted that she should resume her painting lessons as soon as Missie was able to be with her father; and she also contrived that she and Alison should have one of their old refreshing talks as often as possible. Nothing rested Alison so much as intercourse with Miss Carrington's strong, vigorous mind.

Aunt Diana quickly found her way into Missie's wayward little heart, and she soon turned her influence to good account. One afternoon, when Alison had been spending some hours at Maplewood, she found on her return that Missie had gone back into her old room. All Alison's pictures and books had been moved; Aunt Diana's loving hands had evidently been employed in her service—no one else would have arranged the bowl of dark chrysanthemums on the little round table, and the pretty fresh cretonne on the couch and easy chair spoke of the same taste.

Alison's voice quite trembled as she thanked Missie.

'You ought not to have done it, Mabel dear; it is very good of you, but I would rather have waited until you were really well.'

'I always meant to do it,' returned Missie solemnly. 'I thought about it every night, and then I made up my mind to speak to Aunt Diana, and she said she would help me. Have you seen the beautiful illumination she has painted for you?'

Yes, Alison had seen it.

'Be not weary in well-doing,'—that was the text that Miss Carrington had chosen—'for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.' Well, was not Alison reaping a rich harvest? Would she ever repent that she had come back to her own people for loving service and ministry, when she had won Missie's affection, and found her

way to her father's heart? That he loved and trusted her, that she was growing daily dearer to him, Alison, with all her humility, could not doubt; but Missie was still his petted darling—the very suffering she had caused him brought them nearer together.

It was a lovely sight, Miss Carrington thought, to see Missie sitting for hours patiently beside her father's couch, reading or talking to him. But for her aunt's vigilant care her health would have been permanently injured by her devotion to him; before she left she made Missie faithfully promise to take her daily walk and to resume her singing.

'You must leave something for Ailie to do,' she said, with a smile; 'I cannot sanction monopoly. We must watch against selfishness, dear child, even in our best actions; we must not be over-exacting in our affection—love sometimes compels one to efface oneself for love's sake.'

Anna was a constant visitor to The Holms during Miss Carrington's stay; they had taken a great fancy to each other. Anna told Alison privately that she thought Miss Carrington was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

'I don't know about her features,' Alison had answered; 'I don't think people consider her handsome, but it is a dear face, and that is all I care about.'

'I am never tired of looking at her,' returned Anna, with girlish enthusiasm; 'one sees the thoughts coming before she speaks; her eyes talk to one, even when she is silent. There is something harmonious, too, in her voice, and even in her walk; she never jars on one; I am sure there are no discords in her nature.'

Alison repeated this speech; she thought it so prettily worded, and so true. But Miss Carrington shook her head over it, and let it pass; she knew much better how the chords of her being had once been jangled roughly out of tune. 'No discords in her nature!' when every note had been dumb and tuneless until the Divine Hand had brought the jarred chords into harmony.

'When God's will is our will, then we shall know peace,' she said to herself; 'I have learnt that now.' But she spoke very kindly of Anna, and praised Alison's discernment in the choice of a friend.

'She is a simple, lovable little soul,' she said once; 'it is quite a treat in this decided age to meet with a girl who distrusts her own judgment, and believes other people's experiences before her own.'

'Anna is really very clever, Aunt Di.'

‘I am sure of that, my dear; and she shows her cleverness by not advertising her best wares. In talking to her one is not dropping buckets into empty wells—there is good sense and a clear knowledge of facts at the bottom. Living in an uncongenial atmosphere has made her shy and awkward; she is like a poor little plant brought too suddenly into the light; in another year or so she will be less pallid and depressed; she will have learnt to believe in herself a little.’

‘I am afraid you think her plain,’ observed Alison anxiously; for her artistic taste made her lay rather an undue importance on beauty; ‘but really when she talks and brightens up, she is quite pretty.’

‘She has a lovely look sometimes. You are wrong, Ailie; I do not think her plain. Missie’s apple-blossom face makes her a little colourless; but there is a delicate white rose bloom about her that is not without beauty; I like her face, my dear.’

‘Do you know, Aunt Di’—hesitating a little, as though she feared how her words might be received, for Miss Carrington had a horror of gossip—‘I am half afraid there is a new trouble in store for poor Anna.’

‘You mean Eva’s marriage. I think that will be a good thing for her; there is no real sympathy between the sisters.’

‘No; I meant something quite different. I have been at Maplewood a great deal this week, and Dr. Forbes is always there. I am afraid, from what I see, that Anna will soon have a step-father; and, Aunt Di,’—in a voice of strong disgust—‘Dr. Forbes is such an ugly, disagreeable man, I must say I do wonder at Mrs. Hardwick.’

‘Do you, Ailie? Well, wonder sits well on young people. I hate to see them taking everything as a matter of course. Your wonder will not hurt you, my dear.’

‘But if it should be true, Aunt Di?’—very solemnly.

‘“There are no fools like old fools,” Ailie; and there is certainly no accounting for tastes. Now, in my opinion, one husband is enough for any woman; but I do not pretend to regulate the world. Don’t trouble your little head about it. I have a notion that, step-father or no stepfather, Anna will have her share of God’s sunshine.’ And Miss Carrington smiled a queer little smile that mystified Alison; but she said no more.

There were some things of which Miss Carrington never spoke to young people. She often said: ‘A girl’s mind ought to be as clear

as crystal and hold no secrets—a crystal reflects everything. I wish older people would remember that.’ And nothing displeased her more than the careless talk of some mothers. ‘They don’t seem to care what they put into a girl’s mind,’ she would say indignantly, ‘and then they wonder that it is choked up with rubbish.’

Miss Carrington took a great deal of notice of Roger, and sought every opportunity to be with him; she had a great respect for his character, which, she said, was a most uncommon one.

‘Roger differs from the young men of this generation,’ she said once to Alison; ‘he cares little for other people’s opinion, unless he knows them to be in the right—mere criticism does not influence him in the least.’

She took a great interest in his work, and made herself acquainted with the details of the business. Roger wondered a little at the quiet pertinacity with which she questioned him; she even followed him to the mill, and sat in the timber-yard, watching the men at work.

After a few conversations with Roger, she spoke very seriously to her brother-in-law; she told him Roger was very young for such a responsibility. ‘He is a good lad, and would wear himself out in your service, Ainslie, and that without a word of complaint; but he looks too old and careworn for his age; you must remember he is only two-and-twenty yet—he must have his play-time, like other lads.’

‘But how am I to help him, Diana?’ asked Mr. Merle fretfully. ‘It is not my fault that I am lying here like a log. The boy must work, or what would become of us all?’

‘My dear Ainslie, you misunderstand me,’ she replied gently. ‘Of course Roger must work; but surely he needs help for so large a business. Have you put no one in your last manager’s place?’

‘No, not yet,’ he returned, evidently struck by her practical good sense. ‘Roger never proposed it, and I was too indolent to think about it; but there is Murdoch, a Scotchman—he has been with us a long time, and he is an honest fellow. I dare say he would be glad of a rise in his salary: he has a large young family. I will ask Roger what he thinks of putting Murdoch in the manager’s place; I think he would watch over our interests.’

‘I wish you would do so,’ she returned earnestly; ‘Roger is rather too hard-worked for his age. He tells me he has no time for cricket or tennis, or for skating in winter. I—I have set my heart,

Ainslie, on his bringing Alison for a long visit to Moss-side in the spring. You will be better by that time, and if you have a manager Roger will be able to enjoy a holiday; he tells me he has not left Chesterton for two years.'

'I am afraid I have been very remiss and neglected his interests,' returned Mr. Merle, rather sadly. 'You shall have your wish, Diana; I will manage to spare Roger for a month.'

'Come, now, that is generous of you,' she replied brightly; 'I shall owe you a good turn for that. Supposing I promise to come and spend my Christmas and New Year with you; shall you care to have me?'

'Try me,' was his only reply. But he said it with one of his rare smiles, and Miss Carrington felt she would be welcome.

The prospect of having Aunt Diana for Christmas, and still more the promise of a long visit to Moss-side in the spring, went far to reconcile Alison to the parting when the day came for Miss Carrington to leave them; but when the last hour arrived Alison's heart failed her a little.

'You must not look so pale over it, Ailie,' Miss Carrington said to her anxiously; 'you know if I had the power I would willingly take you back with me.'

'Yes, but I could not come,' returned Alison slowly. 'Missie is still far from well, and I could not leave papa lying there. There can be no question now about my duty; it is a comfort to know that.'

'Yes, dearest, your place must be here a little longer; they could not spare you to me yet. Do you know I sometimes doubt whether the old days will ever come back.'

'Oh, Aunt Di! Do you mean I shall never be able to live with you again?' asked Alison, in an alarmed voice.

Miss Carrington looked at her in a strangely moved way.

'I do not think you will live at The Holms always; Missie will replace you by-and-by. I am quite sure we shall be together, even if it be not in the old way. Don't look so perplexed, Ailie darling; in this life, with its manifold changes and chances, things are seldom quite the same.'

'You and I will never be different—I am convinced of that,' exclaimed Alison, not in the least understanding the drift of Aunt Diana's strange speech. 'Oh, Aunt Di, how delicious the spring will be! To think that we shall be rowing on the river again to

Long Island, to hunt for forget-me-nots, and that we shall hear the cuckoo in Aspy Woods, and I shall be sitting in the studio watching you painting, and Roger will be with us.'

'That's right ; look forward, Ailie darling ; it is your birthright. The young must always look on to a happy future. Now say good-bye to me, for I hear the carriage coming round. Christmas will soon be here, and, God willing, we shall meet again.' And pressing her tenderly in her arms, Aunt Diana bade God bless her, and turned away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AMONG THE ROSES AGAIN.

'L'HOMME propose et Dieu dispose,' is an old but true axiom. Miss Carrington, indeed, spent her Christmas and the opening days of the new year at The Holms, to the mutual enjoyment of herself and Alison; but it was not until the end of June that Alison and Roger paid their promised visit to Moss-side—not until the sweet fresh days of spring had passed into the glory of summer. Miss Carrington had written again and again, pleading the compact she had made with Mr. Merle; but neither of the young people had found themselves free.

'When we come it must be with a quiet conscience, and not with a burden of unfulfilled duties, dear Aunt Di,' wrote Alison at last. 'Missie can do without me, but Roger cannot leave at present—there is such a pressure of business at the mill; and if you do not mind, I would rather wait for him.'

Miss Carrington's reply was curt, and to the point: 'Wait for Roger, by all means. I am not young enough to fear deferring an unexpected pleasure, or old enough to dread that "by-and-by" may mean never. There is danger in hurrying on things too much; we need not crowd our lives. I will have neither of you until you can put your cares in your pockets, and take the full meaning of these sweet, sunshiny days.'

Aunt Diana's unselfishness and patience were rewarded when at last the desired letter from Alison arrived. Its bright sentences sounded to her like a ripple of soft laughter from youthful lips. 'We are coming, coming, coming!' Could any repetition be sweeter than that?

It was one of the loveliest evenings in June when Alison and Roger arrived at the Riverston station, and stood for a moment looking round them in a pleased uncertainty whether any familiar face would greet them. Miss Carrington had hinted that she pre-

ferred receiving her guests in her own porch—she hated the bustle and noise of a railway station. But still Alison's dark eyes would scan the platform and the sunny station room, half in delightful recognition and half in girlish curiosity.

'Ailie, who is that handsome fellow just getting down from a dog-cart?' asked Roger. 'What a neat little turn-out! I like a chestnut mare. Holloa! do you know him?' as Alison smiled and bowed.

'It is Greville Moore,' she said hurriedly, and a bright look of pleasure crossed her face at the sight of her old friend, which was certainly reflected in the young man's countenance as he came forward and greeted them.

'You are punctual to a minute,' he said joyously, 'rather before your time, for I have only just driven up. Miss Carrington told me I might bring the dog cart, and your luggage might go up by the omnibus. How are you, Miss Alison? You do not seem at all fagged by your long journey. I expected to find a pair of dusty, jaded travellers.'

'Alison is as fresh as a lark,' returned Roger; 'she has been chirping like a whole nest-full all the way up. It is a good many years since we met, Moore. I should hardly have identified you the first minute, but for my sister's recognition.'

'I believe I should not have known you,' replied Greville, with a quick, scrutinising glance. 'You don't look first-rate, does he, Miss Alison? He has an overworked appearance. We must give him plenty of tennis and boating, and make him look younger.'

'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,' laughed Roger. 'Two or three weeks of idleness and fresh air will make a different fellow of me. I mean to forget that there are such things as saw-mills in existence.'

'Come, that is sensible,' returned Greville heartily. 'Miss Alison, will you take the front seat? Merle, the groom is going to look after the luggage, so you need not trouble your head about it.' And, springing lightly to his place, he touched the mare, and in a moment they were driving rapidly down the shady road.

'Oh, there is the river!' exclaimed Alison, in a tone of ecstasy. 'Look, Roger, you can just catch a gleam through the trees—oh! the dear place, how I do love it!' her voice rising into a perfect crescendo, of which the top note was complete satisfaction.

'It is just a year since you have seen it,' observed Greville. 'Miss

Alison, what made you steal a march on me in that fashion? I was quite hurt that you never gave me a hint of your intention of going home.'

He spoke in a low tone that Roger could not hear.

The quick, sensitive colour rushed into Alison's face—there was such implied reproach in Greville's voice. Had he really been hurt?

'Oh, you must not feel like that about it,' she returned, with a sweet, candid look. 'We had talked of the possibility, Aunt Diana and I, but nothing had been settled. I had put it out of my mind. I was so naughty, I could not bear the idea of going home and doing my duty. I should never have gone at all if Aunt Diana had not helped me.'

'You did not think how I should feel when I came back and found you gone,' retorted Greville, in a boyish, injured voice, that reached Roger and made him smile, only Alison grew a little grave.

'I left a message with your grandfather,' she said quietly. 'What could I do? Aunt Diana said it was my duty to go, and that it was no good putting one's hand to the plough and looking backwards. What is the use of loitering over a difficult task when it has to be done?'

'That is true, but——'

'Please don't talk of last summer,' she interrupted him; 'it makes me sad only to think about it.' And he could see there were tears in her eyes as she spoke. 'I made myself so miserable over it; I could not bear leaving Aunt Diana, and I missed every one so.'

Alison broke off abruptly, though everything had turned out for the best. Though she would not have had it otherwise, still the memory of that struggle and the victory that had cost her so much gave her a pained feeling. It is only in heaven, under the clearer light of a fuller and purer life, that the victor will dare to recall without pain the fierce battle with the scorching fires of trial through which he has passed.

'Miss Alison, please do not look sad over it,' said Greville earnestly. 'What a clumsy fellow I am! I have silenced the nest-full of twittering young larks'—referring to Roger's speech. 'Come, I know you will forgive me, and look chirpy again, when I tell you I have passed muster and come off with flying colours.'

'Oh, I am so glad!' exclaimed Alison, her smiles returning

again. 'Then you must have worked hard. How pleased Mr. Moore must be!'

'To hear grandfather talk,' returned Greville calmly, 'you would think I was the Admirable Crichton at least. The dear old man makes no end of fuss, bless him! I tell him it is all your doing; you gave me such a terrible lecture that Wednesday.'

'Oh, no,' replied Alison, blushing; 'it was your own good sense.'

'I shall go in for "Greats" next year, so I shall have to grind pretty hard. I am to have a coach down here this summer. Cheyne, of Balliol, is at The Crays with his people, and he is a rare fellow for that. I have to work all my mornings,' he continued, rather dolorously, 'but I shall have my afternoons and evenings free. Miss Alison, you are not listening to me.'

'Oh, yes, I am!' she cried joyously, 'but I cannot bear any more just now, though I am very glad to hear it all. Roger, do look! there is Moss-side—you know you have forgotten it—and there is Aunt Di in the porch.'

'Ailie, you have eyes like a hawk. I see nothing but greenery and sunshine.'

Nevertheless, Roger did perceive, a moment afterwards, a tall figure in myrtle-green standing under a trellis of roses.

Miss Carrington had evidently heard the wheels of the dog-cart, and had come out to look. When they stopped she had the little gate open, and was helping Alison to alight.

'How are you, my dear child?' she said, as Alison put her arms round her; 'actually not tired, Ailie! And you, Roger? Welcome to Moss-side, my boy!'

'Aren't you going to welcome me, too, Miss Carrington?' asked Greville, half jokingly, but he looked a little wistfully at the group.

'No, not to-night,' she returned decidedly. 'I must have my belongings to myself for this one evening; you may come in to breakfast, if you like.' And, knowing of old that Miss Carrington's decisions allowed of no appeal, Greville lifted his hat and wished them good-evening, and turned his mare's head in the direction of the Fernleigh stables, not without a backward glance at the slim dark-eyed girl looking affectionately in Miss Carrington's face.

'Now, Ailie, go to your old room and get rid of the dust, while I show Roger upstairs,' observed Aunt Diana, in a brisk voice. 'You will find me in the studio when you are ready.'

Her old room! Alison gave a happy little sigh as she trod on

the threshold. What a green little bower it looked, and oh, the roses!—roses in the quaint old china bowls that Aunt Diana so much affected; roses in the slender Venetian glasses on the mantle-piece and toilet-table; roses clambering into the window and pressing their pink faces against the swinging lattice; and on the window-sill, dropped by some thoughtful hand, a glorious Gloire de Dijon, with a background of maidenhair fern, such as Alison loved to wear in her white gown. She stood for a moment looking out thoughtfully. The long shady lawns of Moss-side and Fernleigh lay beneath her, and through the fresh foliage of the willows and acacias was the silvery gleam of the lovely river. Something in the Sabbath-like stillness, in the beauty of the scene, in the peaceful satisfaction of her heart, moved Alison to kneel down among the roses, and breathe a brief thanksgiving for the duties she had been strengthened to perform, for the fatherly goodness that brought her back to the home of her adoption, and for the human love that was but a dim reflection of the Divine.

She did not hurry to go down, though her luggage had not yet arrived, and there was no possibility of changing her travelling-dress. But when she had brushed her brown hair, and put on her breast-knot of roses, she looked trim as ever; and her bright smiling face, as she opened the studio door, brought the name 'Sunny' to Miss Carrington's mind, for she looked as all young faces should look—the very essence of a sunbeam.

'Oh, Aunt Di, the dear lovely room! And, oh, that is the new picture!' springing to the easel to gaze delightedly on golden corn-fields, with scarlet poppies struggling among the wheat, like gaudy promises never to ripen into fruit, and under the hedge a little brown baby sleeping with its dimpled hand full of weeds and a sheep-dog watching its slumbers.

'Do you like the picture, Ailie? It is sold already. Lady Franklin fell in love with it, but I want it to hang in next year's Academy. The baby is painted from life; the original belongs to Barby, an old servant.'

'Aunt Di, it is perfectly beautiful! Roger, come here and tell me if you do not think so.'

'Nonsense, Ailie; Roger is far too hungry for art criticism at present. Come away, you foolish child, and let me give you something more satisfying than painted canvas. The chickens came from Barby's farm, with the strawberries and this jug of delicious cream.'

Alison looked round rather bewildered, for none of these tempting viands were in sight; but Miss Carrington, who knew her love for meals *al fresco*, had had the supper table laid in the wide verandah, and not only chickens and strawberries, but other delicacies were provided for the hungry travellers.

'This is better than your tea-table under the limes at home, Ailie,' exclaimed Roger, as he carved for the ladies. 'No wonder she was spoiled, Aunt Diana, and did not take kindly to the sooty ivy and the music of the crane.'

'Roger, I shall impose a forfeit if either you or Ailie mention the mill,' observed Miss Carrington, as she handed him a cup of coffee enriched with Barby's yellow cream. 'I want you two young things to forget everything but how you are to amuse yourselves. Ailie, shall we have our breakfast-table here, as we did last year, while the blackbirds and thrushes take theirs? Roger looks as if he wanted to live in the open air. Do you know you have got thin, dear boy?'

'Never mind that, Aunt Diana; there is no fear of rusting, that is one blessing—work never hurt man or woman yet.'

'No,' she said thoughtfully, 'but "moderation in all things" was an apostle's maxim; but you are right in principle, Roger. Now for the home news. What is really your father's condition? Letters are so unsatisfactory, and they never say half enough.'

'Dr. Greenwood is delighted with the progress he has made, Aunt Diana; he gets across the room quite nicely on crutches, though he is not to do more at present. Of course the long confinement has made him look pale and delicate, but his spirits are first-rate. Dr. Greenwood told me the other day that in another year or so he might hope to be as well as ever. He says he is an excellent patient.'

'And how does the book go on?'

'Very well, I believe; he manages to write without difficulty with the help of a sloping board.'

'That was Roger's clever contrivance,' interrupted Alison.

'Aunt Diana does not want to know that; you have broken the thread of my discourse. Father does seem happier lying there with all his books round him than he did at the mill.'

'And we think,' broke in Alison again, with a merry defiant look at her brother, 'that papa's place is in his study, and Roger ought to be master at the mill.'

'And a very good idea too,' observed Miss Carrington, looking at her nephew with decided approbation. 'How does Murdoch fulfil his duties?'

'Admirably; he is a very steady fellow.'

'Then Ailie's plan will answer,' she returned in her practical way. 'There is no reason, Roger, why you should not carry on the business, and leave your father free for his literary pursuits. He was never fitted for a business man; he is too dreamy and unpractical. Believe me, he will be far happier and less irritable if circumstances allow him to follow his own particular bent.'

'I am quite sure of it, Aunt Diana,' returned Roger quietly; 'and now I have worked alone all these months, I feel more competent to carry on the business single-handed. It has been a hard pull—Fergusson had done so much mischief; but things are righting themselves now, and with Murdoch's help we shall get on capitally.'

'That is well,' replied Miss Carrington heartily; 'and now, how does Missie go on?'

This time Alison answered.

'Her arm is quite right, but she still looks rather thin and delicate. Mrs. Hardwick—Mrs. Forbes, I mean—wants to take her to Torquay, in October, for two months; she says she will be such a nice companion for Anna. Papa insists that she is to go.'

'And how does my little friend Anna get on with her stepfather?'

'He is very kind to her, Aunt Di. Roger is rather pleased with him on the whole.'

'Dr. Forbes is one of those men whose bark is worse than their bite,' observed Roger; 'he rather prides himself on being a bear; but I think Miss Anna has proved there is a soft spot in his heart.'

'I am glad to hear this. Then the poor little girl is happy on the whole?'

'I don't think Anna is to be pitied, Aunt Di,' returned Alison, in rather a peculiar tone; 'she looks extremely happy.' And something in Alison's manner made Miss Carrington change the subject; it certainly did not appear to interest Roger, for he seemed absorbed in his strawberries all at once, and his criticism on Dr. Forbes was given in rather a constrained voice.

'Miss Leigh tells me that Missie is wonderfully improved since her illness,' observed Aunt Diana, after a pause, which no one seemed anxious to break.

‘Indeed she is,’ returned Alison, with quick enthusiasm. ‘I have never seen any one so changed; she is so much quieter in dress and manners, and so much more tolerant of Rudel. Poppie likes to be with her now, and Miss Leigh cannot say enough in her praise. It is easy to see how she tries to break herself of her faults, and it is so much harder for her than for us, as she has not naturally a good temper.’

‘Neither had I, Ailie. Many a girl has a sore fight to go through as well as Missie; it is so easy to contract bad habits, and so difficult to subdue them. I believe nothing but the grace of the Lord Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can enable any one to overcome a really bad temper.’

And so saying, Miss Carrington rose from the table, and proposed that Roger should go down to the river while she and Alison disposed of the unpacking.

CHAPTER XXIV.

‘HE WILL HAVE SUNNY TO COMFORT HIM.’

THERE was a merry breakfast in the verandah next morning, and Alison, in her white dress, with some dewy roses as a breast-knot, looked the picture of happiness as she poured out the coffee.

Directly it was over, Greville took her and Roger to see his grandfather.

Mr. Moore was eagerly expecting them; even before Alison's foot had passed over the threshold his sightless eyes were turned to the window, and his ‘Welcome, Sunny,’ reached her ears.

In another moment Alison was occupying her old footstool at his feet, and his fine wrinkled hand, a little more trembling than of old, was placed on her hair, with a half-audible blessing.

‘Dear Mr. Moore, I am so glad to see you again——’

‘Have you missed us, little one? Not half as much as we have missed Sunny.’ And as she pressed her lips to his hand in mute contradiction of this, he said, half sadly, ‘Child, I never thought to have heard your sweet voice again, but the good God would have it otherwise; before the message reached me, it was recalled, the gates were almost closed in my face.’

‘Thank God for that!’ she whispered; ‘but they never told me that you were ill until you were well again.’

‘Ah, Miss Carrington is a wise woman; she thinks it wrong to burthen young spirits with sorrows that do not belong to them. My boy there nearly broke his heart about the old man; can you believe it, Sunny?’

‘You are like his own father,’ she returned softly. ‘He is outside on the verandah with Roger. Are you well enough to speak to Roger?’

‘Ay, ready and willing; he has grown a fine lad, I hear.’ And as Alison beckoned to them, the two young men came in through the window, and Roger sat down by the old man's side.

It was pleasant to Alison to see her brother's quiet, respectful



ALISON WAS SITTING AT HER WINDOW.

manners, so full of reverence for that wise and dignified old age, and the evident gratification with which Mr. Moore listened to him. She might almost have believed herself forgotten, but that every now and then the thin hand passed lightly over her hair with a caressing touch, which told how he loved to feel Sunny near him again. Greville kept a little aloof from them, but not a movement escaped his notice. Once Alison glanced in his direction, and met a grave, touched look in his eyes, as though something moved him.

Miss Carrington presently came in to see after her charge, for such she evidently considered the old man, and dispersed the little group. Mr. Moore must have his noon-day rest, and then he would be well enough to play to them in the evening, but he had talked to them sufficiently for the present.

The rest of the morning was spent in tennis, and in the afternoon Miss Carrington joined them, and Greville and Roger rowed them to Long Island, that Alison might revisit her old haunts; and the evening was spent at Fernleigh.

This was Greville's only idle morning; for the future he adhered steadily to his determination to work until luncheon, and as Alison resumed her old habits of painting under Aunt Diana's supervision, or playing to Mr. Moore, or reading to him, Roger found himself left to his own devices.

He took Miss Carrington's advice, and lived in the open air, either lying on the lawn with a book, or paddling himself lazily in a canoe, till his face was brown and ruddy with health, and he grew as light-hearted as a boy.

In the afternoons and evenings the three young people were always together. Tennis and boating, or drives in Greville's dog-cart, filled up the afternoon. When Mr. Moore was pretty well, the evenings were always spent in his room; sometimes he played on his violin while Alison accompanied him, or one of the young men read aloud while the ladies worked.

The old man always retired early, and then sometimes Greville would tempt them to a moonlight row or stroll, or if Miss Carrington refused this for herself and Alison, Roger and he would pace the garden in animated conversation.

The young men had become great friends. Greville, who was a few months older than Roger, always acted as though he were younger. Roger was full of quaint drollery, and loved fun in his own way, but Greville's spirits were liable to carry him away; he had

plenty of character, but Roger's grave solidity and greater thoughtfulness were uncommon at his age ; nevertheless Greville's gaiety and natural exuberance covered a depth of feeling that would have astonished people. 'A man is a man for a' that,' he would have said, if any one had accused him of too much love of play ; that he played well in his youth was no argument against his working well by-and-by. 'Young growing things must stretch themselves,' Miss Carrington used to say in loving extenuation of her favourite.

When a good woman thinks well of a man, there cannot be much amiss with him. Miss Carrington always said Greville was a fine creature, and she had a tolerably shrewd judgment of her own.

Aunt Diana had resolved that Roger and Alison should have as much play as possible, so she not only revived her Wednesdays, but she gave a boating-party and a large picnic. Roger was a great favourite with the ladies, old and young, though he could not compare in good looks to Greville, but his honest face and courteous manners—the manners bred of a perfectly kind heart—won golden opinions ; but Miss Carrington, who had reasons of her own for watching him, could not fail to notice that though he was pleasant to all the young ladies, he did not single out one as an object for any special attention, while on the contrary Greville was always beside Alison.

She drew her own conclusions, but made no remark. She always said, 'It was like brushing the golden dust off a butterfly's wing to speak of such things to young people before the time.' But her heart was very full sometimes when she looked at Alison. 'I will not speak to her ; when the time comes, she will seek me of her own accord,' she thought ; 'there are some things I cannot teach her, that every woman must learn for herself.'

That time came sooner than she expected.

One evening she was sitting alone in the studio, writing a letter to her brother-in-law, when she caught a glimpse of Alison's white gown flashing between the shrubs, and in another moment the girl came swiftly through the conservatory, and stood beside her.

'Aunt Di, I want to speak to you.'

'One moment, Ailie ; I have just finished my letter to your father. Have you any message for him ?'

'Yes—no—oh ! I cannot think of one just now,' she said, in such a trembling voice that Miss Carrington looked up quickly ; and what she saw in Alison's face made her drop her pen.

'Come and sit here, darling, and tell me all about it;' and as Alison hid her burning face, drawing down Aunt Diana's hands, as though they would shield her effectually, she continued, tenderly, 'Don't be shy over it, Ailie. Of course I know what it is: Greville has been speaking to you?'

'Yes, Aunt Di.'

'Well, I will scold him presently for not speaking to me first.' But there was no anger in Aunt Diana's eyes. 'I dare say his grandfather encouraged him; he is so set upon this. Well, Ailie, and what did our boy say to you?'

'Oh, Aunt Di, don't ask me,' returned Alison desperately, 'he thinks too highly of me. I am not as good as that; I don't deserve it all.'

'We must allow for a little exaggeration under the circumstances,' returned Miss Carrington, smiling, and managing to free her hands, and so get a glimpse of the hidden happy face.

'But, Aunt Di,' almost whispering, 'are we not too young? Greville will have to be at Oxford another year, and—and——'

'Too young to marry just yet, Ailie; but I think, under Greville's peculiar circumstances—his grandfather's great age and precarious health, and his loneliness, having no parents or brothers and sisters belonging to him—that an engagement might be allowed. It will make him happier, and give him heart for his work. In general, Ailie, I do not approve of long engagements for young people, they are so unsettling; but you know Greville's circumstances as well as I do. He is his grandfather's heir; in two years he might well marry.'

'Then you approve?' raising her eyes at last to her aunt's face.

'Don't you know Greville is my own boy? he is even dearer to me than you; you must not be sorry to hear that. One day I will tell a sad little story about myself, how a girl's self-will and temper lost her the noblest lover a woman could have.'

'I guess who it was; I always knew,' murmured Alison.

'Greville is dear to me for his father's sake,' returned Miss Carrington, almost solemnly. 'No more of this just now, Ailie. If you love me, dear child, you little know how happy it makes me to know my two darlings are to be united.'

'Really and truly happy, Aunt Di?'

'Yes, surely, dearest; and this has been the wish of Mr. Moore's heart. Ah, here comes Greville; he looks almost as shy over it as you do, Ailie.'

But, shy or not, there was no mistaking the expression of proud happiness on the young man's face. A look passed between him and Miss Carrington, and then she held out her hand.

'Well, Greville, have you come to be scolded?' she asked playfully.

'Yes; but you would not have the heart to do it,' was his reply. 'Cara,' with a pause on the old name, 'how could I help it?' And his glance at Alison was sufficiently eloquent.

'Well, Greville, I think you are worthy even of her.' And now something like the glimmer of unshed tears softened the keen grey eyes. 'God bless you, my boy! you have fulfilled the great wish of my heart.'

There was a little more talk after this, and then Greville said, 'Alison, I think we ought to go to my grandfather; this will make him very happy.' And then Alison obediently rose.

There was a touching scene with the old man. 'Now I can sing my *Nunc Dimittis*,' he said, raising his sightless eyes towards heaven, and a beautiful smile played round his lips. 'When the messenger comes, my boy will not be left desolate, he will have Sunny to comfort him.' And again his hands were placed on her bright hair to invoke a blessing.

Roger's turn came next. He had been out all day on a fishing excursion, and on his return Greville had waylaid him, and told him the news. Alison, who was sitting at her window, trying to compose her fluttered spirits, saw them coming up the garden walk together, and a few minutes afterwards there was a hasty step at her door, and Roger burst into her room.

She knew how glad he was by the way he took her in his arms and kissed her, even before he had uttered a word.

But it came at last.

'Ailie, I never was so pleased in my life. Of course I knew it was coming. He is a fine fellow; you are giving me just the sort of brother I wanted, and I am greatly obliged to you.'

'He told you, then?' a little bashfully.

'Yes; he had been waiting ever so long by the river bank. It is my belief that, like King Midas, he had been whispering his secret to the rushes. I wish you could have heard what he said about you. He has thoroughly convinced me that he fully appreciates Ailie.'

'I am so glad you will be friends,' returned Alison simply, quite ignoring the latter part of Roger's speech; in her modest opinion of

herself, she never ceased wondering at Greville's lover-like speeches; it was dear and kind of him to say such things, she thought, but she did not deserve them.

She said as much to him one day, when their engagement was but a week old, but he turned decidedly wilful.

'I shall think of you just as I like,' he said quietly; 'and I know I shall never alter my opinions. I don't care what your faults are; you are perfect in my eyes, just because you are Alison.' And after this she gave up the point.

But on the evening before she left Moss-side, she and Aunt Diana had one of their long talks. Greville had just left them grumbling, in spite of an invitation to breakfast the next morning, and though he knew that he was expected at The Holms in six weeks' time, to make acquaintance with Alison's home, and to introduce himself to Mr. Merle. But Miss Carrington paid no attention to his boyish discontent; this hour belonged to her, she said, in her decided manner; Greville might talk to Roger, but she wanted Ailie to herself.

So, while the two young men paced up and down by the river, Alison and Miss Carrington sat in the dim studio, looking out into the moonlight. There was so much that they had to say to each other on this last night.

'You do not think me too hard-hearted to insist on a two years' engagement, Ailie?' Miss Carrington said presently. 'Mr. Moore has begged me over and over again to reconsider my decision; but, indeed, I think Greville is too young for such a responsibility. In two years he will be five and-twenty.'

'I would not have it otherwise, Aunt Di,' returned Alison quietly. 'In two years' time, papa will be well and strong—at least, Dr. Greenwood tells us so—and Missie will be older; I can be spared then, and can leave home far more happily.'

'Is Greville content with this?'

'I have talked to him, and made him see that we are both right. Of course, we shall both feel the separation a little hard; but now I have promised to spend at least two months next summer at Moss-side, and he is to pay flying visits to The Holms, I think we ought to be content; and then there are the letters—letters are such a pleasure.'

'And in two years, Alison Merle is to be Alison Moore.'

'I hope so, Aunt Di.'

'Darling! that day will be a happy one for me. I love you both

so much, and then I shall have you near me. Think of Fernleigh being Ailie's home !'

'A beautiful home !' she returned.

'Roger will miss you the most, dear.'

'I hope not by that time, Aunt Di. Perhaps I ought not to speak of it ; he has never given me the right to do so ; but I think—I hope—Anna may be able to comfort him for my absence.'

'What makes you think so, dear ?' she asked very quietly ; and yet the same thought had occurred to her.

'It is Roger's manner ; it has changed so much of late. Once he used to be as friendly as possible with Anna, but now he never mentions her name if he can help it ; but when any one talks of her I can see the way he listens, and the look that comes into his eyes ; he is always so pleased when I tell him she is coming to The Holms, and he is so nice with her, speaking so gently to her, and anticipating all her wishes ; you could not doubt what it meant if you saw them together. And she is just as sweet to him as one could wish—very shy, but so simple and childlike.'

'She is a dear little thing, and I dare say she has improved.'

'Yes, indeed, even Missie owns she is almost pretty sometimes ; not that that matters, when she always looks so sweet and good. Oh, Aunt Di, I have grown to love her so !'

'Roger is a wise man,' observed Miss Carrington thoughtfully ; 'if he chooses Anna for his wife, he will find her certainly "above rubies." There is the law of kindness in her lips ; I never knew any one so perfectly gentle.'

'Missie is actually growing fond of her ; they will be nice companions for each other when I leave home. Oh, Aunt Di, how beautifully everything has turned out ! Papa is better, and Missie is growing more amiable every day ; Rudel is not so rough, and Poppie is the dearest little soul, and Miss Leigh is so much more cheerful !'

'God has accepted our sacrifice, Ailie,' returned Aunt Diana solemnly ; 'a blessing has come down on your efforts in a way we never expected.'

'"Give, and it shall be given to you again," is the Divine law of love.'

'Darling ! I never loved you so much as when I sent you from me to do your duty.'



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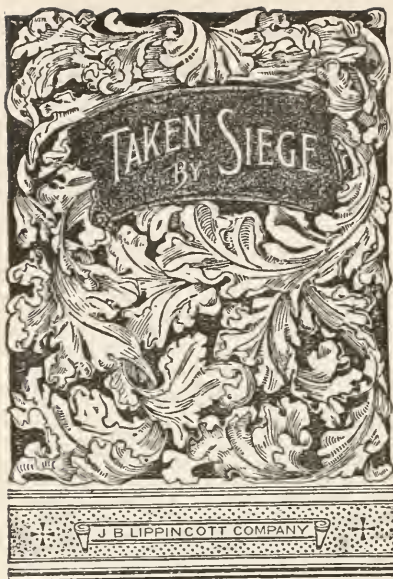
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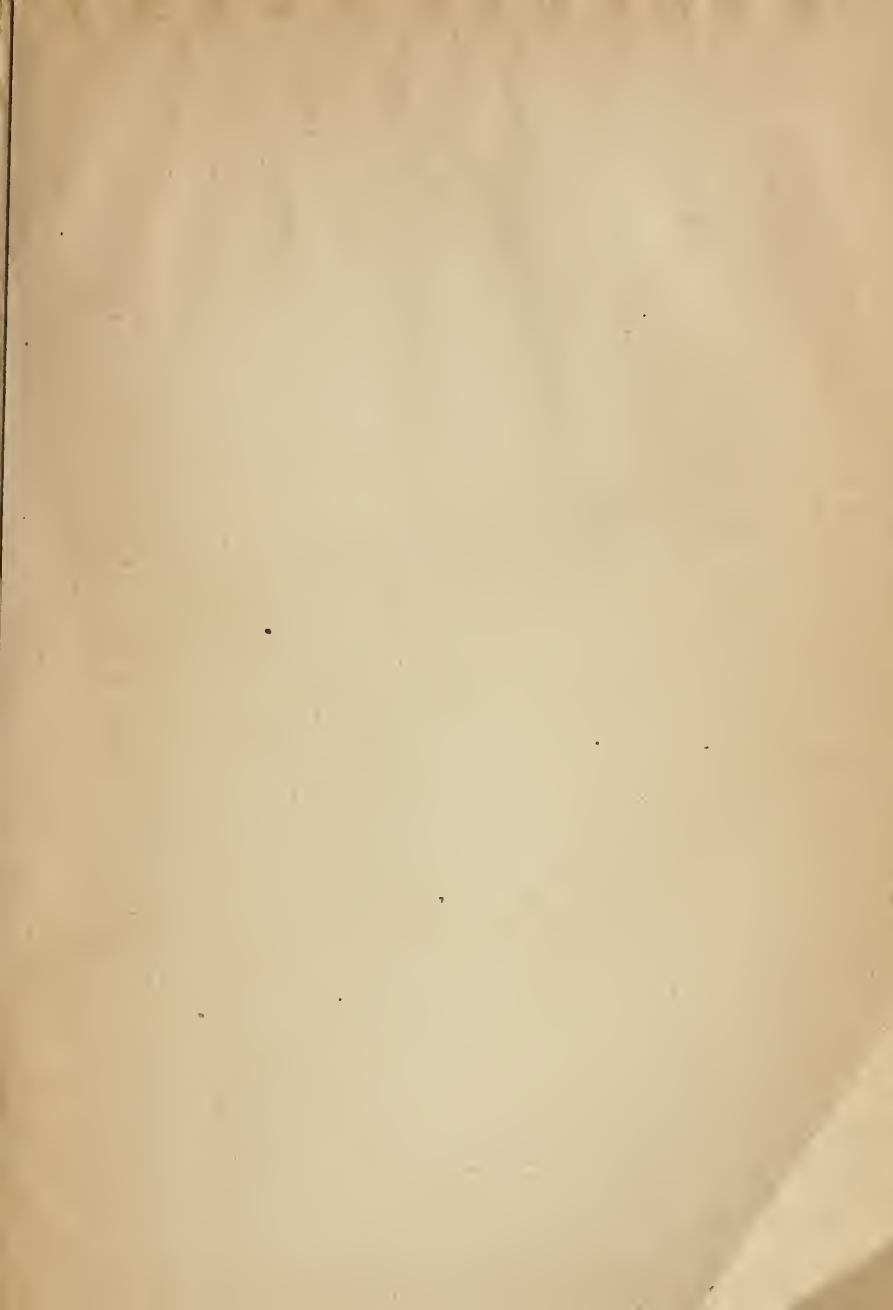
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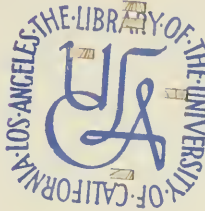


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