The Carved Lions

by Mary Louisa Molesworth

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THE CARVED LIONS.

OUR CONSULTATION TOOK A GOOD WHILE.—p. 44.—Frontispiece.

THE CARVED

LIONS

BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH

ILLUSTRATED BY L. LESLIE BROOKE

1895

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ILLUSTRATIONS.

Our consultation took a good while "Good-bye!" "Little girls must not contradict, and must not be rude" "My poor little girl, what is the matter?" I crept downstairs, past one schoolroom with its closed door The brother lions rose into the air Myra came forward gently, her sweet face looking rather grave

CHAPTER I.

OLD DAYS.

It is already a long time since I was a little girl. Sometimes, when I look out upon the world and see how many changes have come about, how different many things are from what I can remember them, I could believe that a still longer time had passed since my childhood than is really the case. Sometimes, on the contrary, the remembrance of things that then happened comes over me so very vividly, so very real-ly, that I can scarcely believe myself to be as old as I am.

I can remember things in my little girlhood more clearly than many in later years. This makes me hope that the story of some part of it may interest children of to-day, for I know I have not forgotten the feelings I had as a child. And after all, I believe that in a great many ways children are very like each other in their hearts and minds, even though their lives may seem very different and very far apart.

The first years of my childhood were very happy, though there were some things in my life which many children would not like at all. My parents were not rich, and the place where we lived was not pretty or pleasant. It was a rather large town in an ugly part of the country, where great tall chimneys giving out black smoke, and streams—once clear sparkling brooks, no doubt—whose water was nearly as black as the smoke, made it often difficult to believe in bright blue sky or green grass, or any of the sweet pure country scenes that children love, though perhaps children that have them do not love them as much as those who have not got them do.

I think that was the way with me. The country was almost the same as fairyland to me—the peeps I had of it now and then were a delight I could not find words to express.

But what matters most to children is not where their home is, but what it is. And our home was a very sweet and loving one, though it was only a rather small and dull

house in a dull street. Our father and mother did everything they possibly could to make us happy, and the trial of living at Great Mexington must have been far worse for them than for us. For they had both been accustomed to rich homes when they were young, and father had never expected that he would have to work so hard or in the sort of way he had to do, after he lost nearly all his money.

When I say "us," I mean my brother Haddie and I. Haddie—whose real name was Haddon—was two years older than I, and we two were the whole family. My name—was I was going to say, for now there are so few people to call me by my Christian name that it seems hardly mine—my name is Geraldine. Somehow I never had a "short" for it, though it is a long name, and Haddie was always Haddie, and "Haddon" scarcely needs shortening. I think it was because he nearly always called me Sister or "Sis."

Haddie was between ten and eleven years old and I was nine when the great change that I am going to tell you about came over our lives. But I must go back a little farther than that, otherwise you would not understand all about us, nor the meaning of the odd title I have chosen for my story.

I had no governess and I did not go to school. My mother taught me herself, partly, I think, to save expense, and partly because she did not like the idea of sending me to even a day-school at Great Mexington. For though many of the families there were very rich, and had large houses and carriages and horses and beautiful gardens, they were not always very refined. There were good and kind and unselfish people there as there are everywhere, but there were some who thought more of being rich than of anything else—the sort of people that are called "purse proud." And as children very often take after their parents, my father and mother did not like the idea of my having such children as my companions—children who would look down upon me for being poor, and perhaps treat me unkindly on that account.

"When Geraldine is older she must go to school," my father used to say, "unless by

that time our ship comes in and we can afford a governess. But when she is older it will not matter so much, as she will have learnt to value things at their just worth."

I did not then understand what he meant, but I have never forgotten the words.

I was a very simple child. It never entered my head that there was anything to be ashamed of in living in a small house and having only two servants. I thought it would be nice to have more money, so that mamma would not need to be so busy and could have more pretty dresses, and above all that we could then live in the country, but I never minded being poor in any sore or ashamed way. And I often envied Haddie, who did go to school. I thought it would be nice to have lots of other little girls to play with. I remember once saying so to mamma, but she shook her head.

"I don't think you would like it as much as you fancy you would," she said. "Not at present at least. When you are a few years older I hope to send you for some classes to Miss Ledbury's school, and by that time you will enjoy the good teaching. But except for the lessons, I am quite sure it is better and happier for you to be at home, even though you find it rather lonely sometimes."

And in his way Haddie said much the same. School was all very well for boys, he told me. If a fellow tried to bully you, you could bully him back. But girls weren't like that—they couldn't fight it out. And when I said to him I didn't want to fight, he still shook his head, and repeated that I wouldn't like school at all—some of his friends' sisters were at school and they hated it.

Still, though I did not often speak of it, the wish to go to school, and the belief that I should find school-life very happy and interesting, remained in my mind. I often made up fancies about it, and pictured myself doing lessons with other little girls and reading the same story-books and playing duets together. I could not believe that I should not like it. The truth was, I suppose, that I was longing for companions of my own age.

It was since Haddie went to school that I had felt lonely. I was a great deal with mamma, but of course there were hours in the day when she was taken up with other things and could not attend to me. I used to long then for the holidays to come so that I should have Haddie again to play with.

My happiest days were Wednesdays and Saturdays, for then he did not go to school in the afternoon. And mamma very often planned some little treat for us on those days, such as staying up to have late tea with her and papa when he came in from his office, or reading aloud some new story-book, or going a walk with her in the afternoon and buying whatever we liked for our own tea at the confectioner's.

Very simple treats—but then we were very simple children, as I have said already.

Our house, though in a street quite filled with houses, was some little way from the centre of the town, where the best shops were—some years before, our street had, I suppose, been considered quite in the country. We were very fond of going to the shops with mamma. We thought them very grand and beautiful, though they were not nearly as pretty as shops are nowadays, for they were much smaller and darker, so that the things could not be spread out in the attractive way they are now, nor were the things themselves nearly as varied and tempting.

There was one shop which interested us very much. It belonged to the principal furniture-maker of Mexington. It scarcely looked like a shop, but was more like a rather gloomy private house very full of heavy dark cabinets and tables and wardrobes and chairs, mostly of mahogany, and all extremely good and well made. Yes, furniture, though ugly, really was very good in those days—I have one or two relics of my old home still, in the shape of a leather-covered arm-chair and a beautifully-made chest of drawers. For mamma's godmother had helped to furnish our house when we came to Mexington, and she was the sort of old lady who when she did give a present gave it really good of its kind. She had had furniture herself made by Cranston—that was the cabinet-maker's name—for her home was in the

country only about three hours' journey from Mexington—and it had been first-rate, so she ordered what she gave mamma from him also.

But it was not because the furniture was so good that we liked going to Cranston's. It was for quite another reason. A little way in from the front entrance to the shop, where there were glass doors to swing open, stood a pair of huge lions carved in very dark, almost black, wood. They were nearly, if not quite, as large as life, and the first time I saw them, when I was only four or five, I was really frightened of them. They guarded the entrance to the inner part of the shop, which was dark and gloomy and mysterious-looking, and I remember clutching fast hold of mamma's hand as we passed them, not feeling at all sure that they would not suddenly spring forward and catch us. But when mamma saw that I was frightened, she stopped and made me feel the lions and stroke them to show me that they were only wooden and could not possibly hurt me. And after that I grew very fond of them, and was always asking her to take me to the "lion shop."

Haddie liked them too—his great wish was to climb on one of their backs and play at going a ride.

I don't think I thought of that. What I liked was to stroke their heavy manes and fancy to myself what I would do if, all of a sudden, one of them "came alive," as I called it, and turned his head round and looked at me. And as I grew older, almost without knowing it, I made up all sorts of fairy fancies about the lions—I sometimes thought they were enchanted princes, sometimes that they were real lions who were only carved wood in the day-time, and at night walked about wherever they liked.

So, for one reason or another, both Haddie and I were always very pleased when mamma had to look in at Cranston's.

This happened oftener than might have been expected, considering that our house was small, and that my father and mother were not rich enough often to buy new furniture. For mamma's godmother seemed to be always ordering something or other

at the cabinet-maker's, and as she knew mamma was very sensible and careful, she used to write to her to explain to Cranston about the things she wanted, or to look at them before he sent them home, to see that they were all right. And Cranston was always very polite indeed to mamma.

He himself was a stout, red-faced, little, elderly man, with gray whiskers, which he brushed up in a fierce kind of way that made him look like a rather angry cat, though he really was a very gentle and kind old man. I thought him much nicer than his partner, whose name was Berridge, a tall, thin man, who talked very fast, and made a great show of scolding any of the clerks or workmen who happened to be about.

Mr. Cranston was very proud of the lions. They had belonged to his grandfather and then to his father, who had both been in the same sort of business as he was, and he told mamma they had been carved in "the East." I didn't know what he meant by the East, and I don't now know what country he was alluding to—India or China or Japan. And I am not sure that he knew himself. But "the East" sounded far away and mysterious—it might do for fairyland or brownieland, and I was quite satisfied. No doubt, wherever they came from, the lions were very beautifully carved.

Now I will go on to tell about the changes that came into our lives, closing the doors of these first happy childish years, when there scarcely seemed to be ever a cloud on our sky.

One day, when I was a month or two past nine years old, mamma said to me just as I was finishing my practising—I used to practise half an hour every other day, and have a music lesson from mamma the between days—that she was going out to do some shopping that afternoon, and that, if I liked, I might go with her.

"I hope it will not rain," she added, "though it does look rather threatening. But perhaps it will hold off till evening."

"And I can take my umbrella in case it rains," I said. I was very proud of my umbrella. It had been one of my last birthday presents. "Yes, mamma, I should like

to come very much. Will Haddie come too?"

For it was Wednesday—one of his half-holidays.

"To tell the truth," said mamma, "I forgot to ask him this morning if he would like to come, but he will be home soon—it is nearly luncheon time. I daresay he will like to come, especially as I have to go to Cranston's."

She smiled a little as she said this. Our love for the carved lions amused her.

"Oh yes, I am sure he will like to come," I said. "And may we buy something for tea at Miss Fryer's on our way home?"

Mamma smiled again.

"That will be two treats instead of one," she said, "but I daresay I can afford two or three pence."

Miss Fryer was our own pet confectioner, or pastry-cook, as we used to say more frequently then. She was a Quakeress, and her shop was very near our house, so near that mamma let me go there alone with Haddie. Miss Fryer was very grave and quiet, but we were not at all afraid of her, for we knew that she was really very kind. She was always dressed in pale gray or fawn colour, with a white muslin shawl crossed over her shoulders, and a white net cap beautifully quilled and fitting tightly round her face, so that only a very little of her soft gray hair showed. She always spoke to us as "thou" and "thee," and she was very particular to give us exactly what we asked for, and also to take the exact money in payment. But now and then, after the business part had been all correctly settled, she would choose out a nice bun or sponge-cake, or two or three biscuits, and would say "I give thee this as a present." And she did not like us to say, "Thank you, Miss Fryer," but "Thank you, friend Susan." I daresay she would have liked us to say, "Thank thee," but neither Haddie nor I had courage for that!

I ran upstairs in high spirits, and five minutes after when Haddie came in from school he was nearly as pleased as I to hear our plans.

"If only it does not rain," said mamma at luncheon.

Luncheon was, of course, our dinner, and it was often mamma's dinner really too. Our father was sometimes so late of getting home that he liked better to have tea than a regular dinner. But mamma always called it luncheon because it seemed natural to her.

"I don't mind if it does rain," said Haddie, "because of my new mackintosh."

Haddie was very proud of his mackintosh, which father had got him for going to and from school in rainy weather. Mackintoshes were then a new invention, and very expensive compared with what they are now. But Haddie was rather given to catching cold, and at Great Mexington it did rain very often—much oftener than anywhere else, I am quite sure.

"And Geraldine doesn't mind because of her new umbrella," said mamma. "So we are proof against the weather, whatever happens."

It may seem strange that I can remember so much of a time now so very long ago. But I really do—of that day and of those that followed it especially, because, as I have already said, they were almost the close of the first part of our childish life.

That afternoon was such a happy one. We set off with mamma, one on each side of her, hanging on her arms, Haddie trying to keep step with her, and I skipping along on my tiptoes. When we got to the more crowded streets we had to separate—that is to say, Haddie had to let go of mamma's arm, so that he could fall behind when we met more than one person. For the pavements at Mexington were in some parts narrow and old-fashioned.

Mamma had several messages to do, and at some of the shops Haddie and I waited outside because we did not think they were very interesting. But at some we were only too ready to go in. One I remember very well. It was a large grocer's. We thought it a most beautiful shop, though nowadays it would be considered quite dull and gloomy, compared with the brilliant places of the kind you see filled with

biscuits and dried fruits and all kinds of groceries tied up with ribbons, or displayed in boxes of every colour of the rainbow. I must say I think the groceries themselves were quite as good as they are now, and in some cases better, but that may be partly my fancy, as I daresay I have a partiality for old-fashioned things.

Mamma did not buy all our groceries at this grand shop, for it was considered dear. But certain things, such as tea—which cost five shillings a pound then—she always ordered there. And the grocer, like Cranston, was a very polite man. I think he understood that though she was not rich, and never bought a great deal, mamma was different in herself from the grandly-dressed Mexington ladies who drove up to his shop in their carriages, with a long list of all the things they wanted. And when mamma had finished giving her order, he used always to offer Haddie and me a gingerbread biscuit of a very particular and delicious kind. They were large round biscuits, of a nice bright brown colour, and underneath they had thin white wafer, which we called "eating paper." They were crisp without being hard. I never see gingerbreads like them now.

"This is a lucky day, mamma," I said, when we came out of the grocer's. "Mr. Simeon never forgets to give us gingerbreads when he is there himself."

"No," said mamma, "he is a very kind man. Perhaps he has got Haddies and Geraldines of his own, and knows what they like."

"And now are we going to Cranston's?" asked my brother.

Mamma looked at the paper in her hand. She was very careful and methodical in all her ways, and always wrote down what she had to do before she came out.

"Yes," she said, "I think I have done everything else. But I shall be some little time at Cranston's. Mrs. Selwood has asked me to settle ever so many things with him—she is going abroad for the winter, and wants him to do a good deal of work at Fernley while she is away."

CHAPTER II.

A HAPPY EVENING.

Haddie and I were not at all sorry to hear that mamma's call at Cranston's was not to be a hurried one.

"We don't mind if you are ever so long," I said; "do we, Haddie?"

"No, of course we don't," Haddie agreed. "I should like to spend a whole day in those big show-rooms of his. Couldn't we have jolly games of hide-and-seek, Sis? And then riding the lions! I wish you were rich enough to buy one of the lions, mamma, and have it for an ornament in the hall, or in the drawing-room."

"We should need to build a hall or a drawing-room to hold it," said mamma, laughing. "I'm afraid your lion would turn into a white elephant, Haddie, if it became ours."

I remember wondering what she meant. How could a lion turn into an elephant? But I was rather a slow child in some ways. Very often I thought a thing over a long time in my mind if I did not understand it before asking any one to explain it. And so before I said anything it went out of my head, for here we were at Cranston's door.

There was only a young shopman to be seen, but when mamma told him she particularly wanted to see Mr. Cranston himself, he asked us to step in and take a seat while he went to fetch him.

We passed between the lions. It seemed quite a long time since we had seen them, and I thought they looked at us very kindly. I was just nudging Haddie to whisper this to him when mamma stopped to say to us that we might stay in the outer room if we liked; she knew it was our favourite place, and in a few minutes we heard her talking to old Mr. Cranston, who had come to her in the inner show-room through another door.

Haddie's head was full of climbing up onto one of the lions to go a ride. But luckily he could not find anything to climb up with, which was a very good thing, as he would have been pretty sure to topple over, and Mr. Cranston would not have been at all pleased if he had scratched the lion.

To keep him quiet I began talking to him about my fancies. I made him look close into the lions' faces—it was getting late in the afternoon, and we had noticed before we came in that the sun was setting stormily. A ray of bright orange-coloured light found its way in through one of the high-up windows which were at the back of the show-room, and fell right across the mane of one of the lions and almost into the eyes of the other. The effect on the dark, almost black, wood of which they were made was very curious.

"Look, Haddie," I said suddenly, catching his arm, "doesn't it really look as if they were smiling at us—the one with the light on its face especially? I really do think there's something funny about them—I wonder if they are enchanted."

Haddie did not laugh at me. I think in his heart he was fond of fancies too, though he might not have liked the boys at school to know it. He sat staring at our queer friends nearly as earnestly as I did myself. And as the ray of light slowly faded, he turned to me.

"Yes," he said, "their faces do seem to change. But I think they always look kind."

"They do to us," I said confidently, "but sometimes they are quite fierce. I don't think they looked at us the way they do now the first time they saw us. And one day one of the men in the shop shoved something against one of them and his face frowned—I'm sure it did."

"I wonder if he'd frown if I got up on his back," said Haddie.

"Oh, do leave off about climbing on their backs," I said. "It wouldn't be at all comfortable—they're so broad, you couldn't sit cross-legs, and they'd be as slippery as anything. It's much nicer to make up stories about them coming alive in the night,

or turning into black princes and saying magic words to make the doors open like in the Arabian Nights."

"Well, tell me stories of all they do then," said Haddie condescendingly.

"I will if you'll let me think for a minute," I said. "I wish Aunty Etta was here—she does know such lovely stories."

"I like yours quite as well," said Haddie encouragingly, "I don't remember Aunty Etta's; it's such a long time since I saw her. You saw her last year, you know, but I didn't."

"She told me one about a china parrot, a most beautiful green and gold parrot, that was really a fairy," I said. "I think I could turn it into a lion story, if I thought about it."

"No," said Haddie, "you can tell the parrot one another time. I'd rather hear one of your own stories, new, about the lions. I know you've got some in your head. Begin, do—I'll help you if you can't get on."

But my story that afternoon was not to be heard. Just as I was beginning with, "Well, then, there was once an old witch who lived in a very lonely hut in the middle of a great forest," there came voices behind us, and in another moment we heard mamma saying,

"Haddie, my boy, Geraldine, I am quite ready."

I was not very sorry. I liked to have more time to make up my stories, and Haddie sometimes hurried me so. It was Aunty Etta, I think, who had first put it into my head to make them. She was so clever about it herself, both in making stories and in remembering those she had read, and she had read a lot. But she was away in India at the time I am now writing about; her going so far off was a great sorrow to mamma.

Haddie and I started up at once. We had to be very obedient, what father called

"quickly obedient," and though he was so kind he was very strict too.

"My children are great admirers of your lions, Mr. Cranston," mamma said; and the old man smiled.

"They are not singular in their taste, madam," he said. "I own that I am very proud of them myself, and when my poor daughter was a child there was nothing pleased her so much as when her mother or I lifted her on to one of them, and made believe she was going a ride."

Haddie looked triumphant.

"There now you see, Sis," he whispered, nudging me.

But I did not answer him, for I was listening to what mamma was saying.

"Oh, by the bye, Mr. Cranston," she went on, "I was forgetting to ask how your little grandchild is. Have you seen her lately?"

Old Cranston's face brightened.

"She is very well, madam, I thank you," he replied. "And I am pleased to say that she is coming to stay with us shortly. We hope to keep her through the winter. Her stepmother is very kind, but with little children of her own, it is not always easy for her to give as much attention as she would like to Myra, and she and Mr. Raby have responded cordially to our invitation."

"I am very glad to hear it—very glad indeed," said mamma. "I know what a pleasure it will be to you and Mrs. Cranston. Let me see—how old is the little girl now—seven, eight?"

"Nine, madam, getting on for ten indeed," said Mr. Cranston with pride.

"Dear me," said mamma, "how time passes! I remember seeing her when she was a baby—before we came to live here, of course, once when I was staying at Fernley, just after——"

Mamma stopped and hesitated.

"Just after her poor mother died—yes, madam," said the old man quietly.

And then we left, Mr. Cranston respectfully holding the door open.

It was growing quite dark; the street-lamps were lighted and their gleam was reflected on the pavement, for it had been raining and was still quite wet underfoot. Mamma looked round her.

"You had better put on your mackintosh, Haddie," she said. "It may rain again. No, Geraldine dear, there is no use opening your umbrella till it does rain."

My feelings were divided between pride in my umbrella and some reluctance to have it wet! I took hold of mamma's arm again, while Haddie walked at her other side. It was not a very cheerful prospect before us—the gloomy dirty streets of Mexington were now muddy and sloppy as well—though on the whole I don't know but that they looked rather more cheerful by gaslight than in the day. It was chilly too, for the season was now very late autumn, if not winter. But little did we care—I don't think there could have been found anywhere two happier children than my brother and I that dull rainy evening as we trotted along beside our mother. There was the feeling of her to take care of us, of our cheerful home waiting for us, with a bright fire and the tea-table all spread. If I had not been a little tired—for we had walked a good way—in my heart I was just as ready to skip along on the tips of my toes as when we first came out.

"We may stop at Miss Fryer's, mayn't we, mamma?" said Haddie.

"Well, yes, I suppose I promised you something for tea," mamma replied.

"How much may we spend?" he asked. "Sixpence—do say sixpence, and then we can get enough for you to have tea with us too."

"Haddie," I said reproachfully, "as if we wouldn't give mamma something however little we had!"

"We'd offer it her of course, but you know she wouldn't take it," he replied. "So it's

much better to have really enough for all."

His way of speaking made mamma laugh again.

"Then I suppose it must be sixpence," she said, "and here we are at Miss Fryer's. Shall we walk on, my little girl, I think you must be tired, and let Haddie invest in cakes and run after us?"

"Oh no, please mamma, dear," I said, "I like so to choose too."

Half the pleasure of the sixpence would have been gone if Haddie and I had not spent it together.

"Then I will go on," said mamma, "and you two can come after me together."

She took out her purse and gave my brother the promised money, and then with a smile on her dear face—I can see her now as she stood in the light of the street-lamp just at the old Quakeress's door—she nodded to us and turned to go.

I remember exactly what we bought, partly, perhaps, because it was our usual choice. We used to think it over a good deal first and each would suggest something different, but in the end we nearly always came back to the old plan for the outlay of our sixpence, namely, half-penny crumpets for threepence—that meant seven, not six; it was the received custom to give seven for threepence—and half-penny Bath buns for the other threepence—seven of them too, of course. And Bath buns, not plain ones. You cannot get these now—not at least in any place where I have lived of late years. And I am not sure but that even at Mexington they were a spécialité of dear old Miss Fryer's. They were so good; indeed, everything she sold was thoroughly good of its kind. She was so honest, using the best materials for all she made.

That evening she stood with her usual gentle gravity while we discussed what we should have, and when after discarding sponge-cakes and finger-biscuits, which we had thought of "for a change," and partly because finger-biscuits weighed light and made a good show, we came round at last to the seven crumpets and seven buns, she

listened as seriously and put them up in their little paper bags with as much interest as though the ceremony had never been gone through before. And then just as we were turning to leave, she lifted up a glass shade and drew out two cheese-cakes, which she proceeded to put into another paper bag.

Haddie and I looked at each other. This was a lovely present. What a tea we should have!

"I think thee will find these good," she said with a smile, "and I hope thy dear mother will not think them too rich for thee and thy brother."

She put them into my hand, and of course we thanked her heartily. I have often wondered why she never said, "thou wilt," but always "thee will," for she was not an uneducated woman by any means.

Laden with our treasures Haddie and I hurried home. There was mamma watching for us with the door open. How sweet it was to have her always to welcome us!

"Tea is quite ready, dears," she said. "Run upstairs quickly, Geraldine, and take off your things, they must be rather damp. I am going to have my real tea with you, for I have just had a note from your father to say he won't be in till late and I am not to wait for him."

Mamma sighed a little as she spoke. I felt sorry for her disappointment, but, selfishly speaking, we sometimes rather enjoyed the evenings father was late, for then mamma gave us her whole attention, as she was not able to do when he was at home. And though we were very fond of our father, we were—I especially, I think—much more afraid of him than of our mother.

And that was such a happy evening! I have never forgotten it. Mamma was so good and thoughtful for us, she did not let us find out in the least that she was feeling anxious on account of something father had said in his note to her. She was just perfectly sweet.

We were very proud of our spoils from Miss Fryer's. We wanted mamma to have

one cheesecake and Haddie and I to divide the other between us. But mamma would not agree to that. She would only take a half, so that we had three-quarters each.

"Wasn't it kind of Miss Fryer, mamma?" I said.

"Very kind," said mamma. "I think she is really fond of children though she is so grave. She has not forgotten what it was to be a child herself."

Somehow her words brought back to my mind what old Mr. Cranston had said about his little grand-daughter.

"I suppose children are all rather like each other," I said. "Like about Haddie, and that little girl riding on the lions."

Haddie was not very pleased at my speaking of it; he was beginning to be afraid of seeming babyish.

"That was quite different," he said. "She was a baby and had to be held on. It was the fun of climbing up I cared for."

"She wasn't a baby," I said. "She's nine years old, he said she was—didn't he, mamma?"

"You are mixing two things together," said mamma. "Mr. Cranston was speaking first of his daughter long ago when she was a child, and then he was speaking of her daughter, little Myra Raby, who is now nine years old."

"Why did he say my 'poor' daughter?" I asked.

"Did you not hear the allusion to her death? Mrs. Raby died soon after little Myra was born. Mr. Raby married again—he is a clergyman not very far from Fernley——"

"A clergyman," exclaimed Haddie. He was more worldly-wise than I, thanks to being at school. "A clergyman, and he married a shopkeeper's daughter."

"There are very different kinds of shopkeepers, Haddie," said mamma. "Mr. Cranston is very rich, and his daughter was very well educated and very nice. Still,

no doubt Mr. Raby was in a higher position than she, and both Mr. Cranston and his wife are very right-minded people, and never pretend to be more than they are. That is why I was so glad to hear that little Myra is coming to stay with them. I was afraid the second Mrs. Raby might have looked down upon them perhaps."

Haddie said no more about it. And though I listened to what mamma said, I don't think I quite took in the sense of it till a good while afterwards. It has often been like that with me in life. I have a curiously "retentive" memory, as it is called. Words and speeches remain in my mind like unread letters, till some day, quite unexpectedly, something reminds me of them, and I take them out, as it were, and find what they really meant.

But just now my only interest in little Myra Raby's history was a present one.

"Mamma," I said suddenly, "if she is a nice little girl like what her mamma was, mightn't I have her to come and see me and play with me? I have never had any little girl to play with, and it is so dull sometimes—the days that Haddie is late at school and when you are busy. Do say I may have her—I'm sure old Mr. Cranston would let her come, and then I might go and play with her sometimes perhaps. Do you think she will play among the furniture—where the lions are?"

Mamma shook her head.

"No, dear," she answered. "I am quite sure her grandmother would not like that. For you see anybody might come into the shop or show-rooms, and it would not seem nice for a little girl to be playing there—not nice for a carefully brought-up little girl, I mean."

"Then I don't think I should care to go to her house," I said, "but I would like her to come here. Please let her, mamma dear."

But mamma only said,

"We shall see."

After tea she told us stories—some of them we had heard often before, but we never tired of hearing them again—about when she and Aunty Etta were little girls. They were lovely stories—real ones of course. Mamma was not as clever as Aunty Etta about making up fairy ones.

We were quite sorry when it was time to go to bed.

After I had been asleep for a little that night I woke up again—I had not been very sound asleep. Just then I saw a light, and mamma came into the room with a candle.

"I'm not asleep, dear mamma," I said. "Do kiss me again."

"That is what I have come for," she answered.

And she came up to the bedside and kissed me, oh so sweetly—more than once. She seemed as if she did not want to let go of me.

"Dear mamma," I whispered sleepily, "I am so happy—I'm always happy, but to-night I feel so extra happy, somehow."

"Darling," said mamma.

And she kissed me again.

CHAPTER III.

COMING EVENTS.

The shadow of coming changes began to fall over us very soon after that.

Indeed, the very next morning at breakfast I noticed that mamma looked pale and almost as if she had been crying, and father was, so to say, "extra" kind to her and to me. He talked and laughed more than usual, partly perhaps to prevent our noticing how silent dear mamma was, but mostly I think because that is the way men do when they are really anxious or troubled.

I don't fancy Haddie thought there was anything wrong—he was in a hurry to get off

to school.

After breakfast mamma told me to go and practise for half an hour, and if she did not come to me then, I had better go on doing some of my lessons alone. She would look them over afterwards. And as I was going out of the room she called me back and kissed me again—almost as she had done the night before.

That gave me courage to say something. For children were not, in my childish days, on such free and easy terms with their elders as they are now. And kind and gentle as mamma was, we knew very distinctly the sort of things she would think forward or presuming on our part.

"Mamma," I said, still hesitating a little.

"Well, dear," she replied. She was buttoning, or pretending to button, the band of the little brown holland apron I wore, so that I could not see her face, but something in the tone of her voice told me that my instinct was not mistaken.

"Mamma," I repeated, "may I say something? I have a feeling that—that you are—that there is something the matter."

Mamma did not answer at once. Then she said very gently, but quite kindly,

"Geraldine, my dear, you know that I tell you as much as I think it right to tell any one as young as you—I tell you more, of our plans and private matters and such things, than most mothers tell their little daughters. This has come about partly through your being so much alone with me. But when I don't tell you anything, even though you may suspect there is something to tell, you should trust me that there is good reason for my not doing so."

"Yes," I said, but I could not stifle a little sigh. "Would you just tell me one thing, mamma," I went on; "it isn't anything that you're really unhappy about, is it?"

Again mamma hesitated.

"Dear child," she said, "try to put it out of your mind. I can only say this much to

you, I am anxious more than troubled. There is nothing the matter that should really be called a trouble. But your father and I have a question of great importance to decide just now, and we are very—I may say really terribly—anxious to decide for the best. That is all I can tell you. Kiss me, my darling, and try to be your own bright little self. That will be a comfort and help to me."

I kissed her and I promised I would try to do as she wished. But it was with rather a heavy heart that I went to my practising. What could it be? I did try not to think of it, but it would keep coming back into my mind. And I was only a child. I had no experience of trouble or anxiety. After a time my spirits began to rise again—there was a sort of excitement in the wondering what this great matter could be. I am afraid I did not succeed in putting it out of my mind as mamma wished me to do.

But the days went on without anything particular happening. I did not speak of what mamma had said to me to my brother. I knew she did not wish me to do so. And by degrees other things began to make me forget about it a little. It was just at that time, I remember, that some friend—an aunt on father's side, I think—sent me a present of The Wide, Wide World, and while I was reading it I seemed actually to live in the story. It was curious that I should have got it just then. If mamma had read it herself I am not sure that she would have given it to me. But after all, perhaps it served the purpose of preparing me a little—a very little—for what was before me in my own life.

It was nearly three weeks after the time I have described rather minutely that the blow fell, that Haddie and I were told the whole. I think, however, I will not go on telling how we were told, for I am afraid of making my story too long.

And of course, however good my memory is, I cannot pretend that the conversations I relate took place exactly as I give them. I think I give the spirit of them correctly, but now that I have come to the telling of distinct facts, perhaps it will be better simply to narrate them.

You will remember my saying that my father had lost money very unexpectedly, and that this was what had obliged him to come to live at Mexington and work so hard. He had got the post he held there—it was in a bank—greatly through the influence of Mrs. Selwood, mamma's godmother, who lived in the country at some hours' distance from the town, and whose name was well known there, as she owned a great many houses and other property in the immediate neighbourhood.

Father was very glad to get this post, and very grateful to Mrs. Selwood. She took great interest in us all—that is to say, she was interested in Haddie and me because we were mamma's children, though she did not care for or understand children as a rule. But she was a faithful friend, and anxious to help father still more.

Just about the time I have got to in my story, the manager of a bank in South America, in some way connected with the one at Great Mexington, became ill, and was told by the doctors that he must return to England and have a complete rest for two years. Mrs. Selwood had money connection with this bank too, and got to hear of what had happened. Knowing that father could speak both French and Spanish well, for he had been in the diplomatic service as a younger man, she at once applied for the appointment for him, and after some little delay she was told that he should have the offer of it for the two years.

Two years are not a very long time, even though the pay was high, but the great advantage of the offer was that the heads of the bank at Mexington promised, if all went well for that time, that some permanent post should be given to father in England on his return. This was what made him more anxious to accept the proposal than even the high pay. For Mrs. Selwood found out that he would not be able to save much of his salary, as he would have a large house to keep up, and would be expected to receive many visitors. On this account the post was never given to an unmarried man.

"If he accepts it," Mrs. Selwood wrote to mamma, "you, my dear Blanche, must go

with him, and some arrangement would have to be made about the children for the time. I would advise your sending them to school."

Now I think my readers will not be at a loss to understand why our dear mother had looked so troubled, even though on one side this event promised to be for our good in the end.

Father was allowed two or three weeks in which to make up his mind. The heads of the Mexington bank liked and respected him very much, and they quite saw that there were two sides to the question of his accepting the offer. The climate of the place was not very good—at least it was injurious to English people if they stayed there for long—and it was perfectly certain that it would be madness to take growing children like Haddie and me there.

This was the dark spot in it all to mamma, and indeed to father too. They were not afraid for themselves. They were both strong and still young, but they could not for a moment entertain the idea of taking us. And the thought of separation was terrible.

You see, being a small family, and living in a place like Great Mexington, where my parents had not many congenial friends, and being poor were obliged to live carefully, home was everything to us all. We four were the whole world to each other, and knew no happiness apart.

I do not mean to say that I felt or saw all this at once, but looking back upon it from the outside, as it were, I see all that made it a peculiarly hard case, especially—at the beginning, that is to say—for mamma.

It seems strange that I did not take it all in—all the misery of it, I mean—at first, nor indeed for some time, not till I had actual experience of it. Even Haddie realised it more in anticipation than I did. He was two years older, and though he had never been at a boarding-school, still he knew something of school life. There were boarders at his school, and he had often seen and heard how, till they got accustomed to it at any rate, they suffered from home-sickness, and counted the days

to the holidays.

And for us there were not to be any holidays! No certain prospect of them at best, though Mrs. Selwood said something vaguely about perhaps having us at Fernley for a visit in the summer. But it was very vague. And we had no near relations on mamma's side except Aunty Etta, who was in India, and on father's no one who could possibly have us regularly for our holidays.

All this mamma grasped at once, and her grief was sometimes so extreme that, but for Mrs. Selwood, I doubt if father would have had the resolution to accept. But Mrs. Selwood was what is called "very sensible," perhaps just a little hard, and certainly not sensitive. And she put things before our parents in such a way that mamma felt it her duty to urge father to accept the offer, and father felt it his duty to put feelings aside and do so.

They went to stay at Fernley from a Saturday to a Monday to talk it well over, and it was when they came back on the Monday that we were told.

Before then I think we had both come to have a strong feeling that something was going to happen. I, of course, had some reason for this in what mamma had said to me, though I had forgotten about it a good deal, till this visit to Fernley brought back the idea of something unusual. For it was very seldom that we were left by ourselves.

We did not mind it much. After all, it was only two nights and one whole day, and that a Sunday, when my brother was at home, so we stood at the door cheerfully enough, looking at our father and mother driving off in the clumsy, dingy old four-wheeler—though that is a modern word—which was the best kind of cab known at Mexington.

But when they were fairly off Haddie turned to me, and I saw that he was very grave. I was rather surprised.

"Why, Haddie," I said, "do you mind so much? They'll be back on Monday."

"No, of course I don't mind that," he said. "But I wonder why mamma looks so—so awfully trying-not-to-cry, you know."

"Oh," I said, "I don't think she's quite well. And she hates leaving us."

"No," said my brother, "there's something more."

And when he said that, I remembered the feeling I had had myself. I felt rather cross with Haddie; I wanted to forget it quite.

"You needn't try to frighten me like that," I said. "I meant to be quite happy while they were away—to please mamma, you know, by telling her so when she comes back."

Then Haddie, who really was a very good-natured, kind boy, looked sorry.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said; "perhaps it was my fancy. I don't want to be unhappy while they're away, I'm sure. I'm only too glad that to-day's Saturday and to-morrow Sunday."

And he did his very best to amuse me. We went out a walk that afternoon with the housemaid—quite a long walk, though it was winter. We went as far out of the town as we could get, to where there were fields, which in spring and summer still looked green, and through the remains of a little wood, pleasant even in the dullest season. It was our favourite walk, and the only pretty one near the town. There was a brook at the edge of the wood, which still did its best to sing merrily, and to forget how dingy and grimy its clear waters became a mile or two farther on; there were still a few treasures in the shape of ivy sprays and autumn-tinted leaves to gather and take home with us to deck our nursery.

I remember the look of it all so well. It was the favourite walk of many besides ourselves, especially on a Saturday, when the hard-worked Mexington folk were once free to ramble about—boys and girls not much older than ourselves among them, for in those days children were allowed to work in factories much younger than they do now. We did not mind meeting some of our townsfellows. On the

contrary, we felt a good deal of interest in them and liked to hear their queer way of talking, though we could scarcely understand anything they said. And we were very much interested indeed in some of the stories Lydia, who belonged to this part of the country, told us of her own life, in a village a few miles away, where there were two or three great factories, at which all the people about worked—men, women, and children too, so that sometimes, except for babies and very old people, the houses seemed quite deserted.

"And long ago before that," said Lydia, "when mother was a little lass, it was such a pretty village—cottages all over with creepers and honeysuckle—not ugly rows of houses as like each other as peas. The people worked at home on their own hand-looms then."

Lydia had a sense of the beautiful!

On our way home, of course, we called at Miss Fryer's—this time we had a whole shilling to spend, for there was Sunday's tea to think of as well as to-day's. We had never had so much at a time, and our consultation took a good while. We decided at last on seven crumpets and seven Bath buns as usual, and in addition to these, three large currant tea-cakes, which our friend Susan told us would be all the better for toasting if not too fresh. And the remaining threepence we invested in a slice of sweet sandwich, which she told us would be perfectly good if kept in a tin tightly closed. The old Quakeress for once, I have always suspected, departed on this occasion from her rule of exact payment for all purchases, for it certainly seemed a very large slice of sweet sandwich for threepence.

We were rather tired with our walk that evening and went to bed early. Nothing more was said by Haddie about his misgivings. I think he hoped I had forgotten what had passed, but I had not. It had all come back again, the strange feeling of change and trouble in the air which had made me question mamma that morning two or three weeks ago.

But I did not as yet really believe it. I had never known what sorrow and trouble actually are. It is not many children who reach even the age I was then with so sunny and peaceful an experience of life. That anything could happen to us—to me—like what happened to "Ellen" in The Wide, Wide World, I simply could not believe; even though if any one had talked to me about it and said that troubles must come and do come to all, and to some much more than to others, and that they might be coming to us, I should have agreed at once and said yes, of course I knew that was true.

The next day, Sunday, was very rainy. It made us feel dull, I think, though we did not really mind a wet Sunday as much as another day, for we never went a walk on Sunday. It was not thought right, and as we had no garden the day would have been a very dreary one to us, except for mamma.

She managed to make it pleasant. We went to church in the morning, and in the evening too sometimes. I think all children like going to church in the evening; there is something grown-up about it. And the rest of the day mamma managed to find interesting things for us to do. She generally had some book which she kept for reading aloud on Sunday—Dr. Adams's Allegories, "The Dark River" and others, were great favourites, and so were Bishop Wilberforce's Agathos. Some of them frightened me a little, but it was rather a pleasant sort of fright, there was something grand and solemn about it.

Then we sang hymns sometimes, and we always had a very nice tea, and mamma, and father too now and then, told us stories about when they were children and what they did on Sundays. It was much stricter for them than for us, though even for us many things were forbidden on Sundays which are now thought not only harmless but right.

Still, I never look back to the quiet Sundays in the dingy Mexington street with anything but a feeling of peace and gentle pleasure.

CHAPTER IV.

ALL SETTLED.

That Sunday—that last Sunday I somehow feel inclined to call it—stands out in my memory quite differently from its fellows. Both Haddie and I felt dull and depressed, partly owing no doubt to the weather, but still more, I think, from that vague fear of something being wrong which we were both suffering from, though we would not speak of it to each other.

It cleared up a little in the evening, and though it was cold and chilly we went to church. Mamma had said to us we might if we liked, and Lydia was going.

When we came in, cook sent us a little supper which we were very glad of; it cheered us up.

"Aren't you thankful they're coming home to-morrow?" I said to Haddie. "I've never minded their being away so much before."

They had been away two or three times that we could remember, though never for longer than a day or two.

"Yes," said Haddie, "I'm very glad."

But that was all he said.

They did come back the next day, pretty early in the morning, as father had to be at the bank. He went straight there from the railway station, and mamma drove home with the luggage. She was very particular when she went to stay with her godmother to take nice dresses, for Mrs. Selwood would not have been pleased to see her looking shabby, and it would not have made her any more sympathising or anxious to help, but rather the other way. Long afterwards—at least some years afterwards, when I was old enough to understand—I remember Mrs. Selwood saying to me that it was mamma's courage and good management which made everybody respect her.

I was watching at the dining-room window, which looked out to the street, when the cab drove up. After the heavy rain the day before, it was for once a fine day, with some sunshine. And sunshine was rare at Great Mexington, especially in late November.

Mamma was looking out to catch the first glimpse of me—of course she knew that my brother would be at school. There was a sort of sunshine on her face, at least I thought so at first, for she was smiling. But when I looked more closely there was something in the smile which gave me a queer feeling, startling me almost more than if I had seen that she was crying.

I think for my age I had a good deal of self-control of a certain kind. I waited till she had come in and kissed me and sent away the cab and we were alone. Then I shut the door and drew her to father's special arm-chair beside the fire.

"Mamma, dear," I half said, half whispered, "what is it?"

Mamma gave a sort of gasp or choke before she answered. Then she said,

"Why, dear, why should you think—oh, I don't know what I am saying," and she tried to laugh.

But I wouldn't let her.

"It's something in your face, mamma," I persisted.

She was silent for a moment.

"We had meant to tell you and Haddie this evening," she said, "father and I together; but perhaps it is better. Yes, my Geraldine, there is something. Till now it was not quite certain, though it has been hanging over us for some weeks, ever since——"

"Since that day I asked you—the morning after father came home so late and you had been crying?"

"Yes, since then," said mamma.

She put her arm round me, and then she told me all that I have told already, or at

least as much of it as she thought I could understand. She told it quietly, but she did not try not to cry—the tears just came trickling down her face, and she wiped them away now and then. I think the letting them come made her able to speak more calmly.

And I listened. I was very sorry for her, very very sorry. But you may think it strange—I have often looked back upon it with wonder myself, though I now feel as if I understood the causes of it better—when I tell you that I was not fearfully upset or distressed myself. I did not feel inclined to cry, except out of pity for mamma. And I listened with the most intense interest, and even curiosity. I was all wound up by excitement, for this was the first great event I had ever known, the first change in my quiet child-life.

And my excitement grew even greater when mamma came to the subject of what was decided about us children.

"Haddie of course must go to school," she said; "to a larger and better school—Mrs. Selwood speaks of Rugby, if it can be managed. He will be happy there, every one says. But about you, my Geraldine."

"Oh, mamma," I interrupted, "do let me go to school too. I have always wanted to go, you know, and except for being away from you, I would far rather be a boarder. It's really being at school then. I know they rather look down upon day-scholars—Haddie says so."

Mamma looked at me gravely. Perhaps she was just a little disappointed, even though on the other hand she may have felt relieved too, at my taking the idea of this separation, which to her over-rode everything, which made the next two years a black cloud to her, so very philosophically. But she sighed. I fancy a suspicion of the truth came to her almost at once and added to her anxiety—the truth that I did not the least realise what was before me.

"We are thinking of sending you to school, my child," she said quietly, "and of

course it must be as a boarder. Mrs. Selwood advises Miss Ledbury's school here. She has known the old lady long and has a very high opinion of her, and it is not very far from Fernley in case Miss Ledbury wished to consult Mrs. Selwood about you in any way, or in case you were ill."

"I am very glad," I said. "I should like to go to Miss Ledbury's."

My fancy had been tickled by seeing the girls at her school walking out two and two in orthodox fashion. I thought it must be delightful to march along in a row like that, and to have a partner of your own size to talk to as much as you liked.

Mamma said no more just then. I think she felt at a loss what to say. She was afraid of making me unnecessarily unhappy, and on the other hand she dreaded my finding the reality all the worse when I came to contrast it with my rose-coloured visions.

She consulted father, and he decided that it was best to leave me to myself and my own thoughts.

"She is a very young child still," he said to mamma. (All this of course I was told afterwards.) "It is quite possible that she will not suffer from the separation as we have feared. It may be much easier for her than if she had been two or three years older."

Haddie had no illusions. From the very first he took it all in, and that very bitterly. But he was, as I have said, a very good boy, and a boy with a great deal of resolution and firmness. He said nothing to discourage me. Mamma told him how surprised she was at my way of taking it, and he agreed with father that perhaps I would not be really unhappy.

And I do think that my chief unhappiness during the next few weeks came from the sight of dear mamma's pale, worn face, which she could not hide, try as she might to be bright and cheerful.

There was of course a great deal of bustle and preparation, and all children enjoy that, I fancy. Even Haddie was interested about his school outfit. He was to go to a

preparatory school at Rugby till he could get into the big school. And as far as school went, he told me he was sure he would like it very well, it was only the—but there he stopped.

"The what?" I asked.

"Oh, the being all separated," he said gruffly.

"But you'd have had to go away to a big school some day," I reminded him. "You didn't want always to go to a day-school."

"No," he allowed, "but it's the holidays."

The holidays! I had not thought about that part of it.

"Oh, I daresay something nice will be settled for the holidays," I said lightly.

In one way Haddie was very lucky. Mrs. Selwood had undertaken the whole charge of his education for the two years our parents were to be away. And after that "we shall see," she said.

She had great ideas about the necessity of giving a boy the very best schooling possible, but she had not at all the same opinion about girls' education. She was a clever woman in some ways, but very old-fashioned. Her own upbringing had been at a time when very little learning was considered needful or even advisable for our sex. And as she had good practical capacities, and had managed her own affairs sensibly, she always held herself up both in her own mind and to others as a specimen of an unlearned lady who had got on far better than if she had had all the '"ologies," as she called them, at her fingers' ends.

This, I think, was one reason why she approved of Miss Ledbury's school, which, as you will hear, was certainly not conducted in accordance with the modern ideas which even then were beginning to make wise parents ask themselves if it was right to spend ten times as much on their sons' education as on their daughters'.

"Teach a girl to write a good hand, to read aloud so that you can understand what

she says, to make a shirt and make a pudding and to add up the butcher's book correctly, and she'll do," Mrs. Selwood used to say.

"And what about accomplishments?" some one might ask.

"She should be able to play a tune on the piano, and to sing a nice English song or two if she has a voice, and maybe to paint a wreath of flowers if her taste lies that way. That sort of thing would do no harm if she doesn't waste time over it," the old lady would allow, with great liberality, thinking over her own youthful acquirements no doubt.

I daresay there was a foundation of solid sense in the first part of her advice. I don't see but that girls nowadays might profit by some of it. And in many cases they do. It is quite in accordance with modern thought to be able to make a good many "puddings," though home-made shirts are not called for. But as far as the "accomplishments" go, I should prefer none to such a smattering of them as our old friend considered more than enough.

So far less thought on Mrs. Selwood's part was bestowed on Geraldine—that is myself, of course—than on Haddon, as regarded the school question. And mamma had to be guided by Mrs. Selwood's advice to a great extent just then. She had so much to do and so little time to do it in, that it would have been impossible for her to go hunting about for a school for me more in accordance with her own ideas. And she knew that personally Miss Ledbury was well worthy of all respect.

She went to see her once or twice to talk about me, and make the best arrangements possible. The first of these visits left a pleasanter impression on her mind than the second. For the first time she saw Miss Ledbury alone, and found her gentle and sympathising, and full of conscientious interest in her pupils, so that it seemed childish to take objection to some of the rules mentioned by the school-mistress which in her heart mamma did not approve of.

One of these was that all the pupils' letters were to be read by one of the teachers,

and as to this Miss Ledbury said she could make no exception. Then, again, no story-books were permitted, except such as were read aloud on the sewing afternoons. But if I spent my holidays there, as was only too probable, this rule should be relaxed.

The plan for Sundays, too, struck my mother disagreeably.

"My poor Geraldine," she said to father, when she was telling him all about it, "I don't know how she will stand such a dreary day."

Father suggested that I should be allowed to write my weekly letter to them on Sunday, and mamma said she would see if that could be.

And then father begged her not to look at the dark side of things.

"After all," he said, "Geraldine is very young, and will accommodate herself better than you think to her new circumstances. She will enjoy companions of her own age too. And we know that Miss Ledbury is a good and kind woman—the disadvantages seem trifling, though I should not like to think the child was to be there for longer than these two years."

Mamma gave in to this. Indeed, there seemed nothing else to do. But the second time she went to see Miss Ledbury, the school-mistress introduced her niece—her "right hand," as she called her—a woman of about forty, named Miss Aspinall, who, though only supposed to be second in command, was really the principal authority in the establishment, much more than poor old Miss Ledbury, whose health was failing, realised herself.

Mamma did not take to Miss Aspinall. But it was now far too late to make any change, and she tried to persuade herself that she was nervously fanciful.

And here, perhaps, I had better say distinctly, that Miss Aspinall was not a bad or cruel woman. She was, on the contrary, truly conscientious and perfectly sincere. But she was wanting in all finer feelings and instincts. She had had a hard and unloving childhood, and had almost lost the power of caring much for any one. She

loved her aunt after a fashion, but she thought her weak. She was just, or wished to be so, and with some of the older pupils she got on fairly well. But she did not understand children, and took small interest in the younger scholars, beyond seeing that they kept the rules and were not complained of by the under teachers who took charge of them. And as the younger pupils were very seldom boarders it did not very much matter, as they had their own homes and mothers to make them happy once school hours were over.

Mamma did not know that there were scarcely any boarders as young as I, for when she first asked about the other pupils, Miss Ledbury, thinking principally of lessons, said, "oh yes," there was a nice little class just about my age, where I should feel quite at home.

A few days before the day—the day of separation for us all—mamma took me to see Miss Ledbury. She thought I would feel rather less strange if I had been there once, and had seen the lady who was to be my school-mistress.

I knew the house—Green Bank, it was called—by sight. It was a little farther out of the town than ours, and had a melancholy bit of garden in front, and a sort of playground at the back. It was not a large house—indeed, it was not really large enough for the number of people living in it—twenty to thirty boarders, and a number of day-scholars, who of course helped to fill the schoolrooms and to make them hot and airless, four resident teachers, and four or five servants. But in those days people did not think nearly as much as now about ventilation and lots of fresh air, and perfectly pure water, and all such things, which we now know to be quite as important to our health as food and clothes.

Mamma rang the bell. Everything about Green Bank was neat and orderly, prim, if not grim. So was the maid-servant who opened the door, and in answer to mamma's inquiry for Miss Ledbury, showed us into the drawing-room, a square moderate-sized-room, at the right hand of the passage.

I can remember the look of that room even now, perfectly. It was painfully neat, not exactly ugly, for most of the furniture was of the spindle-legged quaint kind, to which everybody now gives the general name of "Queen Anne." There were a few books set out on the round table, there was a cottage piano at one side, there were some faint water-colours on the wall, and a rather nice clock on the white marble mantelpiece, the effect of which was spoilt by a pair of huge "lustres," as they were called, at each side of it. The carpet was very ugly, large and sprawly in pattern, and so was the hearth-rug. They were the newest things in the room, and greatly admired by Miss Ledbury and her niece, who were full of the bad taste of the day in furniture, and would gladly have turned out all the delicate spidery-looking tables and chairs to make way for heavy and cumbersome sofas and ottomans, but for the question of expense, and perhaps for the sake of old association on the elder lady's part.

There was no fire, though it was November, and mamma shivered a little as she sat down, possibly, however not altogether from cold. It was between twelve and one in the morning—that was the hour at which Miss Ledbury asked parents to call.

Afterwards, when I got to know the rules of the house, I found that the drawing-room fire was never lighted except on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, or on some very special occasion.

I stood beside mamma. Somehow I did not feel inclined to sit down. I was full of a strange kind of excitement, half pleasant, half frightening. I think the second half prevailed as the moments went on. Mamma did not speak, but I felt her hand clasping my shoulder.

Then at last the door opened.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNPROMISING BEGINNING.

My first sight of Miss Ledbury was a sort of agreeable disappointment. She was not the least like what I had imagined, though till I did see her I do not think I knew that I had imagined anything! She had been much less in my thoughts than her pupils; it was the idea of companions, the charm of being one of a party of other girls, with a place of my own among them, that my fancy had been full of. I don't think I cared very much what the teachers were like.

What I did see was a very small, fragile-looking old lady, with quite white hair, a black or purple—I am not sure which, anyway it was dark—silk dress, and a soft fawn-coloured cashmere shawl. She had a white lace cap, tied with ribbons under her chin, and black lace mittens. Looking back now, I cannot picture her in any other dress. I cannot remember ever seeing her with a bonnet on, and yet she must have worn one, as she went to church regularly. Her face was small and still pretty, and the eyes were naturally sweet, sometimes they had a twinkle of humour in them, sometimes they looked almost hard. The truth was that she was a gentle, kind-hearted person by nature, but a narrow life and education had stunted her power of sympathy, and she thought it wrong to give way to feeling. She was conscious of what she believed to be weakness in herself, and was always trying to be firm and determined. And since her niece had come to live with her, this put-on sternness had increased.

Yet I was never really afraid of Miss Ledbury, though I never—well, perhaps that is rather too strong—almost never, I should say, felt at ease with her.

I was, I suppose, a very shy child, but till now the circumstances of my life had not brought this out.

This first time of seeing my future school-mistress I liked her very much. There was indeed something very attractive about her—something almost "fairy-godmother-like" which took my fancy.

We did not stay long. Miss Ledbury was not without tact, and she saw that the mention of the approaching parting, the settling the day and hour at which I was to come to Green Bank to stay, were very, very trying to mamma. And I almost think her misunderstanding of me began from that first interview. In her heart I fancy she was shocked at my coolness, for she did not know, or if she ever had known, she had forgotten, much about children—their queer contradictory ways of taking things, how completely they are sometimes the victims of their imagination, how little they realise anything they have had no experience of.

All that the old lady did not understand in me, she put down to my being spoilt and selfish. She even, I believe, thought me forward.

Still, she spoke kindly—said she hoped I should soon feel at home at Green Bank, and try to get on well with my lessons, so that when my dear mamma returned she would be astonished at the progress I had made.

I did not quite understand what she said—the word "progress" puzzled me. I wondered if it had anything to do with the pilgrim's progress, and I was half inclined to ask if it had, and to tell her that I had read the history of Christian and his family quite through, two or three times. But mamma had already got up to go, so I only said "Yes" rather vaguely, and Miss Ledbury kissed me somewhat coldly.

As soon as we found ourselves outside in the street again, mamma made some little remark. She wanted to find out what kind of impression had been left on me, though she would not have considered it right to ask me straight out what I thought of the lady who was going to be my superior—in a sense to fill a parent's place to me.

And I remember replying that I thought Miss Ledbury must be very, very old—nearly a hundred, I should think.

"Oh dear no, not nearly as old as that," mamma said quickly. "You must not say anything like that, Geraldine. It would offend her. She cannot be more than sixty."

I opened my eyes. I thought it would be very nice to be a hundred.

But before I had time to say more, my attention was distracted. For just at that moment, turning a corner, we almost ran into the procession I was so eager to join—Miss Ledbury's girls, returning two and two from their morning constitutional.

I felt my cheeks grow red with excitement. I stared at them, and some of them, I think, looked at me. Mamma looked at them too, but instead of getting red, her face grew pale.

They passed so quickly, that I was only able to glance at two or three of the twenty or thirty faces. I looked at the smallest of the train with the most interest, though one older face at the very end caught my attention almost without my knowing it.

When they had passed I turned to mamma.

"Did you see that little girl with the rosy cheeks, mamma? The one with a red feather in her hat. Doesn't she look nice?"

"She looked a good-humoured little person," said mamma. In her heart she thought the rosy-faced child rather common-looking and far too showily dressed, but that was not unusual among the rich Mexington people, and she would not have said anything like that to me. "I did notice one very sweet face," she went on, "I mean the young lady at the end—one of the governesses no doubt."

I had, as I said, noticed her too, and mamma's words impressed it upon me. Mamma seemed quite cheered by this passing glimpse, and she went on speaking.

"She must be one of the younger teachers, I should think. I hope you may be in her class. You must tell me if you are when you write to me, and tell me her name."

I promised I would.

The next two or three days I have no clear remembrance of at all. They seemed all bustle and confusion—though through everything I recollect mamma's pale drawn face, and the set look of Haddie's mouth. He was so determined not to break down. Of father we saw very little—he was terribly busy. But when he was at home, he

seemed to be always whistling, or humming a tune, or making jokes.

"How pleased father seems to be about going so far away," I said once to Haddie. But he did not answer.

He—Haddie—was to go a part of the way in the same train as father and mamma. They were to start on the Thursday, and I was taken to Green Bank on Wednesday morning. Father took me—and Lydia. I was such a little girl that mamma thought Lydia should go with me to unpack and arrange my things, and she never thought that any one could object to this. For she had never been at school herself, and did not know much about school ways. I think the first beginning of my troubles and disappointments was about Lydia.

Father and I were shown into the drawing-room. But when the door opened this time, it was not to admit gentle old Miss Ledbury. Instead of her in came a tall, thin woman, dressed in gray—she had black hair done rather tightly, and a black lace bow on the top of her head.

Father was standing looking out of the window, and I beside him holding his hand. I was not crying. I had had one sudden convulsive fit of sobs early that morning when mamma came for a moment into my room, and for the first time it really came over me that I was leaving her. But she almost prayed me to try not to cry, and the feeling that I was helping her, joined to the excitement I was in, made it not so very difficult to keep quiet. I do not even think my eyes were red.

Father turned at the sound of the door opening.

"Miss Ledbury," he began.

"Not Miss Ledbury. I am Miss Aspinall, her niece," said the lady; she was not pleased at the mistake.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said poor father. "I understood——"

"Miss Ledbury is not very well this morning," said Miss Aspinall. "She deputed me

to express her regrets."

"Oh certainly," said father. "This is my little daughter—you have seen her before, I suppose?"

"No," said the lady, holding out her hand. "How do you do, my dear?"

I did not speak. I stared up at her, I felt so confused and strange. I scarcely heard what father went on to say—some simple messages from mamma about my writing to them, and so on, and the dates of the mails, the exact address, etc., etc., to all of which Miss Aspinall listened with a slight bend of her head or a stiff "indeed," or "just so."

This was not encouraging. I am afraid even father's buoyant spirits went down: I think he had had some idea that if he came himself he would be able to make friends with my school-mistress and be able to ensure her special friendliness. But it was clear that nothing of this kind was to be done with the niece.

So he said at last,

"Well, I think that is all. Good-bye, my little woman, then. Good-bye, my darling. She will be a good girl, I am sure, Miss Aspinall; she has been a dear good child at home."

His voice was on the point of breaking, but the governess stood there stonily. His praise of me was not the way to win her favour. I do believe she would have liked me better if he had said I had been so naughty and troublesome at home that he trusted the discipline of school would do me good. And when I glanced up at Miss Aspinall's face, something seemed to choke down the sob which was beginning again to rise in my throat.

"GOOD-BYE!"

"Good-bye, my own little girl," said father. One more kiss and he was gone.

My luggage was in the hall—which was really a passage scarcely deserving the

more important name—and beside it stood Lydia. Miss Aspinall looked at her coldly.

"Who——" she began, when I interrupted her.

"It's Lydia," I said. "She's come to unpack my things. Mamma sent her."

"Come to unpack your things," repeated the governess. "There must be some mistake—that is quite unnecessary. There is no occasion for you to wait," she said to poor Lydia, with a slight gesture towards the door.

Lydia grew very red.

"Miss Geraldine won't know about them all, I'm afraid," she began. "She has not been used to taking the charge of her things yet."

"Then the sooner she learns the better," said Miss Aspinall, and Lydia dared not persist. She turned to me, looking ready to burst out crying again, though, as she had been doing little else for three days, one might have thought her tears were exhausted.

"Good-bye, dear Miss Geraldine," she said, half holding out her arms. I flew into them. I was beginning to feel very strange.

"Good-bye, dear Lydia," I said.

"You will write to me, Miss Geraldine?"

"Of course I will; I know your address," I said. Lydia was going to her own home to work with a dressmaker sister in hopes of coming back to us at the end of the two years.

"Miss Le Marchant" (I think I have never said that our family name was Le Marchant), said a cold voice, "I really cannot wait any longer; you must come upstairs at once to take off your things."

Lydia glanced at me.

"I beg pardon," she said; and then she too was gone.

Long afterwards the poor girl told me that her heart was nearly bursting when she left me, but she had the good sense to say nothing to add to mamma's distress, as she knew that my living at Green Bank was all settled about. She could only hope the other governesses might be kinder than the one she had seen.

Miss Aspinall walked upstairs, telling me to follow her. It was not a very large house, but it was a high one and the stairs were steep. It seemed to me that I had climbed up a long way when at last she opened a door half-way down a dark passage.

"This is your room," she said, as she went in.

I followed her eagerly. I don't quite know what I expected. I had not been told if I was to have a room to myself or not. But at first I think I was rather startled to see three beds in a room not much larger than my own one at home—three beds and two wash-hand stands, a large and a small, two chests of drawers, a large and a small also, which were evidently considered to be toilet-tables as well, as each had a looking-glass, and three chairs.

My eyes wandered round. It was all quite neat, though dull. For the one window looked on to the side-wall of the next-door house, and much light could not have got in at the best of times, added to which, the day was a very gray one. But the impression it made upon me was more that of a tidy and clean servants' room than of one for ladies, even though only little girls.

I stood still and silent.

"This is your bed," said Miss Aspinall next, touching a small white counterpaned iron bedstead in one corner—I was glad it was in a corner. "The Miss Smiths are your companions. They share the large chest of drawers, and your things will go into the smaller one."

"There won't be nearly room enough," I said quickly. I had yet to learn the habit of not saying out whatever came into my head.

"Nonsense, child," said the governess. "There must be room enough for you if there is room enough for much older and——" she stopped. "At your age many clothes are not requisite. I think, on the whole, it will be better for you not to unpack or arrange your own things. One of the governesses shall do so, and all that you do not actually require must stay in your trunk and be put in the box-room."

I did not pay very much attention to what she said. I don't think I clearly understood it, for, as I have said, in some ways I was rather a slow child. And my thoughts were running more on the Miss Smiths and the rest of my future companions than on my wardrobe. If I had taken in that it was not only my clothes that were in question, but that my little household gods, my special pet possessions, were not to be left in my own keeping, I would have minded much more.

"Now take off your things at once," said Miss Aspinall. "You must keep on your boots till your shoes are got out, but take care not to stump along the passages. Do your hands want washing? No, you have your gloves on. As soon as you are ready, go down two flights of stairs till you come to the passage under this on the next floor. The door at the end is the second class schoolroom, where you will be shown your place."

Then she went away, leaving me to my own reflections. Not a word of sympathy or encouragement, not a pat on my shoulder as she passed me, nor a kindly glance out of her hard eyes. But at the time I scarcely noticed this. My mind was still full of not unpleasant excitement, though I was beginning to feel tired and certainly very confused and bewildered.

I sat down for a moment on the edge of my little bed when Miss Aspinall left me, without hastening to take off my coat and bonnet. We wore bonnets mostly in those days, though hats were beginning to come into fashion for young girls.

"I wish there were only two beds, not three," I said to myself. "And I would like the little girl with the rosy face to sleep in my room. I wonder if she's Miss Smith

perhaps. I wonder if there's several little girls as little as me. I'd like to know all their names, so as to write and tell them to mamma and Haddie."

The inclination to cry had left me—fortunately in some ways, though perhaps if I had made my début in the schoolroom looking very woe-begone and tearful I should have made a better impression. My future companions would have felt sorry for me. As it was, when I had taken off my things I made my way downstairs as I had been directed, and opening the schoolroom door—I remember wondering to myself what second class schoolroom could mean: would it have long seats all round, something like a second-class railway carriage?—walked in coolly enough.

The room felt airless and close, though it was a cold day. And at the first glance it seemed to me perfectly full of people—girls—women indeed in my eyes many of them were, they were so much bigger and older than I—in every direction, more than I could count. And the hum of voices was very confusing, the hums I should say, for there were two or three different sets of reading aloud, or lessons repeating, going on at once.

I stood just inside the door. Two or three heads were turned in my direction at the sound I made in opening it, but quickly bent over their books again, and for some moments no one paid any attention to me. Then suddenly a governess happened to catch sight of me. It was the same sweet-faced girl whom mamma had noticed at the end of the long file in the street.

She looked at me once, then seemed at a loss, then she looked at me again, and at last said something to the girl beside her, and getting up from her seat went to the end of the room, and spoke to a small elderly woman in a brown stuff dress, who was evidently another governess.

This person—I suppose I should say lady—turned round and stared at me. Then she said something to the younger governess, nothing very pleasant, I fancy, for the sweet-looking one—I had better call her by her name, which was Miss

Fenmore—went back to her place with a heightened colour.

You may ask how I can remember all these little particulars so exactly. Perhaps I do not quite do so, but still, all that happened just then made a very strong impression on me, and I have thought it over so much and so often, especially since I have had children of my own, that it is difficult to tell quite precisely how much is real memory, how much the after knowledge of how things must have been, to influence myself and others as they did. And later, too, I talked them over with those who were older than I at the time, and could understand more.

So there I stood, a very perplexed little person, though still more perplexed than distressed or disappointed, by the door. Now and then some head was turned to look at me with a sort of stealthy curiosity, but there was no kindness in any of the glances, and the young governess kept her eyes turned away. I was not a pretty child. My hair was straight and not noticeable in any way, and it was tightly plaited, as was the fashion, unless a child's hair was thick enough to make pretty ringlets. My face was rather thin and pale, and there was nothing of dimpling childish loveliness about me. I was rather near-sighted too, and I daresay that often gave me a worried, perhaps a fretful expression.

After all, I did not have to wait very long. The elderly governess finished the page she was reading aloud—she may have been dictating to her pupils, I cannot say—and came towards me.

"Did Miss Aspinall send you here?" she said abruptly.

I looked up at her. She seemed to me no better than our cook, and not half so good-natured.

"Yes," I said.

"Yes," she repeated, as if she was very shocked. "Yes who, if you please? Yes, Miss ——?"

"Yes, Miss," I said in a matter-of-fact way.

"What manners! Fie!" said Miss ——; afterwards I found her name was Broom. "I think indeed it was quite time for you to come to school. If you cannot say my name, you can at least say ma'am."

I stared up at her. I think my trick of staring must have been rather provoking, and perhaps even must have seemed rude, though it arose entirely from my not understanding.

"I don't know your name, Miss—ma'am," I said. I spoke clearly. I was not frightened. And a titter went round the forms. Miss Broom was angry at being put in the wrong.

"Miss Aspinall sent you to my class, Miss Broom's class," she said.

"No, ma'am—Miss Broom—she didn't."

The governess thought I meant to be impertinent—impertinent, poor me!

And with no very gentle hand, she half led, half pushed me towards her end of the room, where there was a vacant place on one of the forms.

"Silence, young ladies," she said, for some whispering was taking place. "Go on with your copying out."

And then she turned to me with a book.

"Let me hear how you can read," she said.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW WORLD.

I could read aloud well, unusually well, I think, for mamma had taken great pains with my pronunciation. She was especially anxious that both Haddie and I should speak well, and not catch the Great Mexington accent, which was both peculiar and ugly.

But the book which Miss Broom had put before me was hardly a fair test. I don't remember what it was—some very dry history, I think, bristling with long words, and in very small print. I did not take in the sense of what I was reading in the very least, and so, of course, I read badly, tumbling over the long words, and putting no intelligence into my tone. I think, too, my teacher was annoyed at the purity of my accent, for no one could possibly have mistaken her for anything but what she was—a native of Middleshire. She corrected me once or twice, then shut the book impatiently.

"Very bad," she said, "very bad indeed for eleven years old."

"I am not eleven, Miss Broom," I said. "I am only nine past."

"LITTLE GIRLS MUST NOT CONTRADICT, AND MUST NOT BE RUDE."

"Little girls must not contradict, and must not be rude," was the reply.

What had I said that could be called rude? I tried to think, thereby bringing on myself a reprimand for inattention, which did not have the effect of brightening my wits, I fear.

I think I was put through a sort of examination as to all my acquirements. I know I came out of it very badly, for Miss Broom pronounced me so backward that there was no class, not even the youngest, in the school, which I was really fit for. There was nothing for it, however, but to put me into this lowest class, and she said I must do extra work in play hours to make up to my companions.

Even my French, which I now know must have been good, was found fault with by Miss Broom, who said my accent was extraordinary. And certainly, if hers was Parisian, mine must have been worse than that of Stratford-le-Bow!

Still, I was not unhappy. I thought it must be always like that at school, and I said to myself I really would work hard to make up to the others, who were so much, much cleverer than I. And I sat contentedly enough in my place, doing my best to learn a page of English grammar by heart, from time to time peeping round the table, till, to

my great satisfaction and delight, I caught sight of the rosy-cheeked damsel at the farther end of the table.

I was so pleased that I wonder I did not jump up from my place and run round to speak to her, forgetful that though I had thought so much of her, she had probably never noticed me at all the only other time of our meeting, or rather passing each other.

But I felt Miss Broom's eye upon me, and sat still. I acquitted myself pretty fairly of my page of grammar, leading to the dry remark from the governess that it was plain I "could learn if I chose." As this was the first thing I had been given to learn, the implied reproach was not exactly called for. But none of Miss Broom's speeches were remarkable for being appropriate. They depended much more on the mood she happened to be in herself than upon anything else.

I can clearly remember most of that day. I have a vision of a long dining-table, long at least it seemed to me, and a plateful of roast mutton and potatoes which I could not manage to finish, followed by rice pudding with which I succeeded better, though I was not the least hungry. Miss Aspinall was at one end of the table, Miss Broom at the other, and Miss Fenmore, who seemed always to be jumping up to ring the bell or hand the governesses something or other that had been forgotten by the servant, sat somewhere in the middle.

No one spoke unless spoken to by one of the teachers. Miss Aspinall shot out little remarks from time to time about the weather, and replied graciously enough to one or two of the older girls who ventured to ask if Miss Ledbury's cold, or headache, was better.

Then came the grace, followed by a shoving back of forms, and a march in order of age, or place in class rather, to the door, and thence down the passage to what was called the big schoolroom—a room on the ground floor, placed where by rights the kitchen should have been, I fancy. It was the only large room in the house, and I

think it must have been built out beyond the original walls on purpose.

And then—there re-echo on my ears even now the sudden bursting out of noise, the loosening of a score and a half of tongues, girls' tongues too, forcibly restrained since the morning. For this was the recreation hour, and on a wet day, to make up for not going a walk, the "young ladies" were allowed from two to three to chatter as much as they liked—in English instead of in the fearful and wonderful jargon yclept "French."

I stood in a corner by myself, staring, no doubt. I felt profoundly interested. This was a little more like what I had pictured to myself, though I had not imagined it would be quite so noisy and bewildering. But some of the girls seemed very merry, and their laughter and chatter fascinated me—if only I were one of them, able to laugh and chatter too! Should I ever be admitted to share their fun?

The elder girls did not interest me. They seemed to me quite grown-up. Yet it was from their ranks that came the first token of interest in me—of notice that I was there at all.

"What's your name?" said a tall thin girl with fair curls, which one could see she was very proud of. She was considered a beauty in the school. She was silly, but very good-natured. She spoke with a sort of lisp, and very slowly, so her question did not strike me as rude. Nor was it meant to be so. It was a mixture of curiosity and amiability.

"My name," I repeated, rather stupidly. I was startled by being spoken to.

"Yes, your name. Didn't Miss Lardner say what's your name? Dear me—don't stand gaping there like a monkey on a barrel-organ," said another girl.

By this time a little group had gathered round me. The girls composing it all laughed, and though it does not sound very witty—to begin with, I never heard of a monkey "gaping"—I have often thought since that there was some excuse for the laughter. I was small and thin, and I had a trick of screwing up my eyes which made

them look smaller than they really were. And my frock was crimson merino with several rows of black velvet above the hem of the skirt.

I was not offended. But I did not laugh. The girl who had spoken last was something of a tomboy, and looked upon also as a wit. Her name was Josephine Mellor, and her intimate friends called her Joe. She had very fuzzy red hair, and rather good brown eyes.

"I say," she went on again, "what is your name? And are you going to stay to dinner every day, or only when it rains, like Lizzie Burt?"

Who was Lizzie Burt? That question nearly set my ideas adrift again. But the consciousness of my superior position fortunately kept me to the point.

"I am going to be at dinner always," I said proudly. "I am a boarder."

The girls drew a little nearer, with evidently increased interest.

"A boarder," repeated Josephine. "Then Harriet Smith'll have to give up being baby. You're ever so much younger than her, I'm sure."

"What are you saying about me?" said Harriet, who had caught the sound of her own name, as one often does.

"Only that that pretty snub nose of yours is going to be put out of joint," said Miss Mellor mischievously.

Harriet came rushing forward. She was my rosy-cheeked girl! Her face was redder than usual. I felt very vexed with Miss Mellor, even though I did not quite understand her.

"What are you saying?" the child called out. "I'm not going to have any of your teasing, Joe."

"It's not teasing—it's truth," said the elder girl. "You're not the baby any more. She," and she pointed to me, "she's younger than you."

"How old are you?" said Harriet roughly.

"Nine past," I said. "Nine and a half."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" shouted Harriet. "I'm only nine and a month. I'm still the baby, Miss Joe."

She was half a head at least taller than I, and broad in proportion.

"What a mite you are, to be sure," said Miss Mellor, "nine and a half and no bigger than that."

I felt myself getting red. I think one or two of the girls must have had perception enough to feel a little sorry for me, for one of them—I fancy it was Miss Lardner—said in a good-natured patronising way,

"You haven't told us your name yet, after all."

"It's Geraldine," I said. "That's my first name, and I'm always called it."

"Geraldine what?" said the red-haired girl.

"Geraldine Theresa Le Marchant—that's all my names."

"My goodness," said Miss Mellor, "how grand we are! Great Mexington's growing quite aristocratic. I didn't know monkeys had such fine names."

Some of the girls laughed, some, I think, thought her as silly as she was.

"Where do you come from?" was the next question.

"Come from?" I repeated. "I don't know."

At this they all did laugh, and I suppose it was only natural. Suddenly Harriet Smith made a sort of dash at me.

"Oh, I say," she exclaimed. "I know. She's going to sleep in our room. I saw them putting sheets on the bed in the corner, but Jane wouldn't tell me who they were for. Emma," she called out loudly to a girl of fourteen or fifteen, "Emma, I say, she's going to sleep in our room I'm sure."

Emma Smith was taller and thinner and paler than her sister, but still they were

rather like. Perhaps it was for that very reason that they got on so badly—they might have been better friends if they had been more unlike. As it was, they quarrelled constantly, and I must say it was generally Harriet's fault. She was very spoilt, but she had something hearty and merry about her, and so had Emma. They were the daughters of a rich Great Mexington manufacturer, and they had no mother. They were favourites in the school, partly I suspect because they had lots of pocket money, and used to invite their companions to parties in the holidays. But they were not mean or insincere, though rough and noisy—more like boys than girls.

Emma came bouncing forward.

"I say," she began to me, "if it's true you're to sleep in our room I hope you understand you must do what I tell you. I'm the eldest. You're not to back up Harriet to disobey me."

"No," I said. "I don't want to do anything like that."

"Well, then," said Harriet, "you'll be Emma's friend, not mine."

My face fell, and I suppose Harriet saw it. She came closer to me and looked at me well, as if expecting me to answer. But for the first time since I had been in my new surroundings I felt more than bewildered—I felt frightened and lonely, terribly lonely.

"Oh, mamma," I thought to myself, "I wish I could see you to tell you about it. It isn't a bit like what I thought it would be."

But I said nothing aloud. I think now that if I had burst out crying it would have been better for me, but I had very little power of expressing myself, and Haddie had instilled into me a great horror of being a cry-baby at school.

In their rough way, however, several of the girls were kind-hearted, the two Smiths perhaps as much so as any. Harriet came close up to me.

"I'm only in fun," she said; "of course we'll be friends. I'll tell you how we'll do," and

she put her fat little arm round me in a protecting way which I much appreciated. "Come over here," she went on in a lower voice, "where none of the big ones can hear what we say," and she drew me, nothing loth, to the opposite corner of the room.

As we passed through the group of older girls standing about, one or two fragments of their talk reached my ears.

"Yes—I'm sure it's the same. He's a bank clerk, I think. I've heard papa speak of them. They're awfully poor—come-down-in-the-world sort of people."

"Oh, then, I expect when she's old enough she'll be a governess—perhaps she'll be a sort of teacher here to begin with."

Then followed some remark about looking far ahead, and a laugh at the idea of "the monkey" ever developing into a governess.

But after my usual fashion it was not till I thought it over afterwards that I understood that it was I and my father they had been discussing. In the meantime I was enjoying a confidential talk with Harriet Smith—that is to say, I was listening to all she said to me; she did not seem to expect me to say much in reply.

I felt flattered by her condescension, but I did not in my heart feel much interest in her communications. They were mostly about Emma—how she tried to bully her, Harriet, because she herself was five years older, and how the younger girl did not intend to stand it much longer. Emma was as bad as a boy.

"As bad as a boy," I repeated. "I don't know what you mean."

"That's because you've not got a brother, I suppose," said Harriet. "Our brother's a perfect nuisance. He's so spoilt—papa lets him do just as he likes. Emma and I hate the holidays because of him being at home. But it's the worst for me, you see. Emma hates Fred bullying her, so she might know I hate her bullying me."

This was all very astonishing to me.

"I have a brother," I said after a moment or two's reflection.

"Then you know what it is. Why didn't you say so?" asked Harriet.

"Because I don't know what it is. Haddie never teases me. I love being with him."

"My goodness! Then you're not like most," said Harriet elegantly, opening her eyes.

She asked me some questions after this—as to where we lived, how many servants we had, and so on. Some I answered—some I could not, as I was by no means as worldly-wise as this precocious young person.

She gave me a great deal of information about school—she hated the governesses, except the old lady, and she didn't care about her much. Miss Broom was her special dislike. But she liked school very well, she'd been there a year now, and before that she had a daily governess at home, and it was very dull indeed. What had I done till now—had I had a governess?

"Oh no," I said. "I had mamma."

"Was she good to you," asked my new friend, "or was she very strict?"

I stared at Harriet. Mamma was strict, but she was very, very good to me. I said so.

"Then why are you a boarder?" she asked. "We've not got a mamma, but even if we had I'm sure she wouldn't teach us herself. I suppose your mamma isn't rich enough to pay for a governess for you."

"I don't know," I said simply. I had never thought in this way of mamma's teaching me, but I was not at all offended. "I don't think any governess would be as nice as mamma."

"Then why have you come to school?" inquired Harriet.

"Because"—"because father and mamma have to go away," I was going to say, when suddenly the full meaning of the words seemed to rush over me. A strange giddy feeling made me shut my eyes and I caught hold of Harriet's arm.

"What's the matter?" she said wonderingly, as I opened my eyes and looked at her

again.

"I'd rather not talk about mamma just now," I said. "I'll tell you afterwards."

"Up in our room," said Harriet, "oh yes, that'll be jolly. We've got all sorts of dodges."

But before she had time to explain more, or I to ask her why "dodges"—I knew the meaning of the word from Haddie—were required, a bell rang loudly.

Instantly the hubbub ceased, and there began a sort of silent scramble—the elder girls collecting books and papers and hurrying to their places; the younger ones rushing upstairs to the other schoolroom, I following.

In a few minutes we were all seated round the long tables. It was a sewing afternoon, and to my great delight I saw that Miss Fenmore, the pretty governess whom I had taken such a fancy to, though I had not yet spoken to her, was now in Miss Broom's place.

Mamma had provided me with both plain work and a little simple fancy work, but as my things were not yet unpacked, I had neither with me, and I sat feeling awkward and ashamed, seeing all the others busily preparing for business.

"Have you no work, my dear?" said Miss Fenmore gently. It was the first kind speech I had had from a governess.

"It isn't unpacked," I said, feeling my cheeks grow red, I did not know why.

Miss Fenmore hesitated for a moment. Then she took out a stocking—or rather the beginning of one on knitting-needles.

"Can you knit?" she asked.

"I can knit plain—plain and purl—just straight on," I said. "But I've never done it round like that."

"Never mind, you will learn easily, as you know how to knit. Come and sit beside me, so that I can watch you."

She made the girls sit a little more closely, making a place for me beside her, and I would have been quite happy had I not seen a cross expression on several faces, and heard murmurs of "favouring," "spoilt pet," and so on.

Miss Fenmore, if she heard, took no notice. And in a few moments all was in order. We read aloud in turns—the book was supposed to be a story-book, but it seemed to me very dull, though the fault may have lain in the uninteresting way the girls read, and the constant change of voices, as no one read more than two pages at a time. I left off trying to listen and gave my whole attention to my knitting, encouraged by Miss Fenmore's whispered "very nice—a little looser," or "won't it be nice to knit socks for your father or brother, if you have a brother?"

I nodded with a smile. I was burning to tell her everything. Already I felt that I loved her dearly—her voice was as sweet as her face. Yet there were tones in the former and lines in the latter telling of much sorrow and suffering, young as she was. I was far too much of a child to understand this. I only felt vaguely that there was something about her which reminded me of mamma as she had looked these last few weeks.

And my heart was won.

CHAPTER VII.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

After that first day at Green Bank, the remembrance of things in detail is not so clear to me.

To begin with, the life was very monotonous. Except for the different lessons, one day passed much like another, the principal variety being the coming of Sunday and the two weekly half-holidays—Wednesday and Saturday. But to me the half-holidays brought no pleasure. I think I disliked them more than lesson days, and

most certainly I disliked Sundays most of all.

Looking back now, I think my whole nature and character must have gone through some curious changes in these first weeks at school. I grew older very rapidly.

There first came by degrees the great disappointment of it all—for though I am anxious not to exaggerate anything, it was a bewildering "disillusionment" to me. Nobody and nothing were what I had imagined they would be. Straight out of my sheltered home, where every thought and tone and word were full of love, I was tossed into this world of school, where, though no doubt there were kind hearts and nice natures as there are everywhere, the whole feeling was different. Even the good-nature was rough and unrefined—the tones of voice, the ways of moving about, the readiness to squabble, though very likely it was more a kind of bluster than anything worse, all startled and astounded me, as I gradually awoke from my dream of the delights of being at school surrounded by companions.

And there was really a prejudice against me, both among teachers and pupils. A story had got about that my family was very, very poor, that father had had to go abroad on this account, and that my schooling was to be paid for out of charity. So even my gentleness, my soft way of speaking, the surprise I was too innocent to conceal at much that I saw, were all put down to my "giving myself airs." And I daresay the very efforts I made to please those about me and to gain their affection did more harm than good. Because I clung more or less to Harriet Smith, my room-mate, and the nearest to me in age, I was called a little sneak, trying to get all I could "out of her," as she was such a rich little girl.

I overheard these remarks once or twice, but it was not for some time that I in the least knew what they meant, and so I daresay the coarse-minded girls who made them thought all the worse of me because I did not resent them and just went quietly on my own way.

What I did want from Harriet was sympathy; and when she was in the humour to

pay attention to me, she did give me as much as it was in her to give.

I shall never forget the real kindness she and Emma too showed me that first night at Green Bank, when a great blow fell on me after we went upstairs to go to bed.

Some one had unpacked my things. My night-dress was lying on the bed, my brushes and sponges were in their places, and when I opened the very small chest of drawers I saw familiar things neatly arranged in them. But there seemed so few—and in the bottom drawer only one frock, and that my oldest one, not the pretty new one mamma had got me for Sundays or any special occasion.

"Where can all my other things be?" I said to Harriet, who was greatly interested in my possessions.

"What more have you?" she said, peering over my shoulder.

I named several.

"And all my other things," I went on, "not clothes, I don't mean, but my workbox and my new writing-desk, and the picture of father and mamma and Haddie"—it was before the days of "carte-de-visite" or "cabinet" photographs; this picture was what was called a "daguerreotype" on glass, and had been taken on purpose for me at some expense—"and my china dog and the rabbits, and my scraps of silk, and all my puzzles, and, and——" I stopped short, out of breath with bewilderment. "Can they be all together for me to unpack myself?" I said.

Emma, the most experienced of the three, shook her head.

"I'm afraid," she was beginning, when the door opened, and Miss Broom's face appeared.

"Young ladies," she said, "I cannot have this. No talking after the last bell has rung. My dear Miss Smith, you are not usually so forgetful. If it is you, Miss Marchant, it is a very bad beginning, disobedience the very first evening."

"She didn't know," said both the girls. "It isn't her fault." "And if she had known,"

Harriet went on, "she couldn't have helped it. Miss Broom, somebody's took such lots of her things. Tell her, Gerry."

Under her protection I repeated the list of missing articles, but before I had got to the end the governess interrupted me.

"You are a most impertinent child," she said, "to say such a thing. There are no thieves at Green Bank—what a mind you must have! Your things are safely packed away. Such as you really need you shall have from time to time as I or Miss Aspinall think fit. The frock you have on must be kept as your best one, and you must wear the brown check every day. You have far too many clothes—absurd extravagance—no wonder——" but here she had the sense to stop short.

I did not care so much about my clothes.

"It's the other things I mind," I began, but Miss Broom, who was already at the door, again interrupted.

"Nonsense," she said. "We cannot have the rooms littered with rubbish. Miss Aspinall left it to me. You may have your Biblical dissected maps on Sundays, and perhaps some of the other puzzles during the Christmas holidays, but young ladies do not come to school to amuse themselves, but to work hard at their lessons."

I dared not say anything more. There may have been some reason in putting away a certain number of my treasures, for dear mamma, in her wish to do all she possibly could for my happiness, had very probably sent more things with me than was advisable. But I was not a silly spoilt child; I had always been taught to be reasonable, and I would have given in quite cheerfully if Miss Broom had put it before me in any kindly way.

I was not left quite without defence, however.

"I don't see but what you might let her have some things out," said Emma. "Harry and I have. Look at the mantelpiece—the china figures and the Swiss châlets are our ornaments, and there's quite room for some more."

But Miss Broom was by this time at the door, which shut after her sharply without her saying another word.

"Horrid old cat," said both the Smiths.

I said nothing, for if I had I knew I should have burst into tears. But after I was ready for bed and had said my prayers, I could not help the one bitter complaint.

"I wouldn't mind anything else if only she'd let me have papa and mamma's picture," I said.

"Of course you should have that," said Emma. "I'm sure Miss Ledbury would let you have it. I think even Miss Aspinall would. Don't be unhappy, Gerry, I'll see if I can't do something for you to-morrow."

And with this consolation I fell asleep. Nor did Emma forget her promise. The next day I found my daguerreotype installed on the mantelpiece, where it stayed all the time I was at school.

My happiest days were those of our French lessons, for then Miss Fenmore was the teacher. She spoke French very well, and she was most kind and patient. Yet for some reason or other she was not much liked in the school. There was a prejudice against her as there was against me: partly, because she did not belong to that part of the country, she was said to "give herself airs"; partly, I think, because she was quiet and rather reserved; partly, I am afraid, because some of the elder girls were jealous of her extreme loveliness. She was as kind to me as she dared to be, but I had no lessons from her except French, and she has since told me that she did not venture to show me anything like partiality, as it would only have made my life still harder and lonelier.

The remembrances which stand out the most clearly in my mind will give a fair idea of my time at Green Bank. The next great trouble I had came on my first Sunday there.

It had been settled that I was to write to mamma once a week—by every mail, that is

to say. The usual day for writing home was Wednesday, the half-holiday, but as the South American mail left England that very day, mamma had arranged with Miss Ledbury that I should be allowed to add a little on Sundays to my letter, as otherwise my news would be a whole week late before it left.

So on the first Sunday afternoon I got out my writing things with great satisfaction, and when Miss Broom asked me what I was going to do, I was pleased to be able to reply that Miss Ledbury had given leave for a Sunday letter. Miss Broom said something to Miss Aspinall, but though they both looked very disapproving, they said no more.

I wrote a long letter. This time, of course, it had to be a complete one, as I had only come to Green Bank on the Thursday. I poured out my heart to mamma, but yet, looking back now and recalling, as I know I can, pretty correctly, all I said, I do not think it was exaggerated or wrong. I tried to write cheerfully, for childish as I was in many ways, I did understand that it would make mamma miserable to think I was unhappy.

I was just closing the envelope when Miss Broom entered the room.

"What are you doing?" she said. "Dear, dear, you don't mean to say you have been all this afternoon writing that letter? What a waste of time! No, no, you must not do that. Miss Ledbury will seal it."

"It doesn't need sealing," I replied. "It is a gumming-down envelope."

But she had come close to me, and drew it out of my hand.

"No letters leave this house without being first read by Miss Ledbury or Miss Aspinall," she said. "Why do you stare so? It is the rule at every school," and so in those days I suppose it was. "If you have written nothing you should not, you have no reason to dread its being seen."

"Yes, I have," I replied indignantly. Even the three or four days I had been at school had made me months older. "I have," I repeated. "Nobody would say to strangers all

they'd say to their own mamma."

I felt my face growing very red; I pulled the letter out of the envelope and began to tear it across. But Miss Broom's strong hands caught hold of mine.

"You are a very naughty girl," she said, "a very naughty girl indeed. I saw at once how spoilt and self-willed you were, but I never could have believed you would dare to give way to such violent temper."

She dragged the letter out of my fingers—indeed, I was too proud to struggle with her—and left the room. I sat there in a sort of stupefied indifference. That day had been the worst I had had. There was not the interest of lessons, nor the daily bustle which had always something enlivening about it. It was so dull, and oh, so different from home! The home-sickness which I was too ignorant to give a name to began to come over me with strides; but for my letter to mamma I felt as if I could not have lived through that afternoon. For even the Smiths were away. They were what was called "weekly boarders," going home every Saturday at noon and staying till Monday morning.

The indifference did not last long. Gradually both it and the indignation broke down. I laid my head on the table before me and burst into convulsive crying.

I do not think I cried loudly. I only remember the terrible sort of shaking that went through me—I had never felt anything like it in my life—and I remember trying to choke down my sobs for fear of Miss Broom hearing me and coming back.

"MY POOR LITTLE GIRL, WHAT IS THE MATTER?"

Some one opened the door and looked in. I tried to be perfectly quiet. But the some one, whoever it was, had seen and perhaps heard me, for she came forward, and in another moment I felt an arm steal gently round me, while a kind voice said softly, very softly,

"My poor little girl, what is the matter?" and looking up, I saw that the new-comer was Miss Fenmore.

"Oh," I said through my tears, "it's my letter, and she's taken it away—that horrid, horrid Miss Broom."

And I told her the whole story.

Miss Fenmore was very wise as well as kind. I have often wondered how she had learnt so much self-control in her short life, for though she then seemed quite "old" to me, I now know she cannot have been more than eighteen or nineteen. But she had had a sad life—that of an orphan since childhood. I suppose sorrow had done the work of years in her case—work that is indeed often not done at all! For she had a character which was good soil for all discipline. She was naturally so sweet and joyous—she seemed born with rose-coloured spectacles.

"Dear child," she said, "try not to take this so much to heart. I daresay your letter will be sent just as it is. Miss Broom is sure to apply to Miss Aspinall, perhaps to Miss Ledbury. And Miss Ledbury is really kind, and she must have had great experience in such things."

But the last words were spoken with more hesitation. Miss Fenmore knew that the class of children composing Miss Ledbury's school had not had a home like mine.

Suddenly she started up—steps were coming along the passage.

"I must not talk to you any more just now," she said, "I came to fetch a book."

After all, the steps did not come to the schoolroom. So after sitting there a little longer, somewhat comforted by the young governess's words, I went up to my own room, where I bathed my eyes and smoothed my hair, mindful of Haddie's warning—not to get the name of a cry-baby!

Late that evening, after tea, I was sent for to Miss Ledbury in the drawing-room. It was a very rainy night, so only a few of the elder girls had gone to church. Miss Ledbury herself suffered sadly from asthma, and could never go out in bad weather. This was the first time I had seen her to speak to since I came.

I was still too unhappy to feel very frightened, and I was not naturally shy, though I seemed so, owing to my difficulty in expressing myself. And there was something about the old lady's manner, gentle though she was, which added to my constraint. I have no doubt she found me very dull and stupid, and it must have been disappointing, for she did mean to be kind.

She spoke to me about my letter which she had read, according to her rule, to which she said she could make no exceptions. I did not clearly understand what she meant, so I just replied "No, ma'am," and "Yes, ma'am." She said the letter should be sent as it was, but she gave me advice for the future which in some ways was very good. Could I not content myself with writing about my own affairs—my lessons, the books I was reading, and so on? What was the use of telling mamma that I did not like Miss Aspinall, and that I could not bear Miss Broom? Would it please mamma, or would it make school-life any happier for me to take up such prejudices? These ladies were my teachers and I must respect them. How could I tell at the end of three days if I should like them or not?

I felt I could tell, but I did not dare to say so. All I longed for was to get away. So when the old lady went on putting words into my mouth, as it were, about being wiser for the future, and not touchy and fanciful, and so on, I agreed with her and said "No, ma'am" and "Yes, ma'am" a few more times, meekly enough. Then she kissed me, and again I felt that she meant to be kind and that it was wrong of me to disappoint her, but somehow I could not help it. And I went upstairs to bed feeling more lonely than ever, now that I quite understood that my letters to mamma must never be anything more than I might write to a stranger—a mere mockery, in short.

There was but one person I felt that I could confide in. That was Miss Fenmore. But the days went on and she seemed to take less instead of more notice of me. I did not understand that her position, poor girl, was much more difficult than mine. If she had seemed to pet me or make much of me it would only have made Miss Broom

still more severe to me, and angry with her. For, as was scarcely to be wondered at, Miss Broom was very indignant indeed at the way I had spoken of her in my letter to mamma. And Miss Fenmore was entirely at that time dependent upon her position at Green Bank. She had no home, and if she brought displeasure upon herself at Miss Ledbury's her future would look very dark indeed.

Yet she was far from selfish. Her caution was quite as much for my sake as for her own.

CHAPTER VIII.

"NOBODY—NOBODY."

The history of that first week might stand for the history of several months at Green Bank. That is why I have related it as clearly as possible. In one sense I suppose people would say my life grew easier to me, that is to say I got more accustomed to it, but with the "growing accustomed," increased the loss of hope and spring, so I doubt if time did bring any real improvement.

I became very dull and silent. I seemed to be losing the power of complaining, or even of wishing for sympathy. I took some interest in my lessons, and almost the only pleasure I had was when I got praise for them. But that did not often happen, not as often as it should have done, I really believe. For the prejudice against me on the part of the upper teachers did not wear off. And I can see now that I must have been a disagreeable child.

Nor did I win more liking among my companions. They gradually came to treat me with a sort of indifferent contempt.

"It's only that stupid child," I would hear said when I came into the room.

The Christmas holidays came and went, without much improving matters. I spent them at school with one or two other pupils, much older than I. Miss Broom went

away, and we were under Miss Aspinall's charge, for Miss Ledbury had caught a bad cold and her niece would not leave her. I preferred Miss Aspinall to Miss Broom certainly, but I had half hoped that Miss Fenmore would have stayed. She too went away, however, having got a "holiday engagement," which she was very glad of she told me when she bade me good-bye. I did not understand what she meant, beyond hearing that she was glad to go, so I said nothing about being sorry.

"She doesn't care for me," I thought.

I saw nothing of Haddie, though he wrote that he was very happy spending the holidays at the house of one of his schoolfellows, and I was glad of this, even while feeling so utterly deserted myself.

It was very, very dull, but I felt as if I did not mind. Even mamma's letters once a fortnight gave me only a kind of tantalising pleasure, for I knew I dared not really answer them. The only thing I felt glad of was that she did not know how lonely and unhappy I was, and that she never would do so till the day—the day which I could scarcely believe would ever, ever come—when I should see her again, and feel her arms round me, and know that all the misery and loneliness were over!

Some new pupils came after the Christmas holidays, and one or two of the elder girls did not return. But the new boarders were older than I and took no notice of me, so their coming made no difference. One event, however, did interest me—that was the appearance at certain classes two or three times a week of a very sweet-looking little girl about my own age. She was pretty and very nicely dressed, though by no means showily, and her tone of voice and way of speaking were different from those of most of my companions. I wished she had come altogether, and then I might have made friends with her. "Only," I said to myself unselfishly, "she would most likely be as unhappy as I am, so I shouldn't wish for it."

One of the classes she came to was the French one—the class which, as I have said, Miss Fenmore taught. And Miss Fenmore seemed to know her, for she called her by

her Christian name—"Myra." The first time I heard it I felt quite puzzled. I knew I had heard it before, though I could not remember where or when, except that it was not very long ago. And when I heard her last name, "Raby"—"Miss Raby" one of the other teachers called her—and put the two together—"Myra Raby"—I felt more and more certain I had heard them spoken of before, though I was equally certain I had never seen the little girl herself.

I might have asked Miss Fenmore about her, but it did not enter into my head to do so: that was one of my odd childish ways. And it was partly, too, that I was growing more and more reserved and silent. Even to Harriet Smith I did not talk half as much as at first, and she used to tell me I was growing sulky.

I took great interest in watching for Myra's appearance. I daresay if I could make a picture of her now she would seem a quaint old-fashioned little figure to you, but to me she seemed perfectly lovely. She had pretty brown hair, falling in ringlets round her delicate little face; her eyes were gray, very soft and gentle, and she had a dear little rosebud of a mouth. She was generally dressed in pale gray merino or cashmere, with white lace frilled round the neck and short sleeves—all little girls wore short sleeves then, even in winter; and once when I caught a glimpse of her getting into a carriage which was waiting for her at the door, I was lost in admiration of her dark green cloth pelisse trimmed with chinchilla fur.

"She must be somebody very rich and grand," I thought. But I had no opportunity of getting to know more of her, than a nice little smile or a word or two of thanks if I passed her a book at the class or happened to sit next her. For she always left immediately after the lesson was over.

Up to Easter she came regularly. Then we had three weeks' holidays, and as before, Miss Fenmore went away. She was pleased to go, but when she said good-bye to me I thought she looked sad, and she called me "my poor little girl."

"Why do you say that?" I asked her. She smiled and answered that she did not quite

know; she thought I looked dull, and she wished I were going too.

"Are you less unhappy than when you first came to school?" she said, looking at me rather earnestly. It was very seldom she had an opportunity of speaking to me alone.

"No," I replied, "I'm much unhappier when I think about it. But I'm getting not to think, so I don't care."

She looked still graver at this. I fancy she saw that what I said was true. I was growing dulled and stupefied, as it were, for want of any one to sympathise with me or draw me out, though I did not know quite how to put this in words. As I have said before, I was not a child with much power of expression.

Miss Fenmore kissed me, but she sighed as she did so.

"I wish——" she began, but then she stopped. "When I come back after Easter," she said more cheerfully, "I hope I may somehow manage to see more of you, dear Geraldine."

"Thank you," I answered. I daresay my voice did not sound as if I did thank her or as if I cared, though in my heart I was pleased, and often thought of what she had said during the holidays, which I found even duller than the Christmas ones had been.

They came to an end at last, however, but among the returning governesses and pupils there was no Miss Fenmore. Nor did Myra Raby come again to the classes she used to attend. I wondered to myself why it was so, but for some time I knew nothing about Miss Fenmore, and in the queer silent way which was becoming my habit I did not ask. At last one day a new governess made her appearance, and then I overheard some of the girls saying she was to take Miss Fenmore's place. A sort of choke came into my throat, and for the first time I realised that I had been looking forward to the pretty young governess's return.

I do not remember anything special happening for some time after that. I suppose Easter must have been early that year, for when the events occurred which I am now going to relate, it was still cold and wintry weather—very rainy at least, and

Mexington was always terribly gloomy in rainy weather. It seems a long stretch to look back upon—those weeks of the greatest loneliness I had yet known—but in reality I do not think it could have been more than three or four.

I continued to work steadily—even hard—at my lessons. I knew that it would please mamma, and I had a vague feeling that somehow my getting on fast might shorten the time of our separation, though I could not have said why. I was really interested in some of my lessons, and anxious to do well even in those I did not like. But I was not quick or clever, and often, very often, my hesitation in expressing myself made me seem far less intelligent than I actually was. Still I generally got good marks, especially for written tasks, for the teachers, though hard and strict, were not unprincipled. They did not like me, but they were fair on the whole, I think.

Unluckily, however, about this time I got a bad cold. I was not seriously ill, but it hung about me for some time and made me feel very dull and stupid. I think, too, it must have made me a little deaf, though I did not know it at the time. I began to get on less well at lessons, very often making mistakes and replying at random, for which I was scolded as if I did it out of carelessness.

And though I tried more and more to prepare my lessons perfectly, things grew worse and worse.

At last one day they came to a point. I forget what the lesson was, and it does not matter, but every time a question came to me I answered wrongly. Once or twice I did not hear, and when I said so, Miss Broom, whose class it was, was angry, and said I was talking nonsense. It ended in my bursting into tears, which I had never done before in public since I had been at Green Bank.

Miss Broom was very annoyed. She said a great deal to me which between my tears and my deafness I did not hear, and at last she must have ordered me to go up to my room, for her tone grew more and more angry.

"Do you mean to defy me?" she said, so loud that I heard her plainly.

I stared, and I do not know what would have happened if Harriet Smith, who was near me, had not started up in her good-natured way.

"She doesn't hear; she's crying so," she said. "Gerry, dear, Miss Broom says you're to go up to your room."

I was nothing loth. I got up from my seat and made my way more by feeling than seeing—so blinded was I by crying—to the door, and upstairs.

Arrived there, I flung myself on to the end of my bed. It was cold, and outside it was raining, raining—it seems to me now that it never left off raining at Mexington that spring; the sky, if I had looked out of the window, was one dull gray sheet. But I seemed to care for nothing—just at first the comfort of being able to cry with no one to look at me was all I wanted. So I lay there sobbing, though not loudly.

After some little time had passed the downstairs bell rang—it was afternoon, and the bell meant, I knew, preparation for tea. So I was not very surprised when the door opened and Emma and Harriet came in—they were both kind, Harriet especially, though her kindness was chiefly shown by loud abuse of Miss Broom.

"You'd better take care, Harry," said her sister at last, "or you'll be getting into disgrace yourself, which certainly won't do Gerry any good. Do be quick and make yourself tidy, the tea-bell will be ringing in a moment. Hadn't you better wash your face and brush your hair, Gerry—you do look such a figure."

"I can't go down unless Miss Broom says I may," I replied, "and I don't want any tea," though in my heart I knew I was feeling hungry. Much crying often makes children hungry; they are not like grown-up people.

"Oh, nonsense," said Emma. "You'd feel ever so much better if you had some tea. What I think you're so silly for is minding—why need you care what that old Broom says? She daren't beat you or starve you, and once you're at home again you can snap your fingers at school and governesses and——"

Here Harriet said something to her sister in a low voice which I did not hear. It made

Emma stop.

"Oh, well, I can't help it," she said, or something of that kind. "It doesn't do any good to cry like that, whatever troubles you have," she went on.

I got up slowly and tried to wash away some of the traces of my tears by plunging my face in cold water. Then Harriet helped me to smooth my hair and make myself look neat. Emma's words had had the effect of making me resolve to cry no more if I could help it. And a moment or two later I was glad I had followed her advice, for one of the elder girls came to our room with a message to say that I was to go down to tea, and after tea I was to stay behind in the dining-room as Miss Aspinall wished to speak to me.

"Very well," I said. But the moment the other girl had gone both Emma and Harriet began again.

"That horrid old Broom," said Harriet, "just fancy her complaining to Miss Aspinall."

And "Promise me, Gerry," said Emma, "not to mind what she says, and whatever you do, don't cry. There's nothing vexes old Broom so much as seeing we don't care—mean old cat."

I could scarcely help laughing, my spirits had got up a little—that is to say, I felt more angry than sad now. I felt as if I really did not much care what was said to me.

And I drank my tea and ate my slices of thick bread and butter with a good appetite, though I saw Miss Broom watching me from her end of the table; and when I had finished I felt, as Emma had said I should, "ever so much better"—that is to say, no longer in the least inclined to cry.

Nor did I feel nervous or frightened when Miss Aspinall—all the others having gone—seated herself in front of me and began her talk. It began quite differently from what I had expected. She was a good woman, and not nearly so bad-tempered as Miss Broom, though hard and cold, and I am sure she meant to do me good. She

talked about how changed I had been of late, my lessons so much less well done, and how careless and inattentive I seemed. There was some truth in it. I knew my lessons had not been so well done, but I also knew I had not been careless or inattentive.

"And worst of all," continued the governess, "you have got into such a habit of making excuses that it really amounts to telling untruths. Several times, Miss Broom tells me, you have done a wrong lesson or not done one at all, and you have maintained to her that you had not been told what you had been told—there was something about your French poetry yesterday, which you must have known you were to learn. Miss Broom says you positively denied it."

I was getting very angry now—I had wanted to say I was sorry about my lessons, but now that I was accused of not speaking the truth I felt nothing but anger.

"I never tell stories," I said very loudly; "and if Miss Broom says I do, I'll write to mamma and tell her. I won't stay here if you say such things to me."

Miss Aspinall was quite startled; she had never seen me in a passion before, for I was usually considered in the school as sulky rather than violent-tempered. For a moment or two she stared, too astonished to speak. Then,

"Go back to your room," she said. "I am sorry to say I must lay this before Miss Ledbury."

I got up from my seat—Miss Aspinall had not kept me standing—and went upstairs again to my room, where I stayed for the rest of the evening, my supper—a cup of milk and a piece of dry bread—being brought me by a servant, and with it a message that I was to undress and go to bed, which I was not sorry to do.

I lay there, not asleep, and still burning with indignation, when Harriet came up to bed. She had not been told not to speak to me, very likely the teachers thought I would be asleep, and she was very curious to know what had passed. I told her all. She was very sympathising, but at the same time she thought it a pity I had lost my

temper with Miss Aspinall.

"I don't know how you'll get on now," she said, "with both her and Miss Broom so against you. You should just not have minded—like Emma said."

"Not mind her saying I told stories!" I burst out. Harriet did not seem to think there was anything specially annoying in that. "Well," I went on, "I mind it, whether you do or not. And I'm going to mind it. I shall write to mamma and tell her I can't stay here any more, and I'm sure when she hears it she'll do something. She won't let me stay here. Or—or—perhaps father will fix to come home again and not stay as long as two years there."

"I don't think he'll do that," said Harriet mysteriously.

"What do you mean? What do you know about it?" I asked, for something in her voice struck me.

"Oh, nothing—I shouldn't have said it—it was only something I heard," she replied, looking rather confused.

"Something you heard," I repeated, starting up in bed and catching hold of her. "Then you must tell me. Do you mean there's been letters or news about father and mamma that I don't know about?"

"No, no," said Harriet. "Of course not."

"Then what do you mean? You shall tell me—if you don't," I went on, more and more excitedly, "I'll—" I hesitated—"I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll go straight downstairs, just as I am, in my nightgown, to Miss Ledbury herself, and tell her what you've said. I don't care if she beats me, I don't care what she does, but I will know."

Harriet tried to pull herself away.

"What a horrid temper you're getting, Gerry," she said complainingly. "Just when I hurried up to bed as quick as I could to talk to you. It's nothing, I tell you—only

something I heard at home, and Emma said I wasn't ever to tell it you."

I clutched her more firmly.

"You shall tell me, or I'll do what I said."

Harriet looked really frightened.

"You'll not tell Emma, then? You promise?"

I nodded. "I promise."

"Well, then, it was only one day—papa was talking about somebody going to South America, and I said that was where your papa and mamma had gone, and papa asked your name, and then he said he had seen your papa at the bank, and it was a pity he hadn't been content to stay there. It was such a bad climate where he'd gone—lots of people got ill and died there, unless they were rich enough to live out of the town, and he didn't suppose any one who'd only been a clerk in the bank here would be that. And Emma said, couldn't your papa and mamma come back if they got ill, and he said if they waited till then it would be rather too late. There's some fever people get there, that comes all of a sudden. And besides that, your papa must have promised he'd stay two years—they always do."

As she went on, my heart fell lower and lower—for a moment or two I could not speak. All sorts of dreadful fears and imaginings began to fill my mind; perhaps my parents had already got that terrible illness Harriet spoke of, perhaps one or both of them had already died. I could have screamed aloud. I felt I could not bear it—I must write to mamma a letter that nobody should read. I must see somebody who would tell me the truth—Haddie, perhaps, knew more than I did. If I could go to him! But I had no money and no idea of the way, and Miss Aspinall would never, never let me even write to ask him. Besides, I was in disgrace, very likely they would not believe me if I told them why I was so miserable; they had already said I told stories, and then I must not get Harriet into trouble.

What should I do? If only Miss Fenmore had still been there, I felt she would have

been sorry for me, but there was nobody—nobody.

I turned my face away from my little companion, and buried it in the pillow. Harriet grew frightened.

"What are you doing, Gerry?" she said. "Why don't you speak? Are you going to sleep or are you crying? Very likely your papa and mamma won't get that illness. I wish I hadn't told you."

"Never mind," I said. "I'm going to sleep."

"And you won't tell Emma?" Harriet repeated.

"Of course not—don't you believe my word? Do you too think that I tell stories?"

I tried to get rid of my misery by letting myself grow angry.

"You're very cross," said Harriet; but all the same I think she understood me better than she could express, for she kissed me and said, "Do go to sleep—don't be so unhappy."

CHAPTER IX.

OUT IN THE RAIN.

It would be an exaggeration to say that I did not sleep that night. Children often sleep very heavily when they are specially unhappy, and I was unhappy enough, even before Harriet's telling me what she had heard. But though I did sleep, I shall never forget that night. My dreams were so miserable, and when I awoke—very early in the morning—I could scarcely separate them from real things. It was actually not so bad when I was quite awake, for then I set myself thoroughly to think it all over.

I could not bear it—I could not go on without knowing if it was true about father and mamma. I could not bear my life at school, if the looking forward to being with

them again, before very long, was to be taken from me. I must write a letter to mamma that no one would see; but first—yes, first I must know how much was true. Whom could I ask? Haddie? Perhaps he knew no more than I did, and it was just as difficult to write to him as to mamma. Then suddenly another thought struck me—Mrs. Selwood, old Mrs. Selwood, if I could but see her. Perhaps if I wrote to her she would come to see me; mamma always said she was very kind, though I know she did not care much for children, especially little girls. Still I thought I would try, though it would be difficult, for I should not like Miss Ledbury to know I had written to Mrs. Selwood secretly. She would be so angry, and I did not want to make Miss Ledbury angry. She was much nicer than the others. Once or twice the idea came to me of going straight to her and telling her how miserable I was, but that would bring in Harriet, and oh, how furious the other governesses would be! No, I would try to write to Mrs. Selwood—only, I did not know her address. I only knew the name of her house—Fernley—that would not be enough, at least I feared not. I would try to find out; perhaps Harriet could ask some one when she went home.

My spirits rose a little with all this planning. I am afraid that the life I led was beginning to make me unchildlike and concealed in my ways. I enjoyed the feeling of having a secret and, so to say, outwitting my teachers, particularly Miss Broom. So, though I was looking pale and my eyes were still very swollen, I think Harriet was surprised, and certainly very glad, to find that I was not very miserable or upset.

A message was sent up to say I was to go down to breakfast with the others. And after prayers and breakfast were over I went into the schoolroom as usual.

That morning did not pass badly; it happened to be a day for lessons I got on well with—written ones principally, and reading aloud. So I got into no fresh disgrace. It was a very rainy day, there was no question of going out, and I was sent to practise at twelve o'clock till the dressing-bell rang for the early dinner. That was to keep me away from the other girls.

As soon as dinner was over Miss Broom came to me with a French poetry book in her hand.

"This is the poem you should have learnt yesterday," she said, "though you denied having been told so. Miss Aspinall desires you to take it upstairs to your room and learn it, as you can do perfectly, if you choose, by three o'clock. Then you are to come downstairs to the drawing-room, where you will find her."

"Very well," I said, as I took the book, "I will learn it."

They were going to let me off rather easily, I thought, and possibly, just possibly, if Miss Ledbury was in the drawing-room too and seemed kind, I might ask her to give me leave to write to Mrs. Selwood just to say how very much I would like to see her, and then if I did see her I could tell her what Harriet had said, without risking getting Harriet into trouble.

So I set to work at my French poetry with good will, and long before three o'clock I had learnt it perfectly. There was a clock on the landing half-way down the staircase which struck the quarters and half-hours. I heard the quarter to three strike and then I read the poem right through six times, and after that, closing the book, I said it aloud to myself without one mistake, and then just as the clock began "burr-ing" before striking the hour I made my way quietly down to the drawing-room.

I tapped at the door.

"Come in," said Miss Aspinall.

She was standing beside Miss Ledbury, who was sitting in an arm-chair near the fire. She looked very pale, her face nearly as white as her hair, and it made me feel sorry, so that I stared at her and forgot to curtsey as we always were expected to do on entering a room where any of the governesses were.

"Do you not see Miss Ledbury?" said Miss Aspinall sharply. I felt my cheeks get red, and I turned back towards the door to make my curtsey.

"I—I forgot," I said, and before Miss Aspinall had time to speak again, the old lady held out her hand.

"You must try to be more thoughtful," she said, but her voice was gentle. "Now give me your book," she went on, "I want to hear your French verses myself."

I handed her the book, which was open at the place. I felt very glad I had learnt the poetry so well, as I wished to please Miss Ledbury.

"Begin, my dear," she said.

I did so, repeating the six or eight verses without any mistake or hesitation.

Miss Ledbury seemed pleased and relieved.

"Very well said—now, my dear child, that shows that you can learn well when you try."

"Of course she can," said Miss Aspinall.

"But more important than learning your lessons well," continued Miss Ledbury, "is to be perfectly truthful and honest. What has distressed me, Geraldine, has been to hear that when—as may happen to any child—you have forgotten a lesson, or learnt it imperfectly, instead of at once owning your fault, you have tried to screen yourself behind insincere excuses. That was the case about these very verses, was it not, Miss Aspinall?" (Miss Ledbury always called her niece "Miss Aspinall" before any of us.)

"It was," replied Miss Aspinall. "Miss Broom will tell you all the particulars," and as she spoke Miss Broom came in.

Miss Ledbury turned to her.

"I wish you to state exactly what you have had to complain of in Geraldine Le Marchant," she said. And Miss Broom, with a far from amiable expression, repeated the whole—my carelessness and ill-prepared lessons for some time past, the frequent excuses I made, saying that she had not told me what she certainly had told me, my forgetting my French poetry altogether, and persisting in denying that it had

been given out.

I did not hear clearly all she said, but she raised her voice at the end, and I caught her last words. I felt again a sort of fury at her, and I gave up all idea of confiding in Miss Ledbury, or of trying to please any one.

Miss Ledbury seemed nervous.

"Geraldine has said her French poetry perfectly," she said. "I think she has taken pains to learn it well."

"It is some time since she has said any lesson perfectly to me, I am sorry to say," snapped Miss Broom.

Miss Ledbury handed her the book.

"You can judge for yourself," she said. "Repeat the verses to Miss Broom, Geraldine."

Then a strange thing happened. I really wanted to say the poetry well, partly out of pride, partly because again something in Miss Ledbury's manner made me feel gentler, but as I opened my mouth to begin, the words entirely left my memory. I looked up—possibly a little help, a syllable just to start me, would have set me right, but instead of that I saw Miss Broom's half-mocking, half-angry face, and Miss Aspinall's cold hard eyes. Miss Ledbury I did not look at. In reality I think both she and Miss Aspinall were afraid of Miss Broom. I do not think Miss Aspinall was as hard as she seemed.

I drew a long breath—no, it was no use. I could not recall one word.

"I've forgotten it," I said.

Miss Aspinall gave an exclamation—Miss Ledbury looked at me with reproach. Both believed that I was not speaking the truth, and that I had determined not to say the verses to Miss Broom.

"Impossible," said Miss Aspinall.

"Geraldine," said Miss Ledbury sadly but sternly, "do not make me distrust you."

I grew stony. Now I did not care. Even Miss Ledbury doubted my word. I almost think if the verses had come back to me then, I would not have said them. I stood there, dull and stupid and obstinate, though a perfect fire was raging inside me.

"Geraldine," said Miss Ledbury again, still more sadly and sternly.

I was only a child, and I was almost exhausted by all I had gone through. Even my pride gave way. I forgot all that Emma and Harriet had said about not crying, and, half turning away from the three before me, I burst into a loud fit of tears and sobbing.

Miss Ledbury glanced at her niece. I think the old lady had hard work to keep herself from some impulsive kind action, but I suppose she would have thought it wrong. But Miss Aspinall came towards me, and placed her arm on my shoulders.

"Geraldine," she said, and her voice was not unkind, "I beg you to try to master this naughty obstinate spirit. Say the verses again, and all may be well."

"No, no," I cried. "I can't, I can't. It is true that I've forgotten them, and if I could say them I wouldn't now, because you all think me a story-teller."

She turned away, really grieved and shocked.

"Take her upstairs to her room again," said Miss Ledbury. "Geraldine, your tears are only those of anger and temper."

I did not care now. I suffered myself to be led back to my room, and I left off crying almost as suddenly as I had begun, and when Miss Aspinall shut the door, and left me there without speaking to me again, I sat down on the foot of my bed as if I did not care at all, for again there came over me that strange stolid feeling that nothing mattered, that nothing would ever make me cry again.

It did not last long, however. I got up in a few minutes and looked out of the window. It was the dullest afternoon I had ever seen, raining, raining steadily, the

sky all gloomy no-colour, duller even than gray. It might have been any season, late autumn, mid-winter; there was not a leaf, or the tiniest beginning of one, on the black branches of the two or three trees in what was called "the garden"—for my window looked to the back of the house—not the very least feeling of spring, even though we were some way on in April. I gave a little shiver, and then a sudden thought struck me. It would be a very good time for getting out without any one seeing me—no one would fancy it possible that I would venture out in the rain, and all my schoolfellows and the governesses were still at lessons. What was the use of waiting here? They might keep me shut up in my room for—for ever, perhaps—and I should never know about father and mamma, or get Mrs. Selwood's address or be allowed to write to her, or—or any one. I would go.

It took but a few minutes to put on my things. As I have said, there was a queer mixture of childishness and "old-fashionedness," as it is called, about me. I dressed myself as sensibly as if I had been a grown-up person, choosing my thickest boots and warm jacket, and arming myself with my waterproof cape and umbrella. I also put my purse in my pocket—it contained a few shillings.

Then I opened the door and listened, going out a little way into the passage to do so. All was quite quiet—not even a piano was to be heard, only the clock on the landing sounded to me much louder than usual. If I had waited long, it would have made me nervous. I should have begun to fancy it was talking to me like Dick Whittington's bells, though, I am sure, it would not have said anything half so cheering!

I CREPT DOWNSTAIRS, PAST ONE SCHOOLROOM WITH ITS CLOSED DOOR.

But I did not wait to hear. I crept downstairs, past one schoolroom with its closed door, and a muffled sound of voices as I drew quite close to it, then on again, past the downstairs class-room, and along the hall to the front door. For that was what I had made up my mind was the best, bold as it seemed. I would go right out by the

front door. I knew it opened easily, for we went out that way on Sundays to church, and once or twice I had opened it. And nobody would ever dream of my passing out that way.

It was all managed quite easily, and almost before I had time to take in what I had done, I found myself out in the road some little distance from Green Bank, for as soon as the gate closed behind me I had set off running from a half-nervous fear that some one might be coming in pursuit of me. I ran on a little farther, in the same direction, that of the town, for Miss Ledbury's house was in the outskirts—then, out of breath, I stood still to think what I should do.

I had really not made any distinct plan. The only idea clearly in my mind was to get Mrs. Selwood's address, so that I could write to her. But as I stood there, another thought struck me. I would go home—to the house in the dull street which had never seemed dull to me! For there, I suddenly remembered, I might find one of our own servants. I recollected Lydia's telling me that cook was probably going to "engage" with the people who had taken the house. And cook would be sure to know Mrs. Selwood's address, and—perhaps—cook would be able to tell me something about father and mamma. She was a kind woman—I would not mind telling her how dreadfully frightened I was about them since Harriet Smith had repeated what she had heard.

I knew the way to our house, at least I thought I did, though afterwards I found I had taken two or three wrong turnings, which had made my journey longer. It was scarcely raining by this time, but the streets were dreadfully wet and muddy, and the sky still dark and gloomy.

At last I found myself at the well-known corner of our street—how often I had run round it with Haddie, when we had been allowed to go on some little errand by ourselves! I had not passed this way since mamma went, and the feeling that came over me was very strange. I went along till I came to our house, number 39; then, in

a sort of dream, I mounted the two or three steps to the door, and rang the bell. How well I knew its sound! It seemed impossible to believe that Lydia would not open to me, and that if I hurried upstairs I should not find mamma sitting in her usual place in the drawing-room!

But of course it was not so. A strange face met me as the door drew back, and for a moment or two I felt too confused to speak, though I saw the servant was looking at me in surprise.

"Is—can I see cook?" I got out at last.

"Cook," the maid repeated. "I'm sure I can't say. Can't you give me your message—Miss?" adding the last word after a little hesitation.

"I'd rather see her, please. I want to ask her for Mrs. Selwood's address. Mrs. Selwood's a friend of mamma's, and I'm sure cook would know. We used to live here, and Lydia said cook was going to stay."

The servant's face cleared, but her reply was not encouraging.

"Oh," she said, "I see. But it's no use your seeing our cook, Miss. She's a stranger. The other one—Sarah Wells was her name——"

"Yes, yes," I exclaimed, "that's her."

"She's gone—weeks ago. Her father was ill, and she had to go home. I'm sorry, Miss"—she was a good-natured girl—"but it can't be helped. And I think you'd better go home quick. It's coming on to rain again, and it'll soon be dark, and you're such a little young lady to be out alone."

"Thank you," I said, and I turned away, my heart swelling with disappointment.

I walked on quickly for a little way, for I felt sure the servant was looking after me. Then I stopped short and asked myself again "what should I do?" The girl had advised me to go "home"—"home" to Green Bank, to be shut up in my room again, and be treated as a story-teller, and never have a chance of writing to Mrs. Selwood

or any one! No, that I would not do. The very thought of it made me hasten my steps as if to put a greater distance between myself and Miss Ledbury's house. And I walked on some way without knowing where I was going except that it was in an opposite direction from school.

It must have been nearly six o'clock by this time, and the gloomy day made it already dusk. The shops were lighting up, and the glare of the gas on the wet pavement made me look about me. I was in one of the larger streets now, a very long one, that led right out from the centre of the town to the outskirts. I was full of a strange kind of excitement; I did not mind the rain, and indeed it was not very heavy; I did not feel lonely or frightened, and my brain seemed unusually active and awake.

"I know what I'll do," I said to myself; "I'll go to the big grocer's where they give Haddie and me those nice gingerbreads, and I'll ask them for Mrs. Selwood's address. I remember mamma said Mrs. Selwood always bought things there. And—and—I won't write to her. I'll go to the railway and see if I've money enough to get a ticket, and I'll go to Mrs. Selwood and tell her how I can't bear it any longer. I've got four shillings, and if that isn't enough I daresay the railway people wouldn't mind if I promised I'd send it them."

I marched on, feeling once more very determined and valiant. I thought I knew the way to the big grocer's quite well, but when I turned down a street which looked like the one where it was, I began to feel a little confused. There were so many shops, and the lights in the windows dazzled me, and worst of all, I could not remember the name of the grocer's. It was something like Simpson, but not Simpson. I went on, turning again more than once, always in hopes of seeing it before me, but always disappointed. And I was beginning to feel very tired; I must, I suppose, have been really tired all the time, but my excitement had kept me up.

At last I found myself in a much darker street than the others. For there were few

shops in it, and most of the houses were offices of some kind. It was a wide street and rather hilly. As I stood at the top I saw it sloping down before me; the light of the tall lamps glimmered brokenly in the puddles, for it was raining again more heavily now. Suddenly, as if in a dream, some words came back to me, so clearly that I could almost have believed some one was speaking. It was mamma's voice.

"You had better put on your mackintosh, Haddie," I seemed to hear her say, and then I remembered it all—it came before me like a picture—that rainy evening not many months ago when mamma and Haddie and I had walked home so happily, we two tugging at her arms, one on each side, heedless of the rain or the darkness, or anything except that we were all together.

I stood still. Never, I think, was a child's heart more nearly breaking.

CHAPTER X.

TAKING REFUGE.

For a minute or two I seemed to feel nothing; then there came over me a sort of shiver, partly of cold, for it was very cold, partly of misery. I roused myself, however. With the remembrance of that other evening had come to me also the knowledge of where I was. Only a few yards down the sloping street on the left-hand side came a wide stretch of pavement, and there, in a kind of angle, stood a double door, open on both sides, leading into a small outer hall, from which again another door, glazed at the top, was the entrance to Cranston's show-rooms.

I remembered it all perfectly. Just beyond the inner entrance stood the two carved lions that Haddie and I admired so much. I wished I could see them again, and—yes—a flash of joy went through me at the thought—I could get Mrs. Selwood's address quite as well from old Mr. Cranston as from the big grocer!

As soon as the idea struck me I hurried on, seeming to gain fresh strength and

energy. It was almost dark, but a gas-lamp was burning dimly above the lintel, and inside, on the glass of the inner door, were the large gilt letters "Cranston and Co."

I ran up the two or three broad shallow steps and pushed open the door, which was a swing one. It was nearly time for closing, but that I did not know. There was no one to be seen inside, not, at least, in the first room, and the door made no noise. But there stood the dear lions—I could not see them very clearly, for the place was not brightly lighted, but I crept up to them, and stroked softly the one nearest me. They seemed like real friends.

I had not courage to go into the other show-room, and all was so perfectly still that I could scarcely think any one was there. I thought I would wait a few minutes in hopes of some one coming out, of whom I could inquire if I could see Mr. Cranston. And I was now beginning to feel so tired—so very tired, and so cold.

In here, though I did not see any fire, it felt ever so much warmer than outside. There was no chair or stool, but I found a seat for myself on the stand of the farther-in lion—each of them had a heavy wooden stand. It seemed very comfortable, and I soon found that by moving on a little I could get a nice rest for my head against the lion's body. A strange pleasant sense of protection and comfort came over me.

"How glad I am I came in here," I said to myself. "I don't mind if I have to wait a good while. It is so cosy and warm."

I no longer made any plans. I knew I wanted to ask for Mrs. Selwood's address, but that was all I thought of. What I should do when I had got it I did not know; where I should go for the night, for it was now quite dark, I did not trouble about in the least. I think I must have been very much in the condition I have heard described, of travellers lost in the snow—the overpowering wish to stay where I was and rest, was all I was conscious of. I did not think of going to sleep. I did not know I was sleepy.

And for some time I knew nothing.

The first thing that caught my attention was a very low murmur—so low that it might have been merely a breath of air playing in the keyhole; I seemed to have been hearing it for some time before it took shape, as it were, and grew into a softly-whispering voice, gradually gathering into words.

"Poor little girl; so she has come at last. Well, as you say, brother, we have been expecting her for a good while, have we not?"

"Yes, indeed, but speak softly. It would be a pity to awake her. And what we have to do can be done just as well while she sleeps."

"I don't agree with you," said the first speaker. "I should much prefer her being awake. She would enjoy the ride, and she is an intelligent child and would profit by our conversation."

"As you like," replied number two. "I must be off to fetch the boy. She will perhaps be awake by the time I return."

And then—just as I was on the point of starting up and telling them I was awake—came a sound of stamping and rustling, and a sort of whirr and a breath of cold air, which told me the swing door had been opened. And when I sat straight up and looked about me, lo and behold, there was only one lion to be seen—the stand of his brother was empty!

"I—please I am awake," I said rather timidly. "It was me you were talking about, wasn't it?"

"I—'it was I'—the verb to be takes the same case after it as before it," was the reply, much to my surprise and rather to my disgust. Who would have thought that the carved lions bothered about grammar!

"It was I, then," I repeated meekly. I did not want to give any offence to my new friend. "Please—I heard you saying something—something about going a ride. And where has the—the other Mr. Lion gone? I heard about—a boy."

"You heard correctly," my lion replied, and I knew somehow that he was smiling, or whatever lions do that matches smiling. "My brother has gone to fetch your brother—we planned it all some time ago—we shall meet on the sea-shore and travel together. But we should be starting. Can you climb up on to my back?"

"Oh yes," I said quite calmly, as if there was nothing the least out of the common in all this, "I'm sure I can."

"Catch hold of my mane," said the lion; "don't mind tugging, it won't hurt," and—not to my surprise, for nothing surprised me—I felt my hands full of soft silky hair, as the lion shook down his long wavy mane to help my ascent.

Nothing was easier. In another moment I was cosily settled on his back, which felt deliciously comfortable, and the mane seemed to tuck itself round me like a fleecy rug.

"Shut your eyes," said my conductor or steed, I don't know which to call him; "go to sleep if you like. I'll wake you when we meet the others."

"Thank you," I said, feeling too content and comfortable to disagree with anything he said.

Then came a feeling of being raised up, a breath of colder air, which seemed to grow warm again almost immediately, and I knew nothing more till I heard the words, "Here they are."

I opened my eyes and looked about me. It was night—overhead in the deep blue sky innumerable stars were sparkling, and down below at our feet I heard the lap-lap of rippling waves. A dark, half-shadowy figure stood at my right hand, and as I saw it more clearly I distinguished the form of the other lion, with—yes, there was some one sitting on his back.

"Haddie," I exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, Geraldine, it's me," my brother's own dear voice replied. "We're going

right over the sea—did you know?—isn't it splendid? We're going to see father and mamma. Hold out your hand so that you can feel mine."

THE BROTHER LIONS ROSE INTO THE AIR.

I did so, and my fingers clasped his, and at that moment the brother lions rose into the air, and down below, even fainter and fainter, came the murmur of the sea, while up above, the twinkling stars looked down on what surely was one of the strangest sights they had ever seen in all their long, long experience!

Then again I seemed to know nothing, though somehow, all through, I felt the clasp of Haddie's hand and knew we were close together.

A beautiful light streaming down upon us, of which I was conscious even through my closed eyelids, was the next thing I remember. It seemed warm as well as bright, and I felt as if basking in it.

"Wake up, Geraldine," said Haddie's voice.

I opened my eyes. But now I have come to a part of my story which I have never been able, and never shall be able, to put into fitting words. The scene before me was too beautiful, too magically exquisite for me even to succeed in giving the faintest idea of it. Still I must try, though knowing that I cannot but fail.

Can you picture to yourselves the loveliest day of all the perfect summer days you have ever known—no, more than that, a day like summer and spring in one—the richness of colour, the balmy fragrance of the prime of the year joined to the freshness, the indescribable hopefulness and expectation which is the charm of the spring? The beauty and delight seemed made up of everything lovely mingled together—sights, sounds, scents, feelings. There was the murmur of running streams, the singing of birds, the most delicious scent from the flowers growing in profusion and of every shade of colour.

Haddie and I looked at each other—we still held each other by the hand, but now, somehow, we were standing together on the grass, though I could not remember

having got down from my perch on the lion's back.

"Where are the lions, Haddie?" I said.

Haddie seemed to understand everything better than I did.

"They're all right," he replied, "resting a little. You see we've come a long way, Geraldine, and so quick."

"And where are we?" I asked. "What is this place, Haddie? Is it fairyland or—or—heaven?"

Haddie smiled.

"It's not either," he said. "You'll find out the name yourself. But come, we must be quick, for we can't stay very long. Hold my hand tight and then we can run faster."

I seemed to know that something more beautiful than anything we had seen yet was coming. I did not ask Haddie any more questions, even though I had a feeling that he knew more than I did. He seemed quite at home in this wonderful place, quite able to guide me. And his face was shining with happiness.

We ran a good way, and very fast. But I did not feel at all tired or breathless. My feet seemed to have wings, and all the time the garden around us grew lovelier and lovelier. If Haddie had not been holding my hand so fast I should scarcely have been able to resist stopping to gather some of the lovely flowers everywhere in such profusion, or to stand still to listen to the dear little birds singing so exquisitely overhead.

"It must be fairyland," I repeated to myself more than once, in spite of what Haddie had said.

But suddenly all thought of fairyland or flowers, birds and garden, went out of my head, as Haddie stopped in his running.

"Geraldine," he half whispered, "look there."

"There" was a little arbour a few yards from where we stood, and there, seated on a

rustic bench, her dear face all sunshine, was mamma!

She started up as soon as she saw us and hastened forward, her arms outstretched.

"My darlings, my darlings," she said, as Haddie and I threw ourselves upon her.

She did look so pretty; she was all in white, and she had a rose—one of the lovely roses I had been admiring as we ran—fastened to the front of her dress.

"Mamma, mamma," I exclaimed, as I hugged her, "oh, mamma, I am so happy to be with you. Is this your garden, mamma, and may we stay with you always now? Wasn't it good of the lions to bring us? I have been so unhappy, mamma—somebody said you would get ill far away. But nobody could get ill here. Oh, mamma, you will let us stay always."

She did not speak, but looking at Haddie I saw a change in his face.

"Geraldine," he said, "I told you we couldn't stay long. The lions would be scolded if we did, and you know you must say your French poetry."

And then there came over me the most agonising feeling of disappointment and misery. All the pent-up wretchedness of the last weeks at school woke up and overwhelmed me like waves of dark water. It is as impossible for me to put this into words as it was for me to describe my exquisite happiness, for no words ever succeed in expressing the intense and extraordinary sensations of some dreams. And of course, as you will have found out by this time, the strange adventures I have been relating were those of a dream, though I still, after all the years that have passed since then, remember them so vividly.

It was the fatal words "French poetry" that seemed to awake me—to bring back my terrible unhappiness, exaggerated by the fact of my dreaming.

"French poetry," I gasped, "oh, Haddie, how can you remind me of it?"

Haddie suddenly turned away, and I saw the face of one of the lions looking over his shoulder, with, strange to say, a white frilled cap surrounding it.

"You must try to drink this, my dear," said the lion, if the lion it was, for as I stared at him the brown face changed into a rather ruddy one—a round good-humoured face, with pleasant eyes and smile, reminding me of mamma's old nurse who had once come to see us.

I stared still more, and sat up a little, for, wonderful to relate, I was no longer in the lovely garden, no longer even in the show-room leaning against the lion: I was in bed in a strange room which I had never seen before. And leaning over me was the owner of the frilled cap, holding a glass in her hand.

"Try to drink this, my dearie," she said again, and then I knew it was not the lion but this stranger who had already spoken to me.

I felt very tired, and I sank back again upon the pillow. What did it all mean? Where was I? Where had I been? I asked myself this in a vague sleepy sort of way, but I was too tired to say it aloud, and before I could make up my mind to try I fell asleep again.

The room seemed lighter the next time I opened my eyes. It was in fact nearly the middle of the day, and a fine day—as clear as it ever was in Great Mexington. I felt much better and less tired now, almost quite well, except for a slight pain in my throat which told me I must have caught cold, as my colds generally began in my throat.

"I wonder if it was with riding so far in the night," I first said to myself, with a confused remembrance of my wonderful dream. "I didn't feel at all cold on the lion's back, and in the garden it was lovelily warm."

Then, as my waking senses quite returned, I started. It had been only a dream—oh dear, oh dear! But still, something had happened—I was certainly not in my little bed in the corner of the room I shared with Emma and Harriet Smith at Green Bank. When had my dream begun, or was I still dreaming?

I raised myself a little, very softly, for now I began to remember the good-humoured

face in the frilled cap, and I thought to myself that unless its owner were a dream too, perhaps she was still in the room, and I wanted to look about me first on my own account.

What there was to see was very pleasant and very real. I felt quite sure I was not dreaming now, wherever I was. It was a large old-fashioned room, with red curtains at the two windows and handsome dark wood furniture. There was a fire burning cheerfully in the grate and the windows looked very clean, even though there was a prospect of chimney-tops to be seen out of the one nearest to me, which told me I was still in a town. And then I began to distinguish sounds outside, though here in this room it was so still. There were lots of wheels passing, some going quickly, some lumbering along with heavy slowness—it was much noisier than at Miss Ledbury's or at my own old home. Here I seemed to be in the very heart of a town. I began to recall the events of the day before more clearly. Yes, up to the time I remembered leaning against the carved lion in Mr. Cranston's show-room all had been real, I felt certain. I recollected with a little shiver the scene in the drawing-room at Green Bank, and how they had all refused to believe I was speaking the truth when I declared that the French poetry had entirely gone out of my head. And then there was the making up my mind that I could bear school no longer, and the secretly leaving the house, and at last losing my way in the streets.

I had meant to go to Mrs. Selwood's, or at least to get her address and write to her—but where was I now?—what should I do?

My head grew dizzy again with trying to think, and a faint miserable feeling came over me and I burst into tears.

I did not cry loudly. But there was some one watching in the room who would have heard even a fainter sound than that of my sobs—some one sitting behind my bed-curtains whom I had not seen, who came forward now and leant over me, saying, in words and voice which seemed curiously familiar to me,

"Geraldine, my poor little girl."

CHAPTER XI.

KIND FRIENDS.

It was Miss Fenmore. I knew her again at once. And she called me "my poor little girl"—the very words she had used when she said good-bye to me and looked so sorry before she went away for the Easter holidays, never to come back, though she did not then know it, to Green Bank.

"You remember me, dear?" she said, in the sweet tones I had loved to hear. "Don't speak if you feel too ill or if it tires you. But don't feel frightened or unhappy, though you are in a strange place—everything will be right."

I felt soothed almost at once, but my curiosity grew greater.

"When did you come?" I said. "You weren't here when I woke before. It was—somebody with a cap—first I thought it was one of the lions."

The sound of my own voice surprised me, it was so feeble and husky, and though my throat did not hurt me much I felt that it was thick and swollen.

Miss Fenmore thought I was still only half awake or light-headed, but she was too sensible to show that she thought so.

"One of the lions?" she said, smiling. "You mean the carved lions that Myra is so fond of. No—that was a very funny fancy of yours—a lion with a cap on! It was old Hannah that you saw, the old nurse. She has been watching beside you all night. When you awoke before, I was out. I went out very early."

She spoke in a very matter-of-fact way, but rather slowly, as if she wanted to be sure of my understanding what she said. And as my mind cleared and I followed her words I grew more and more anxious to know all there was to hear.

"I don't understand," I said, "and it hurts me to speak. Is this your house, Miss Fenmore, and how do you know about the lions? And who brought me in here, and why didn't I know when I was put in this bed?"

Miss Fenmore looked at me rather anxiously when I said it hurt me to speak. But she seemed pleased, too, at my asking the questions so distinctly.

"Don't speak, dear," she said quietly, "and I will explain it all. The doctor said you were not to speak if it hurt you."

"The doctor," I repeated. Another puzzle!

"Yes," said Miss Fenmore, "the doctor who lives in this street—Dr. Fallis. He knows you quite well, and you know him, don't you? Just nod your head a little, instead of speaking."

But the doctor's name brought back too many thoughts for me to be content with only nodding my head.

"Dr. Fallis," I said. "Oh, I would so like to see him. He could tell me——" but I stopped. "Mrs. Selwood's address" I was going to say, as all the memories of the day before began to rush over me. "Why didn't I know when he came?"

"You were asleep, dear, but he is coming again," said Miss Fenmore quietly. "He was afraid you had got a sore throat by the way you breathed. You must have caught cold in the evening down in the show-room by the lions, before they found you."

And then she went on to explain it all to me. I was in Mr. Cranston's house!—up above the big show-rooms, where he and old Mrs. Cranston lived. They had found me fast asleep, leaning against one of the lions—the old porter and the boy who went round late in the evening to see that all was right for the night, though when the rooms were shut up earlier no one had noticed me. I was so fast asleep, so utterly exhausted, that I had not awakened when the old man carried me up to the kitchen, just as the servants were about going to bed, to ask what in the world was to be done with me; nor even later, when, on Miss Fenmore's recognising me, they had

undressed and settled me for the night in the comfortable old-fashioned "best bedroom," had I opened my eyes or spoken.

Old Hannah watched beside me all night, and quite early in the morning Dr. Fallis, who fortunately was the Cranstons' doctor too, had been sent for.

"He said we were to let you have your sleep out," said Miss Fenmore, "though by your breathing he was afraid you had caught cold. How is your throat now, dear?"

"It doesn't hurt very much," I said, "only it feels very shut up."

"I expect you will have to stay in bed all to-day," she replied. "Dr. Fallis will be coming soon and then we shall know."

"But—but," I began; then as the thought of it all came over me still more distinctly I hid my face in the pillow and burst into tears. "Must I go back to school?" I said. "Oh, Miss Fenmore, they will be so angry—I came away without leave, because—because I couldn't bear it, and they said I told what wasn't true—that was almost the worst of all. Fancy if they wrote and told mamma that I told lies."

"She would not believe it," said Miss Fenmore quietly; "and besides, I don't think Miss Ledbury would do such a thing, and she always writes to the parents herself, I know. And she is kind and good, Geraldine."

"P'raps she means to be," I said among my tears, "but it's Miss Aspinall and—and—Miss Broom. I think I hate her, Miss Fenmore. Oh, I shouldn't say that—I never used to hate anybody. I'm getting all wrong and naughty, I know," and I burst into fresh sobs.

Poor Miss Fenmore looked much distressed. No doubt she had been told to keep me quiet and not let me excite myself.

"Geraldine, dear," she said, "do try to be calm. If you could tell me all about it quietly, the speaking would do you less harm than crying so. Try, dear. You need not speak loud."

I swallowed down my tears and began the story of my troubles. Once started I could not have helped telling her all, even if it had hurt my throat much more than it did. And she knew a good deal already. She was a girl of great natural quickness and full of sympathy. She seemed to understand what I had been going through far better than I could put it in words, and when at last, tired out, I left off speaking, she said all she could to comfort me. There was no need for me to trouble about going back to Green Bank just now. Dr. Fallis had said I must stay where I was for the present, and when I saw him I might tell him anything I liked.

"He will understand," she said, "and he will explain to Miss Ledbury. I have seen Miss Ledbury this morning already, and——"

"Was she dreadfully angry?" I interrupted.

"No, dear," Miss Fenmore replied. "She had been terribly frightened about you, and Miss Aspinall and some of the servants had been rushing about everywhere. But Miss Ledbury is very good, as I keep telling you, Geraldine. She is very sorry to hear how unhappy you have been, and if she had known how anxious you were about your father and mother she would have tried to comfort you. I wish you had told her."

"I wanted to tell her, but Miss Broom was there, and they thought I told stories," I repeated.

"Well, never mind about that now. You shall ask Dr. Fallis, and I am sure he will tell you you need not be so unhappy."

It was not till long afterwards that I knew how very distressed poor old Miss Ledbury had been, and how she had blamed herself for not having tried harder to gain my confidence. Nor did I fully understand at the time how very sensibly Miss Fenmore had behaved when Mr. and Mrs. Cranston sent her off to Green Bank to tell of my having, without intending it, taken refuge with them; she had explained things so that Miss Ledbury, and indeed Miss Aspinall, felt far more sorry for me

than angry with me.

Just as Miss Fenmore mentioned his name there came a tap at the door, and in another moment I saw the kind well-known face of our old doctor looking in.

"Well, well," he began, looking at me with a rather odd smile, "and how is the little runaway? My dear child, why did you not come to me, instead of wandering all about Great Mexington streets in the dark and the rain? Not that you could have found anywhere better for yourself than this kind house, but you might have been all night downstairs in the cold! Tell me, what made you run away like that—no, don't tell me just yet. It is all right now, but I think you have talked enough. Has she had anything to eat?" and he turned to Miss Fenmore. Then he looked at my throat and listened to my breathing, and tapped me and felt my pulse and looked at my tongue before I could speak at all.

"She must stay in bed all to-day," he said at last. "I will see her again this evening," and he went on to give Miss Fenmore a few directions about me, I fidgeting all the time to ask him about father and mamma, though feeling too shy to do so.

"Geraldine is very anxious to tell you one of the chief causes of her coming away from Green Bank as she did," said Miss Fenmore. And then she spoke of the gossip that had reached me through Harriet Smith about the terribly unhealthy climate my parents were in.

Dr. Fallis listened attentively.

"I wanted to write to Mrs. Selwood, and I thought Mr. Cranston would tell me her address," I said, though I almost started when I heard how hoarse and husky my voice sounded. "Can you tell it me? I do so want to write to her."

"Mrs. Selwood is abroad, my dear, and not returning till next month," said Dr. Fallis; but when he saw how my face fell, he added quickly, "but I think I can tell you perhaps better than she about your parents. I know the place—Mr. Le Marchant consulted me about it before he decided on going, as he knew I had been there

myself in my young days. Unhealthy? No, not if people take proper care. Your father and mother live in the best part—on high ground out of the town—there is never any fever there. And I had a most cheerful letter from your father quite lately. Put all these fears out of your head, my poor child. Please God you will have papa and mamma safe home again before long. But they must not find such a poor little white shrimp of a daughter when they come. You must get strong and well and do all that this kind young lady tells you to do. Good-bye—good-bye," and he hurried off.

I was crying again by this time, but quietly now, and my tears were not altogether because I was weak and ill. They were in great measure tears of relief—I was so thankful to hear what he said about father and mamma.

"Miss Fenmore," I whispered, "I wonder why they didn't take me with them, if it's a nice place. And then there wouldn't have been all these dreadful things."

"It is quite a different matter to take a child to a hot climate," she said. "Grown-up people can stand much that would be very bad for girls and boys. When I was little my father was in India, and my sister and I had to be brought up by an aunt in England."

"Did you mind?" I said eagerly. "And did your papa soon come home? And where was your mamma?"

Miss Fenmore smiled, but there was something a little sad in her smile.

"I was very happy with my aunt," she said; "she was like a mother to me. For my mother died when I was a little baby. Yes, my father has been home several times, but he is in India again now, and he won't be able to come back for good till he is quite old. So you have much happier things to look forward to, you see, Geraldine."

That was true. I felt very sorry for Miss Fenmore as I lay thinking over what she had been telling me. Then another idea struck me.

"Is Mrs. Cranston your aunt?" I said. "Is that why you are living here?"

Miss Fenmore looked up quickly.

"No," she replied; "I thought somehow that you understood. I am here because I am Myra Raby's governess—Myra Raby, who used to come for some lessons to Green Bank."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. This explained several things. "Oh yes," I went on, "I remember her, and I know she's Mr. Cranston's grand-daughter—he was speaking of her to mamma one day. I should like to see her, Miss Fenmore. May I?"

Miss Fenmore was just going to reply when again there came a tap at the door, and in answer to her "Come in" it opened and two figures appeared.

I could see them from where I lay, and I shall never forget the pretty picture they made. Myra I knew by sight, and as I think I have said before, she was an unusually lovely child. And with her was a quite old lady, a small old lady—Myra was nearly as tall as she—with a face that even I (though children seldom notice beauty in elderly people) saw was quite charming. This was Mrs. Cranston.

I felt quite surprised. Mr. Cranston was a rather stout old man, with spectacles and a big nose. I had not thought him at all "pretty," and somehow I had fancied Mrs. Cranston must be something like him, and I gave a sigh of pleasure as the old lady came up to the side of the bed with a gentle smile on her face.

"Dr. Fallis gave us leave to come in to see you, my dear," she said. "Myra has been longing to do so all the morning."

"I've been wanting to see her too," I said, half shyly. "And—please—it's very kind of you to let me stay here in this nice room. I didn't mean to fall asleep downstairs. I only wanted to speak to Mr. Cranston."

"I'm sure Mr. Cranston would be very pleased to tell you anything he can that you want to know, my dear. But I think you mustn't trouble just now about anything except getting quite well," said the old lady. "Myra has been wanting to come to see you all the morning, but we were afraid of tiring you."

MYRA CAME FORWARD GENTLY, HER SWEET FACE LOOKING RATHER GRAVE.

Myra came forward gently, her sweet face looking rather grave. I put out my hand, and she smiled.

"May she stay with me a little?" I asked Mrs. Cranston.

"Of course she may—that's what she came for," said the grandmother heartily. "But I don't think you should talk much. Missie's voice sounds as if it hurt her to speak," she went on, turning to Miss Fenmore.

"It doesn't hurt me much," I said. "I daresay I shall be quite well to-morrow. I am so glad I'm here—I wouldn't have liked to be ill at school," and I gave a little shudder. "I'm quite happy now that Dr. Fallis says it's not true about father and mamma getting ill at that place, and I don't want to ask Mr. Cranston anything now, thank you. It was about Mrs. Selwood, but I don't mind now."

I had been sitting up a little—now I laid my head down on the pillows again with a little sigh, half of weariness, half of relief.

Mrs. Cranston looked at me rather anxiously.

"Are you very tired, my dear?" she said. "Perhaps it would be better for Myra not to stay just now."

"Oh, please let her stay," I said; "I like to see her."

So Myra sat down beside my bed and took hold of my hand, and though we did not speak to each other, I liked the feeling of her being there.

Mrs. Cranston left the room then, and Miss Fenmore followed her. I think the old lady had made her a little sign to do so, though I did not see it. Afterwards I found out that Mrs. Cranston had thought me looking very ill, worse than she had expected, and she wanted to hear from Miss Fenmore if it was natural to me to look so pale.

I myself, though feeling tired and disinclined to talk, was really happier than I had been for a very long time. There was a delightful sensation of being safe and at home, even though the kind people who had taken me in, like a poor little stray bird, were strangers. The very look of the old-fashioned room and the comfortable great big four-post bed made me hug myself when I thought how different it all was from the bare cold room at Green Bank, where there had never once been a fire all the weeks I was there. It reminded me of something—what was it? Oh yes, in a minute or two I remembered. It was the room I had once slept in with mamma at grandmamma's house in London, several years before, when I was quite a little girl. For dear grandmamma had died soon after we came to live at Great Mexington. But there was the same comfortable old-fashioned feeling: red curtains to the window and the bed, and a big fire and the shiny dark mahogany furniture. Oh yes, how well I remembered it, and how enormous the bed seemed, and how mamma tucked me in at night and left the door a little open in case I should feel lonely before she came to bed. It all came back to me so that I forgot where I was for the moment, till I felt a little tug given to the hand that Myra was still holding, and heard her voice say very softly,

"Are you going to sleep, Geraldine?"

This brought me back to the present.

"Oh no," I said, "I'm not sleepy. I was only thinking," and I told her what had come into my mind.

She listened with great interest.

"How unhappy you must have been when your mamma went away," she said. "I can't remember my own mamma, but mother"—she meant her stepmother—"is so kind, and granny is so sweet. I've never been lonely."

"You can't fancy what it's like," I said. "It wasn't only mamma's going away; I know Haddie—that's my brother—loves her as much as I do, but he's not very unhappy,

because he likes his school. Oh, Myra, what shall I do when I have to go back to school? I'd rather be ill always. Do you think I'll have to go back to-morrow?"

Myra looked most sympathising and concerned.

"I don't think you'll be quite well to-morrow," was the best comfort she could give me. "When I have bad colds and sore throats they always last longer than one day."

"I'd like to talk a great lot to keep my throat from getting quite well," I said, "but I suppose that would be very naughty."

"Yes," said Myra with conviction, "I'm sure it would be. You really mustn't talk, Geraldine; granny said so. Mayn't I read aloud to you? I've brought a book with me—it's an old story-book of mamma's that she had when she was a little girl. Granny keeps them here all together. This one is called Ornaments Discovered."

"Thank you," I said. "Yes, I should like it very much."

And in her gentle little voice Myra read the quaint old story aloud to me. It was old-fashioned even then, for the book had belonged to her mother, if not in the first place to her grandmother. How very old-world it would seem to the children of to-day—I wonder if any of you know it? For I am growing quite an old woman myself, and the little history of my childhood that I am telling you will, before long, be half a century in age, though its events seem as clear and distinct to me as if they had only happened quite recently! I came across the little red gilt-leaved book not long ago in the house of one of Myra's daughters, and with the sight of it a whole flood of memories rushed over me.

It was not a very exciting story, but I found it very interesting, and now and then my little friend stopped to talk about it, which I found very interesting too. I was quite sorry when Miss Fenmore, who had come back to the room and was sitting quietly sewing, told Myra that she thought she had read enough, and that it must be near dinner-time.

"I will come again after dinner," said Myra, and then I whispered something to her.

She nodded; she quite understood me. What I said was this:

"I wish you would go downstairs and tell the carved lions that they made me very happy last night, and I am so glad they brought me back here to you, instead of taking me to Green Bank."

"Where did they take you to in the night?" said Myra with great interest, though not at all as if she thought I was talking nonsense.

"I'll tell you all about it afterwards," I said. "It was beautiful. But it would take a long time to tell, and I'm rather tired."

"You are looking tired, dear," said Miss Fenmore, who heard my last words, as she gave me a cupful of beef-tea. "Try to go to sleep for a little, and then Myra can come to sit with you again."

I did go to sleep, but Myra was not allowed to see me again that day, nor the next—nor for several days after, except for a very few minutes at a time. For I did not improve as the kind people about me had hoped I would, and Dr. Fallis looked graver when he came that evening than he had done in the morning. Miss Fenmore was afraid she had let me talk too much, but after all I do not think anything would have made any great difference. I had really been falling out of health for months past, and I should probably have got ill in some other way if I had not caught cold in my wanderings. I do not very clearly remember those days of serious illness. I knew whenever I was awake that I was being tenderly cared for, and in the half-dozing, half-dreaming state in which many hours must have been passed, I fancied more than once that mamma was beside me, which made me very happy. And though never actually delirious, I had very strange though not unpleasant dreams, especially about the carved lions; none of them, however, so clear and real as the one I related at full in the last chapter.

On the whole, that illness left more peaceful and sweet memories than memories of pain. Through it all I had the delightful feeling of being cared for and protected, and

somehow it all seemed to have to do with the pair of lions downstairs in Mr. Cranston's show-room!

CHAPTER XII.

GOOD NEWS.

I don't suppose there was anything really infectious about my illness, though nowadays whenever there is any sort of sore throat people are very much on their guard. Perhaps they were not so cautious long ago. However that may have been, Myra was not banished from my room for very long. I rather think, indeed, that she used to creep in and sit like a little mouse behind the curtains before I was well enough to notice her.

But everything for a time seemed dreamy to me. The first event I can quite clearly recall was my being allowed to sit up for an hour or two, or, more correctly speaking, to lie up, for I was lifted on to the sofa and tucked in almost as if I were still in bed.

That was a very happy afternoon. It was happy for several reasons, for that morning had brought me the first letter I had had from dear mamma since she had heard of my bold step in running away from school! Lying still and silent for so many hours as I had done, things had grown to look differently to me. I began to see where and how I had been wrong, and to think that if I had been more open about my troubles, more courageous—that is to say, if I had gone to Miss Ledbury and told her everything that was on my mind—I need not have been so terribly unhappy or caused trouble and distress to others.

A little of this mamma pointed out to me in her letter, which was, however, so very kind and loving, so full of sorrow that I had been so unhappy, that I felt more grateful than I knew how to express. Afterwards, when we talked it all over, years

afterwards even, for we often talked of that time after I was grown up and married, and had children of my own, mamma said to me that she could not blame me though she knew I had not done right, for she felt so broken-hearted at the thought of what I had suffered.

It had been a mistake, no doubt, to send me to Green Bank, but mistakes are often overruled for good. I am glad to have had the experience of it, as I think it made me more sympathising with others. And it made me determine never to send any child of mine, or any child I had the care of, to a school where there was so little feeling of home, so little affection and gentleness—above all, that dreadful old-world rule of letters being read, and the want of trust and confidence in the pupils, which showed in so many ways.

A few days after I received mamma's letter I was allowed to write to her. It was slow and tiring work, for I was only able to write a few lines at a time, and that in pencil. But it was delightful to be free to say just what I wanted to say, without the terrible feeling of Miss Aspinall, or worse still Miss Broom, judging and criticising every line. I thanked mamma with my whole heart for not being angry with me, and to show her how truly I meant what I said, I promised her that when I was well again and able to go back to school I would try my very, very best to get on more happily.

But I gave a deep sigh as I wrote this, and Myra, who was sitting beside me, looked up anxiously, and asked what was the matter.

"Oh, Myra," I said, "it is just that I can't bear to think of going back to school. I'd rather never get well if only I could stay here till mamma comes home."

"Dear little Geraldine," said Myra—she often called me "little" though she was scarcely any taller than I—"dear little Geraldine, you mustn't say that. I don't think it's right. And, you know, when you are quite well again things won't seem so bad to you. I remember once when I was ill—I was quite a little girl then,"—Myra spoke as if she was now a very big girl indeed!—"I think it was when I had had the measles,

the least thing vexed me dreadfully. I cried because somebody had given me a present of a set of wooden tea-things in a box, and the tea ran out of the cups when I filled them! Fancy crying for that!"

"I know," I said, "I've felt like that too. But this is a real trouble, Myra—a real, very bad, dreadful trouble, though I've promised mamma to try to be good. Do you think, Myra, that when I'm back at school your grandmamma will sometimes ask me to come to see you?"

"I'm sure——" my little friend began eagerly. But she was interrupted. For curiously enough, just at that moment Mrs. Cranston opened the door and came in. She came to see me every day, and though at first I was just a tiny bit afraid of her—she seemed to me such a very old lady—I soon got to love her dearly, and to talk to her quite as readily as to kind Miss Fenmore.

"What is my little girl sure about?" she said. "And how is my other little girl to-day? Not too tired," and she glanced at my letter. "You have not been writing too much, dearie, I hope?"

"No, thank you," I replied, "I'm not tired."

"She's only rather unhappy, granny," said Myra.

"I think that's a very big 'only,'" said Mrs. Cranston. "Can't you tell me, my dear, what you are unhappy about?"

I glanced at Myra, as if asking her to speak for me. She understood.

"Granny," she said, "poor little Geraldine is unhappy to think of going away and going back to school."

Mrs. Cranston looked at me very kindly.

"Poor dear," she said, "you have not had much pleasure with us, as you have been ill all the time."

"I don't mind," I said. "I was telling Myra, only she thought it was naughty, that I'd

rather be ill always if I was with kind people, than—than—be at school where nobody cares for me."

"Well, well, my dear, the troubles we dread are often those that don't come to pass. Try to keep up your spirits and get quite well and strong, so that you may be able to enjoy yourself a little before both you and Myra leave us."

"Oh, is Myra going away?" I said. "I thought she was going to live here always," and somehow I felt as if I did not mind quite so much to think of going away myself in that case.

"Oh no," said the old lady, "Myra has her own home where she must spend part of her time, though grandfather and I hope to have her here a good deal too. It is easy to manage now Miss Fenmore is with her always."

In my heart I thought Myra a most fortunate child—two homes were really hers; and I—I had none. This thought made me sigh again. I don't know if Myra guessed what I was thinking of, but she came close up to me and put her arms round my neck and kissed me.

"Geraldine," she whispered, by way of giving me something pleasant to think of, perhaps, "as soon as you are able to walk about a little I want you to come downstairs with me to see the lions."

"Yes," I said in the same tone, "but you did give them my message, Myra?"

"Of course I did, and they sent you back their love, and they are very glad you're better, and they want you very much indeed to come to see them."

Myra and I understood each other quite well about the lions, you see.

I went on getting well steadily after that, and not many days later I went downstairs with Myra to the big show-room to see the lions. It gave me such a curious feeling to remember the last time I had been there, that rainy evening when I crept in, as nearly broken-hearted and in despair as a little girl could be. And as I stroked the lions and

looked up in their dark mysterious faces, I could not get rid of the idea that they knew all about it, that somehow or other they had helped and protected me, and when I tried to express this to Myra she seemed to think the same.

After this there were not many days on which we did not come downstairs to visit our strange play-fellows, and not a few interesting games or "actings," as Myra called them, did we invent, in which the lions took their part.

We were only allowed to be in the show-rooms at certain hours of the day, when there were not likely to be any customers there. Dear old Mrs. Cranston was as particular as she possibly could be not to let me do anything or be seen in any way which mamma could possibly have disliked.

And before long I began to join a little in Myra's lessons with Miss Fenmore—lessons which our teacher's kind and "understanding" ways made delightful. So that life was really very happy for me at this time, except of course for the longing for mamma and father and Haddie, which still came over me in fits, as it were, every now and then, and except—a still bigger "except"—for the dreaded thought of the return to school which must be coming nearer day by day.

Myra and I never spoke of it. I tried to forget about it, and she seemed to enter into my feeling without saying anything.

I had had a letter from mamma in answer to the one I wrote to her just after my illness. In it she said she was pleased with all I said, and my promise to try to get on better at Green Bank, but "in the meantime," she wrote, "what we want you to do is to get quite strong and well, so put all troubling thoughts out of your head and be happy with your kind friends."

That letter had come a month ago, and the last mail had only brought me a tiny little note enclosed in a letter from mamma to Mrs. Cranston, with the promise of a longer one "next time." And "next time" was about due, for the mail came every fortnight, one afternoon when Myra and I were sitting together in our favourite nook in the

show-room.

"I have a fancy, Myra," I said, "that something is going to happen. My lion has been so queer to-day—I see a look on his face as if he knew something."

For we had each chosen one lion as more particularly our own.

"I think they always look rather like that," said Myra dreamily. "But I suppose something must happen soon. I shall be going home next week."

"Next week," I repeated. "Oh, Myra!"

I could not speak for a moment. Then I remembered how I had made up my mind to be brave.

"Do you mind going home?" I asked. "I mean, are you sorry to go?"

"I'm always sorry to leave grandpapa and grandmamma," she said, "and the lions, and this funny old house. But I'm very happy at home, and I shall like it still better with Miss Fenmore. No, I wouldn't be unhappy—I'd be very glad to think of seeing father and mother and my little brothers again—I wouldn't be unhappy, except for—you know, Geraldine—for leaving you," and my little friend's voice shook.

"Dear Myra," I said. "But you mustn't mind about me. I'm going to try——" but here I had to stop to choke down something in my throat. "After all," I went on, after a moment or two, "more than a quarter of the time that father and mamma have to be away is gone. And perhaps in the summer holidays I shall see Haddie."

"I wish——" Myra was beginning, but a voice interrupted her. It was Miss Fenmore's.

"I have brought you down a letter that has just come by the second post, Geraldine, dear," she said; "a letter from South America."

"Oh, thank you," I said, eagerly seizing it.

Miss Fenmore strolled to the other side of the room, and Myra followed her, to leave me alone to read my letter. It was a pretty long one, but I read it quickly, so quickly

that when I had finished it, I felt breathless—and then I turned over the pages and glanced at it again. I felt as if I could not believe what I read. It was too good, too beautifully good to be true.

"Myra," I gasped, and Myra ran back to me, looking quite startled. I think I must have grown very pale.

"No, no," I went on, "it's nothing wrong. Read it, or ask Miss Fenmore—she reads writing quicker. Oh, Myra, isn't it beautiful?"

They soon read it, and then we all three kissed and hugged each other, and Myra began dancing about as if she had gone out of her mind.

"Geraldine, Geraldine, I can't believe it," she kept saying, and Miss Fenmore's pretty eyes were full of tears.

I wonder if any of my readers can guess what this delightful news was? It was not that mamma was coming home—no, that could not be yet. But next best to that it certainly was.

It was to tell me this—that till dear father and she returned, my home was to be with Myra, and I was to be Miss Fenmore's pupil too. Wherever Myra was, there I was to be—principally at her father's vicarage in the country, but some part of the year with her kind grandparents at Great Mexington. It was all settled and arranged—of course I did not trouble my head about the money part of it, though afterwards mamma told me that both Mr. and Mrs. Raby and the Cranstons had been most exceedingly kind, making out that the advantage of a companion for their little girl would be so great that all the thanking should be on their side, though, of course, they respected father too much not to let him pay a proper share of all the expense. And it really cost less than my life at Green Bank, though father was now a good deal richer, and would not have minded paying a good deal more to ensure my happiness.

There is never so much story to tell when people are happy, and things go rightly; and the next year or two of my life, except of course for the separation from my dear

parents, were very happy. Even though father's appointment in South America kept him and mamma out there for nearly three years instead of two, I was able to bear the disappointment in a very different way, with such kind and sympathising friends at hand to cheer me, so that there is nothing bitter or sad to look back to in that part of my childhood. Haddie spent the summer holidays with me, either at Crowley vicarage, or sometimes at the sea-side, where Miss Fenmore took care of us three. Once or twice he and I paid a visit to Mrs. Selwood, which we enjoyed pretty well, as we were together, though otherwise it was rather dull.

And oh, how happy it was when father and mamma at last came home—no words can describe it. It was not quite unmixed pleasure—nothing ever is, the wise folk say—for there was the separation from Myra and her family. But after all, that turned out less than we feared. Miss Fenmore married soon after, and as father had now a good post in London, and we lived there, it was settled that Myra should be with us, and join in my lessons for a good part of the year, while I very often went back to Crowley with her for the summer holidays. And never without staying a few days at Great Mexington, to see Mr. and Mrs. Cranston and the lions!

Many years have passed since I went there for the last time. Myra's grandparents have long been dead—my own dear father and mother are dead too, for I am growing quite old. My grandchildren are older now than I was when I ran away from the school at Green Bank. But once, while mamma was still alive and well, she and I together strolled through the streets of the grim town, which had for a time been our home, and lived over the old days again in fancy. I remember how tightly I clasped her hand when we passed the corner where once was the old Quakeress's shop—all changed now—and walked down the street, still not very different from what it had been, where we used to live.

There was no use in going to Mr. Cranston's show-rooms—they had long been done away with. But the lions are still to be seen. They stand in the hall of Myra's pretty

house in the country, where she and Haddon, her husband, have lived for many years, ever since my brother left the army and they came home for good from India.

I spend a part of every year with them, for I am alone now. They want me to live with them altogether, but I cling to a little home of my own. Our grandchildren know the lions well, and stroke their smooth sides, and gaze up into their dark faces just as Myra and I used to do. So I promised them that sometime I would write out the simple story that I have now brought to a close.

THE END.

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CHRISTMAS-TREE LAND.

"It is conceived after a happy fancy, as it relates the supposititious journey of a party

of little ones through that part of fairyland where Christmas-trees are supposed to most abound. There is just enough of the old-fashioned fancy about fairies mingled with the 'modern improvements' to incite and stimulate the youthful imagination to healthful action. The pictures by Walter Crane are, of course, not only well executed in themselves, but in charming consonance with the spirit of the tale."—Troy Times.

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