

PROSPERITY'S CHILD



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सप्तर्षी प्रकाशन

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CHAPTER I

THE WYNDHAM FAMILY

THE November day, which had been dull and chilly, was closing in, and a thick mist was settling over the metropolis, making the traffic in the streets slow and difficult, and causing those whose business lay in the city no small anxiety as to how they would reach their various suburban homes that night; for, as was patent to everybody, in a very short while all London would be enveloped in a dense fog.

In the sitting-room of a certain small villa at Streatham, a family group was assembled around the fire, talking and laughing. It comprised, Mrs. Wyndham and her five children—Ruth and Violet, aged fifteen and fourteen respectively; Madge, who was twelve; and Frank and Billy, who were twins of not quite ten years old. The gas had not been lit, but the fire fitfully illuminated the room, which was certainly anything but neat or well kept, for the furniture was dull if not actually dusty, the lace curtains on either

side of the window were soiled and limp, and the tea-cloth on the table was crumpled and not over clean. Even in the kindly firelight the room looked poor and neglected, and yet it was evident that its general appearance might have been improved at very little cost.

"I hope your father will come home soon for it's getting very foggy, I see," Mrs. Wyndham remarked by-and-by when there was a pause in the children's chatter. Her voice was soft and musical, with a plaintive note in it. "He coughed continually during the night, he quite alarmed me," she added, with a deep-drawn sigh.

"I heard him," the eldest girl said, turning a pair of serious, dark eyes from the fire to her mother's face; "I spoke to him about it after breakfast, and he said he would get some cough mixture from a chemist: I hope he won't forget."

"I hope not," Mrs. Wyndham replied. "I am sure it is no wonder that he ails so often," she proceeded, "always rushing here, there, and everywhere as he does, getting his meals so irregularly, and wearing clothes which do

not properly protect him from the cold and damp. He ought to have both a new overcoat and a new waterproof this winter, but how he is to get either I really do not know. Dear me, it's nearly five o'clock. I hope Barbara has the kettle on the boil: I wish one of you would go and see—not you, Billy, you're always quarrelling with Barbara, you tease her and make her cross. Let Madge go. And Violet, you light the gas and pull down the blind."

Madge left the room to do her mother's bidding, whilst Violet, before lighting the gas, went to the window and peered out into the mist, remarking that it was so thick that she could hardly see the street lamps. Ruth kept her seat by the fire; she was listening for her father's footsteps—or his cough, which had haunted her ears all day.

The Wyndhams were all nice-looking children, tall for their ages and well-grown; they greatly resembled their mother in appearance. Mrs. Wyndham was a pretty woman, having a clear complexion, small regular features, and brown eyes and hair. At the time of her marriage she had been a lovely girl; but now she was somewhat

faded and careworn, and she always seemed weighed down with domestic worries.

Mr. Wyndham held a post on a popular daily paper; but, unfortunately, his wife was no manager, and he was generally exercised in mind how to make his income cover his expenses, which he was not always successful in doing. If his wife was not the helpmeet to him he had hoped she would be, he never admitted the fact; and if his home was not as comfortable as those of other men who earned less than he did, he never complained but made the best of things, telling himself that he had much to be thankful for in that his family was both a happy and a healthy one.

He was deeply attached to his children, and they were very fond of him; but Ruth, without doubt, was more to him than the others. Young as she was, she was in his confidence; she was interested in his work as work, not only as a means of providing the necessaries of life, and she realised, as her mother did not, that he loved his profession and was ambitious to succeed in it. In short, she understood him; and her love for him was so deep and unselfish that she would

have been capable of making any sacrifice for his sake.

By-and-by Ruth rose from her seat by the fire, and slipped quietly out of the room. There was no light in the passage, so she lit the gas there, and, as soon as she had done so, the front door opened and her father entered. She sprang to meet him, and, after having given him a hearty kiss, proceeded to assist him in taking off his overcoat. Mr. Wyndham was a tall, thin man with stooping shoulders and near-sighted dark eyes. As a rule his expression was thoughtful and pre-occupied; but to-night, as his daughter observed at once, he looked particularly alert.

"Well, Ruthie," he began, "is tea ready? I'm longing for 'the cup which cheers,' for the fog is enough to choke one. I'm glad to be at home and to know that I shall not have to go out again to-night."

He followed Ruth into the sitting-room as he spoke, and glanced around with smiling eyes. His wife's face brightened as she saw his look, and she greeted him with an answering smile, whilst Madge and the boys

began to question him about the fog. Was it much worse in the City than at Streatham? Did he think it would last long? Had he any difficulty in finding his way from the station?

"I should think it is worse in the City," was the reply; "everything will be at a standstill soon if the fog continues, and it does not appear likely to lift yet. I had to stop every now and again as I came from the station to make sure I was in the right road, and that delayed me. Ah, here's tea! That's good."

Violet now entered the room followed by Barbara, the maid-of-all-work, who was a rather untidy-looking specimen of her class. She had been with the Wyndhams for more than two years, and had fallen into the ways of the family; she was always a little late with everything, always "in a rush" as she expressed it, but she suited her employers and was good-natured to a fault. Before the advent of Barbara the Wyndhams had never been able to keep a servant for long; but Barbara had settled down comfortably at once, and seemed likely to remain a fixture. She was a little body, with a freckled countenance and the roundest of green eyes,

and her cap was generally askew on her sandy hair; but there was a vast amount of energy and strength in her slight frame, and she worked with a will.

Having placed the tea on the table, Barbara retired, and the meal commenced. The children had most of the conversation at first, and gave their father various items of information about their doings during the day. The twins attended a preparatory school for boys, not five minutes walk from their own home, and the girls had not much farther to go. Ruth was not to return to the same school as her sisters after Christmas; for it was only a school for young girls, kept by a lady named Minter, and Ruth was the eldest pupil.

Mr. Wyndham talked of sending her to a boarding-school for a couple of years, but how that was to be managed he did not quite know, and it was Ruth's private opinion that her education, as far as schooling went, would be finished when she left Miss Minter's. That she would not mind, she told herself, if only she could have lessons in drawing and painting—she was devoted to the pencil and the brush, and she would have

time to help her mother and Barbara and to try to get things in better order; for, of late, the general untidiness of her home had vaguely troubled her.

By-and-by Mr. Wyndham coughed, and his wife asked him if he had remembered his promise to Ruth and procured some cough mixture.

"Yes," he replied, "the bottle's in the pocket of my overcoat. My cough has not been so troublesome to-day as it was during the night, but I remembered I had said I would get something for it, so I went into a chemist's in the city, and there I met some one whom I had not seen for more than twenty years; you have heard me mention him—Andrew Reed."

"Andrew Reed?" echoed Mrs. Wyndham. "Oh yes, I have often heard you mention him. You went to school with him, and afterwards you saw a good bit of him when he was a medical student. Quite a poor lad, was he not?"

"Yes. He was always one of the best fellows in the world, though, and the straightest. He

was of humble birth; his father was only a small renting farmer in Devonshire, who had saved a few hundreds and had the sense to see that by educating his son and letting him follow his natural bent he was doing the best for him that he could. Reed's practising as a doctor in Yorkshire now, and his is the first practice in the place—I heard that some time ago. He has prospered in life and made money."

"Did he recognise you, father?" Ruth asked eagerly.

"Yes. He was in the chemist's shop having a prescription made up when my voice attracted his attention, and he spoke to me. I knew him the minute our eyes met. He seemed as glad to see me as I was to see him, and we went and had lunch together and a long talk about old times."

"What is he doing in London?" Mrs. Wyndham inquired.

"He is merely stopping here a few days, with relations of his wife's, on his way home from Devonshire. His mother still lives, and he has been to see her. I did not know he had a

wife until to-day, but it appears he has been married sixteen years and has an only child, a girl, of whom he spoke very affectionately. I told him that, in one way, I am richer than he," Mr. Wyndham concluded with a smile.

"In what way, Clement?" asked his wife wonderingly.

"I have three daughters and two sons, my dear, and he has only that one girl."

The children laughed, whilst their mother smiled and looked pleased.

"Not but that he seemed very satisfied with his single chick," Mr. Wyndham proceeded; "one could tell that she is as the apple of his eye. You cannot imagine what a pleasure it was to me to renew my acquaintance with my old friend; he regrets, as I do, that we failed to keep in touch with each other after he left town, and he expressed a desire to see you, my dear Mary—" Mr. Wyndham smiled at his wife— "and our little flock."

"You did not suggest his coming here, I suppose?" Mrs. Wyndham said quickly.

"Yes, I did," Mr. Wyndham admitted; "I invited him to spend Sunday with us. It won't matter, will it? You needn't make any difference for Andrew Reed."

"But, Clement, we always have cold dinners on Sundays, and I expect your friend is accustomed to have everything very nice," expostulated Mrs. Wyndham, glancing expressively around the room.

"I daresay he is, nowadays," Mr. Wyndham answered, "but you must remember he was not born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. He is a thorough man of the world, in the best sense of the term, and I should like you all to know him. I couldn't well ask such an old friend as he is to dine with me at an hotel or a restaurant when I've a home in London to invite him to."

"No, no," Mrs. Wyndham agreed, "only I thought, as he has got on in the world—but, there, he must just take us as he finds us!"

"Tell us some more about him, father," said Madge; "how old is his little girl?"

"Nearly fifteen, so she must be quite a big girl, my dear." And Mr. Wyndham, who was in excellent spirits, continued to talk of his old school friend at length, whilst his wife and children evinced great interest in listening to him.

"And he was only a poor, common boy once," Violet remarked wonderingly by-and-by; "and now I suppose he has become very rich, father?"

"I don't know that he is very rich, Vi," Mr. Wyndham answered gravely; "but he is certainly a prosperous man. Yes, he used to be poor, but never common. A common man could never have made the position in life which my old friend has done. I should say he is decidedly uncommon."

Violet flushed and hung her head, for there was reproof in her father's voice.

"He was always a true gentleman at heart," Mr. Wyndham proceeded; "he deserves success, and I am glad it has come to him. I am sure you will all like him, for he is one of the most kindly and genial of men."

"I am glad you met him, Clement, since you are so pleased at having done so," Mrs. Wyndham said, speaking more cordially; "we will certainly make him welcome when he comes."

Having finished tea, Mr. Wyndham went to his study, a small apartment intended for a breakfast room, simply furnished with a writing-desk and a few chairs; and the children prepared their lessons for the following day. Ruth found some difficulty in concentrating her thoughts; for her mind was full of her father's friend, and occupied with one of the puzzles of life—why success should be given to some and denied to others. No man could work harder or more conscientiously than her own father; and yet, so far, success had not come to him. Why did God keep it from him? she wondered. It was very difficult to believe that He knew best.

CHAPTER II

THEIR FATHER'S FRIEND

"I AM glad the fog is clearing," remarked Ruth to Barbara, on the following afternoon—it was Saturday—as she was assisting in putting away the dinner things in the kitchen, "because father would be disappointed if it prevented Dr. Reed's coming to-morrow."

"I am sure it would be a great pity if the gentleman did not come after all the trouble you've taken on his account, Miss Ruth," Barbara replied, smiling good-naturedly; "you've been hard at work all day making the house look as nice as possible."

"I've given the study the most thorough turn out and clean it's had for months," said Ruth; "for father is certain to take Dr. Reed in there to talk with him; and I've cobbled

together several tears in the sitting-room curtains, and nailed down the canvas in the passage where it's worn out—Billy caught his foot in it last night and had a nasty fall. But, dear me, Barbara, I don't know where the work in a house comes from, there seems to be no end to it."

"Things will wear out," Barbara observed sagely; "and when they do and are not replaced—"

"Ah, that's it!" Ruth interposed, "we so seldom have anything new. We ought to have a new carpet in the sitting-room, it's really dreadfully shabby, and will look more so when the sunny spring days come, but it's no good thinking about it. I hope Dr. Reed won't notice it, but mother says doctors are very observant people as a rule, so I suppose he will."

"I wouldn't begin to worry about that if I were you, miss," advised Barbara; "the gentleman isn't coming to take stock of the furniture, you may depend. What time does master expect him?"

"About one o'clock, I think—after church, he told father. He is going home on Monday; he has an assistant who looks after his practice in his absence."

Ruth was wiping the plates and dishes which Barbara had washed. She often gave her assistance in this way in the kitchen on Saturday afternoons, thus enabling Barbara to get over her work earlier than she otherwise would have done. Madge and the boys were out; but Mrs. Wyndham and Violet were in the sitting-room, mending stockings, and, as soon as Ruth had put away the dinner things, she joined them there.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed Violet, as her sister entered the room. "How tired you look, Ruthie!"

"No wonder, poor child," said Mrs. Wyndham; "she has had a very fatiguing day. I am glad the study has been turned out, howler, for I know it wanted cleaning badly; but your father does not like Barbara to do it for fear that she might misplace his papers, and I really have had no time to see to it myself. I peeped into the room just now, and thought it looking very fresh and nice."

"Still it hardly seems fair that Ruth should have had to work so hard on her holiday," Violet remarked; "we ought to keep two servants—cook and house-maid—"

"Oh, Vi, you know we couldn't afford two servants!" Ruth broke in protestingly, whilst her mother shook her head.

"I suppose not," Violet admitted. "It is too bad that we should be so wretchedly poor," she proceeded irritably; "we are wretchedly poor, although no doubt we ought to be thankful we have a home, and food to eat when so many people have neither. But it seems to me that we are poorer than most people in our position; I'm sure I don't know why it is. Father's no better off now than he was on his wedding day; I heard him tell you so, mother, didn't I?"

"Yes, my dear," assented Mrs. Wyndham; "but that is not his fault, he has had no opportunity of bettering his position. Besides, when a man has a wife and five children to provide for he is heavily handicapped, remember. Perhaps some day your father will get a more lucrative post; he is very clever, every one says so—"

"Yes, but it's not always the clever people who get on best," interposed Violet, who, in some ways, was wise beyond her fourteen years; "the fathers of several of the girls at school are not in the least clever, but they're very well off."

"You're not blaming father in any way, are you?" Ruth cried hotly, her brown eyes flashing with anger. "Perhaps if he had made a fortune by speculating like Agnes Hosking's father you'd be more satisfied!"

"Don't be disagreeable, Ruth," pouted Violet; "you don't mean that, and you know I don't blame father. What an idea! See how hard he works. That's why it seems so unfair that he should not earn more money. I don't suppose Dr. Reed works any harder than father does."

"I don't think he could," Ruth replied, speaking more quietly. "Let me help with the stockings." She slipped one over her hand and commenced to darn it. "I wonder what Dr. Reed's daughter is like," she said, by way of turning the conversation into a different channel.

"I expect she has everything heart can desire," Violet answered with a sigh; "lucky girl!"

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Wyndham; "doubtless she has all that your father and I would give you, Violet, if we could. But you are a poor man's daughter, and she—well, she is Prosperity's child."

There was a touch of bitterness mingled with reproach in Mrs. Wyndham's tone, and Violet had the grace to feel ashamed of the discontent she had shown. Ruth kept silence, for her heart was full of indignation against her sister, and she feared that if she spoke she might say something she would repent. Presently Violet said—

"There is one thing I do not envy her, and that is her name."

"What is it?" asked Ruth; "I did not hear father say."

"She is called 'Ann.'"

"Ann," Ruth repeated; "Ann Reed. It is not a pretty name, I suppose, but I do not know that I dislike it."

"It is an old-fashioned name, of course," said Mrs. Wyndham; "Dr. Reed told your father that he had called his daughter after his mother. I do hope nothing will happen to prevent Dr. Reed's coming to-morrow now we have prepared for him."

By the following day the fog had quite gone, and towards noon the sun cleared. When the Wyndham children returned from church, after morning service, they found their father's expected visitor had just arrived, and they were immediately presented to him. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a grave, clean-shaven face, and a pair of steel-grey eyes which looked both keen and kindly. The young folks took to him at once, and Ruth's heart warmed towards him, when, after her father had introduced him to her, and they had shaken hands, he said:—

"Why, you must be about the age of my little maid at home! One of these days I must persuade your mother to let you pay us a visit; I am sure you would be friends with

Ann. Do you know that your father and I were chums before we were as old as you?"

"Yes," Ruth answered; "he has told us so."

"Ah, but he hasn't told you how he used to stand by me, at school, and help fight my battles! No, he wouldn't tell you that!" — And he straightway launched into an account of his school-days, which they all— Frank and Billy especially—found very interesting.

Soon the children were quite at their ease with their new acquaintance. He made himself at home at once, as Mrs. Wyndham afterwards remarked; and his visit proved a great success. Ruth and Violet could not help wondering if he noticed the shabbiness of the house, but he did not appear to do so; and they would have liked to find out what his own home was like, but he said very little about it, though he talked a good deal of his wife and daughter. Every one was sorry when the time came to say good-bye to him; and he left with the promise to call and see them again the next time he came to town.

"He isn't a bit as I expected he would be," Violet confided to her sister when they were alone for the night in the room which they shared; "I pictured him like Agnes Hosking's father, but he doesn't resemble him in the least."

"I never saw Mr. Hosking."

"Oh, he's a stout, red-faced man with a big curled moustache, who puts his hands in his pockets, and jingles his money when he's talking to you. Agnes took me over their new house the other day, and I saw him then. It's such a grand house, Ruthie, and the furniture is lovely—almost too handsome to use. The drawing-room chairs are upholstered in bright pink satin—Agnes says pink is the fashionable colour for drawing-rooms, now; and there's one mirror so big that it reaches nearly to the ceiling. Everything is the best that can be had for money. How I should like to be rich and live in a house like that!"

"It would be far too grand to suit me," Ruth said, shaking her head. "What made Agnes take you there? I did not know you were very friendly with her."

"I am not. I think she wanted to show off her new home, and when she asked me if I'd like to see it, I said 'yes,' and went. As a rule she doesn't have much to say to me. I think she is rather inclined to look down on us, Ruthie, because we're poor, and, do you know, once I heard her call father 'a newspaper hack'—that was after I'd been to her house, I wished then I hadn't gone. I wonder if Dr. Reed's daughter is anything like Agnes Hosking."

"I should think not."

"Oh, I don't know! Being rich often makes people very horrid. You heard what mother called Ann Reed? Prosperity's child. I expect she's quite spoilt, and as selfish as she can be."

Violet paused for a minute; but, as her sister made no response, she continued: "Did you notice that Barbara had a smut on her nose when she was waiting table at dinner? I told her about it, in a whisper, and she tried to rub it off, but just smeared it instead. I wish we could afford to keep a proper parlour-maid, but it's no good wishing. Ruthie, does it ever strike you that we're a rather untidy family?"

"Yes," Ruth admitted, with a slight smile; "Miss Minter says there should be a place for everything and everything should be in its place, but that's certainly not the case in our house."

"I never think about it unless we've visitors," Violet confessed; "then I notice it, and wonder what they think."

Long after her sister was asleep that night Ruth lay awake pondering on many things. She was vexed that Violet's curiosity should have taken her to Agnes Hosking's home; for Agnes had been neither kind nor considerate in her treatment of the Wyndham girls, having frequently allowed them to see that she looked down upon them because they wore somewhat shabby clothes, and had but little pocket money to spend. Ruth both disliked and despised Agnes.

By-and-by she dismissed her from her mind, and her thoughts passed to her father's old friend. She liked him, she told herself, and she fancied she understood now a remark she had overheard her father make to her mother, that prosperity had not spoiled Andrew Reed. She wondered if Dr. Reed

had really meant that he must persuade her mother to let her pay a visit to his home. Yes, she believed he had meant it; he did not strike her as being the sort of man who would have said it merely to be pleasant. Perhaps, some day, she would receive an invitation from Mrs. Reed. How delightful that would be!

Then she reflected how much better her father had looked that day, and that his cough had been less troublesome. She had been glad to hear Dr. Reed tell him that he must take care of himself; for he never considered himself enough, he was the most unselfish of men. Now, as it always did, her heart softened and thrilled with loving pride as her mind dwelt on her father; and she remembered how, once, when she had been regretting the fact that his work was not appreciated as she had thought it should be, he had put his arm around her and said:—

"Never mind, little daughter, perhaps my day will come, and if not—well "The true problem of life is not to "get on" or "get up," not to be great or to do great things, but to be just what God meant us to be," and the recollection soothed and comforted her, for

she realised that one who believed that could not be altogether dissatisfied with his lot.

CHAPTER III

DR. REED AT HOME

"NOW, father, for a nice, cosy chat. Take your favourite chair close to the fire, and the little mother shall sit opposite to you, and, oh, I do hope nobody will disturb us to-night!"

The speaker was Ann Reed, and the scene was the drawing-room of the Reeds' house, on the night of the doctor's return from London. He had dined with his wife and daughter, and, having seen his assistant and ascertained that all had gone well during his absence, he had joined them in the drawing-room where they had been waiting for him

for the past hour. Sinking into the comfortable chair which Ann had pulled near the fireplace, he heaved a sigh of perfect contentment, and a tender smile shone in his grey eyes as he looked from one to the other of the two faces which, to him, were the dearest in the world.

Mrs. Reed was a little woman with a slight, girlish figure, and a sweet-tempered rather than a pretty countenance, around which waved a quantity of soft, fair hair, which made her look younger than her years. She had been a hospital nurse before her marriage, and had brought her husband no money, but those who knew her well declared she was a fortune to him in herself; for she had a shrewd head for business, and had always kept his books and managed his home most capably; in short, she had proved a helpmeet to him in the truest sense of the word. Now, as she met her husband's eyes, she said:—

"I, too, hope we shall not be disturbed to-night. It seems an age since we three enjoyed a chat together, though in reality you have been only absent from home a

week. The time dragged while you were away, did it not, Ann?"

"Yes," Ann assented; "you were very good to write every day, father, and the cream you sent us was delicious, and arrived quite fresh."

She was standing before her father, a slight, tall figure—though barely fifteen she was half a head taller than her mother—with a bright flush on her cheeks, and her eyes—very like her father's they were—shining with happiness. Though she could not be called pretty, there was something wonderfully attractive in her face, in its frank expression and lack of self-consciousness.

"It's pleasant to know one has been missed," Dr. Reed said, in a satisfied tone; "and I'm glad to be at home again. I should have been back on Saturday if I had not run against my old friend, Clement Wyndham. He asked me to spend Sunday with him, and I was glad to be able to accept his invitation and talk over old times. I was grieved, though, to see how much he has changed; he looks more than his age. Poor Wyndham!"

Ann seated herself on a stool at her father's feet, and leaned her head against his knee. "Why do you say 'poor Wyndham,' father?" she inquired.

"Because I am afraid life has not treated him very kindly, my dear. He is a journalist, a clever fellow, but somehow he has not managed to make much headway in his profession, and he has a long family—three girls and two boys—and, I fear, rather an incapable sort of woman for a wife. Mrs. Wyndham seems very nice, but I imagine she is a poor manager; indeed their home at Streatham showed me that fact plainly enough. I dined there, and made the acquaintance of the whole family—good-looking, intelligent children all of them. The eldest girl, Ruth, appeared very helpful; I noticed the servant consulted her about several matters, and her father told me that she was his right hand. She is only about your age, Ann; but there is a little worried pucker between her brows already, as though the cares of life weigh upon her mind. Next to Ruth in age come Violet and Madge—extremely pretty children they are; then come the boys who are twins and very fine little fellows indeed. The children attend

day schools at Streatham; their school bills must take a substantial slice out of their father's income."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Mrs. Reed. "Mr. Wyndham is a journalist, you say?"

"Yes. He has a post on a daily paper, he has had it for years in fact, but it leads to nothing better. Being a married man with a long family he cannot afford to strike for a larger salary, though he is most inadequately paid for his work. He told me that he has had to stand quietly by and see less efficient men pushed into lucrative posts through interested friends. It must have been very hard lines for him."

"What a shame to treat him so unfairly!" Ann cried warmly, her eyes darkening with indignation. "Is he, then, so very poor, father?"

"Well, I'm afraid his income scarcely meets the requirements of his family, my dear. He did not actually say so, but I gleaned as much."

"I am very sorry for him, poor man," said Mrs. Reed, her voice full of sympathy, "and for his wife, too."

The doctor looked thoughtfully into the fire, and for a few minutes there was silence, then Ann asked:—

"Isn't there anything you can do to help Mr. Wyndham, father?"

"That's what I've been wondering, Ann," he replied.

"You couldn't give him money or—if he would not like that—lend it to him?"

"N-o-o. He did not tell me he was in need of monetary help. But, perhaps, I—we might help him in some other way."

"We?" Mrs. Reed said interrogatively. "What is in your mind, Andrew? Let us hear."

"Well, my dear, Wyndham confided to me that he is rather troubled about Ruth, his eldest girl. She is to leave the school, which she now attends with her sisters, at

Christmas—it is only a school for young girls it appears—and he would like to send her to a thoroughly good boarding-school for a couple of years if he could hear of one where the terms are 'very reasonable' as he expressed it; and I've been thinking how it would be to have Ruth here—she would be a capital companion for Ann—and let her complete her education at Helmsford College. Of course we should undertake to pay her school fees and in every way provide for her as long as she remains with us."

"Oh, father, how clever of you to think of that!" Ann cried excitedly; "I call it a splendid plan! We should be sure to become great friends, as she is about my age. It would be like having a sister almost. Oh, do you think her mother and father would let her come?"

"I believe they would." The doctor glanced from his daughter to his wife, who was looking very serious and thoughtful. "What do you think of my plan, Helen?" he inquired.

"That it requires consideration," she replied gravely; "I daresay it might answer, but then it might not. Don't let us act hastily and afterwards regret it. Let us take time to think the matter over."

"You are quite right, my dear," Dr. Reed agreed. "You and I are a great deal too impulsive, Ann; we need the little mother to keep us in check."

Ann looked disappointed, but only for a minute, and, meeting Mrs. Reed's glance, she smiled. She had perfect confidence that her mother would advise what she considered would be right and for the best.

"I think Ruth is such a pretty name," she said; "and I am sure, from the little you have told us about her, father, that she is a nice girl. I have always longed to have a companion of my own age. Do tell me exactly what she is like in appearance."

"She's about your height and size, and she has regular features, brown eyes, and brown hair. I am afraid that description is not very distinctive. What struck me most in connection with her was the way in which

all the others appealed to her about nearly everything; really, she might have had the management of the household, poor child! No wonder her father spoke of her as his right hand!"

"What would he do without her, then?" Mrs. Reed inquired. "Do you think he would be willing to part with her, Andrew?"

"He is the sort of man who would not consider himself in the matter in the least, he would think only of what would be best for his child."

"And the mother?" questioned Mrs. Reed.

"I cannot answer for her," Dr. Reed answered dubiously; "she struck me as an affectionate wife and mother, but I should say she is rather a weak, undecided kind of person. Wyndham married her when she was very young, she had but just left school, I believe. She was an only child, an orphan, and, as she had been left unprovided for in infancy, she had been brought up and educated by an uncle who was only too glad to get her off his hands, as he had a family of his own. So you see she was quite an

inexperienced girl at the time she married, with no knowledge whatever of housekeeping or the worth of money, and I fear she is not much wiser on either point now."

"Poor soul," said Mrs. Reed pityingly; "I can understand the sort of woman she is. The circumstances of her life have been against her. I feel very interested in all you have told us about these Wyndhams, Andrew, and, like you, I wish we could help them. We'll decide nothing till Christmas, then we'll see what can be done. You must not think me unsympathetic, but—"

"Oh, mother, father couldn't think you that!" Ann broke in. "Why, you're always quite as eager to help people as he is!"

"Yes, indeed," agreed the doctor, "and much wiser about finding out the best mode to set about doing it. Perhaps my plan will not be feasible, but we'll think it over at any rate, and, as I've heard my mother say when she failed to see her way plainly or was doubtful about the wisdom of any step she contemplated taking, 'We'll just set the

matter before the Lord and ask His guidance."

"How like dear old Granny to say that!" exclaimed Ann, a tender smile lighting up her face. "Oh, father, I wish you could have persuaded her to pay us a visit!"

"She thinks she has become too old to undertake such a long journey, my dear, and I believe she is right; besides, she is more contented in her own home. Elderly people do not care for change like young ones. She knows how welcome she would be here, but she is never so happy anywhere as at Teymouth. You and the little mother shall go and see her in the summer, Ann, if all's well, as usual, but I don't think she herself will ever leave Devonshire again."

"You do not think her ill, father?" Ann asked anxiously.

"No; but naturally her strength is not what it once was. She said to me that she thought the next journey she would make would be to her long home. That will be as God wills; but I saw she did not wish to leave

Teymouth, so of course I refrained from urging her to do so."

Ann's eyes, which she shaded with her hand, were misty with tears, for she was most devotedly attached to her grandmother, and the thought that she might be in failing health caused her a pang of deep grief. Every summer she and her mother went to stay with old Mrs. Reed in the little cottage at Teymouth, which she had inhabited since her husband's death. Granny was a true, noble-hearted woman, though in her young days she had been "only a servant" as some people say—it had not been considered derogatory for the daughters of small farmers to be domestic servants then—and had had no education except what life had taught her.

From her the doctor had inherited many of those qualities which had gained him the respect and confidence of all classes in the prosperous Yorkshire town where he had become a successful surgeon and a well-to-do man; and when, nearly fifteen years previously, with his wife's cordial approval, he had called his infant daughter "Ann," it had been with the earnest hope and prayer

that she might grow into as sweet and good a woman as the one after whom she was named.

"I am so glad you have been able to pay your mother this visit, Andrew," Mrs. Reed remarked, after a few minutes' silence, "I am sure she must have been delighted to have you to herself for a few days. I often wish that we lived nearer to her."

"So do I," her husband replied. "Mother spoke very affectionately of you, Helen," he proceeded, "and said how much she enjoyed your long letters, and she told me I was fortunate in my wife. 'She's a real lady, Andrew,' she said, 'if she wasn't she'd be ashamed of your old mother, and, instead of that, she treats me as a daughter would treat a mother, and I love her for it.' And I love her for it, too," he concluded in a tone so soft and low that only Ann caught the words.

"Oh, Andrew!" Mrs. Reed exclaimed, her fair face flushing rosy red. "I shall write to her to-morrow and tell her how well Ann and I consider you looking, she will be glad to hear that."

"I wish poor Wyndham could have a change for a few days," observed the doctor meditatively; "he looked as though he needed it badly. He and his family are on my mind. I shall not rest until I have found some way of helping them. We must put our heads together, Helen, and see what can be done."

His wife assented; and Ann's face brightened as she whispered to her father:—

"Oh, father, I don't think you'll have much difficulty in persuading the little mother to agree to your plan!"

CHAPTER IV

DR. REED'S OFFER

TWO months had elapsed since the Sunday Dr. Reed had spent with his old friend at Streatham, and it was now the second week in January. The Wyndham children were all at home for the holidays, and, as the weather was wet and stormy, they had to remain indoors nearly every day, which proved trying, especially for the boys who teased their sisters, and worried poor Barbara "nearly out of her life," as she declared to Ruth, to whom she confided her grievances. Mr. Wyndham was working at the office very late of a night, at this time, and

returning home in the early hours of the morning; his wife tried her best to keep the house quiet whilst he was taking his rest, but it was most difficult to do so, and the consequence was that he often failed in obtaining the sleep he so badly needed.

"I don't think our boys are worse than others," Mrs. Wyndham remarked to her little daughters, one afternoon, when Barbara had ousted the twins from the kitchen and they had betaken themselves to their own room upstairs, where, for the present, they were quiet; "but I must admit that they are very high-spirited and noisy. Barbara cannot manage them a bit."

"She cannot get on with her work if they are playing marbles on the kitchen floor," Violet replied; "and you know, mother, you complained to her yesterday that she had not changed her gown by tea-time."

"She had the kitchen stove to clean," Ruth said excusingly; "so it was really not her fault; and Frank upset a pail of water in the scullery, and that had to be mopped up. Barbara will be glad when the boys go back to school."

"Well, we shall all be back to school next week," put in Madge, not altogether regretfully; "all except you, Ruth."

"I wonder if father has given up all thoughts of sending Ruth to boarding-school, mother?" interrogated Violet. "Girls don't usually leave school at fifteen, do they?"

"No," Mrs. Wyndham replied, "but Ruth is too old to remain any longer at Miss Minter's, and I don't know how we can send her anywhere else. Your father is very short of money, at present."

"I shall stay at home and help you and Barbara, mother," Ruth said cheerfully, noting the look of distress on her mother's face; "I don't want to go to boarding-school. Perhaps by-and-by I shall be able to have lessons in drawing and painting at home—I don't show talent for anything but drawing and painting, Miss Minter says; I'm not like Violet, who's clever all the way round."

They all laughed at that, and Violet looked pleased. She really was a clever little girl, and industrious, too.

"I do not know what I should do without you at home, Ruth," said Mrs. Wyndham very seriously; "and you don't mind doing housework, do you, dear?"

"No," Ruth answered truthfully.

"Your father was saying to me only yesterday that he thought you would make a clever little housekeeper one of these days," Mrs. Wyndham continued, smiling at her eldest daughter; "he was so pleased with the way in which you cooked that steak for his supper the night Barbara was out. I could not have done it so well myself."

"I rather like cooking," responded Ruth, colouring with gratification.

"I should hate it," Violet confessed; "in fact, I dislike housework of any kind. I should like to be able to keep servants to do everything of that sort."

At that point in the conversation, the boys, having found nothing to interest them upstairs, appeared upon the scene and asked permission to make toffee over the sitting-room fire, as Barbara would not have, them

in the kitchen. At first Mrs. Wyndham opposed the idea, but, as Madge joined her entreaties to her brothers', she gave in, and Ruth was prevailed upon to fetch the necessary ingredients and a saucepan.

Half an hour afterwards when Mr. Wyndham opened the front door and entered the house, he was greeted by the sound of high voices in the sitting-room and the smell of burnt toffee. With a weary sigh he turned into his study, and shut the door; but, ten minutes subsequently, he came out with an open letter in his hand and made his way to the sitting-room, where the burnt toffee had been emptied into a buttered dish, and the young folks were impatiently waiting for it to cool.

"It's all Madge's fault it is burnt," Billy was saying aggrievedly, as his father appeared, "she said she'd keep it stirred; but perhaps it won't taste so very bad—oh, here's father!"

Mr. Wyndham beckoned to his wife, who followed him from the room, closing the door behind her. The children exchanged significant glances.

"Something's happened," remarked Frank; and the others agreed with him.

"I expect it's to do with a bill," said Violet; "the butcher called this morning to know when it would be convenient for father to settle his account. Mother said she had no idea we owed him so much money as he said we did, and that she would speak to father about it; or, perhaps—"

"Oh, I don't fancy it's to do with anything disagreeable!" Ruth interposed; "I thought father looked quite pleased."

"So did I," agreed Madge; "perhaps something good has happened."

"I hope so, I'm sure," Ruth replied; and she fell to wondering if her father had been offered a better post at last.

By-and-by Mrs. Wyndham reappeared, looking flushed and excited, and bade Ruth go to her father in the study. As soon as she had gone Mrs. Wyndham explained to the others that her husband had received a letter, from Dr. Reed, offering to make a home for

their sister and educate her with his own daughter for the next two years.

"It is a most kind, most generous offer," she said; "and your father and I are much touched by it—only what I shall do without Ruth I do not know! I shall miss her terribly!"

At first the young folks were too surprised at their mother's news to say much, but very soon they began to ask questions, and it was not long before they were in full possession of all the details of Dr. Reed's plan for their sister's benefit, so that by the time Ruth returned to the sitting-room they knew as much as she did herself. She appeared pleased, but her manner was very subdued.

"What a lucky girl you are, Ruth!" exclaimed Violet, half enviously. "Isn't Dr. Reed wonderfully thoughtful and kind? Oh, how I wish I were you!"

"Do you?" Ruth asked. "Yes, you would like to go to Helmsford College, I know. Father says it is a splendid school, one of the best in England; and I am to live with the Reeds—"

"Then it is decided already that you are to go?" Madge broke in eagerly. "Oh, Ruthie," the little girl proceeded, as she received a nod for an answer, "I hope you won't go away and get very proud and grand! Don't get to love Ann Reed better than you do us."

"As though I ever should!" Ruth exclaimed, half indignant, half amused at the idea. Her voice sounded slightly tremulous, and she was evidently agitated. "Dr. Reed says in his letter that he hopes Ann and I will be great friends," she continued, "but I don't know about that, and I shall miss you all so much—"

"And we shall miss you, darling," her mother assured her; "I have been saying that I do not know what I shall do without you. Your father, too, will be quite at a loss when you are gone, it's for you he looks the minute he comes home."

"I could be much better spared than Ruthie, couldn't I, mother?" Violet said. "How I should like to be in her shoes!"

"Would you?" Ruth asked quickly.

"Indeed yes! But you mustn't think me envious of you, Ruthie; I hope I'm not that. Mother says that Dr. Reed promises you shall be treated exactly as his own daughter, and no outsider will know that he is providing for you. Only think how nice it will be for you to live in a house where there's plenty of everything, servants to wait upon you, and—oh, dear me, you are a fortunate girl!"

"I am sure I am," Ruth answered earnestly; "but I shall be continually thinking of you all at home, and if I thought father would miss me very much—" She paused and looked wistfully at her mother, then continued—"Mother, tell me truly, if you had to choose between Violet and me, which of us would you keep at home? Oh, yes, I know I'm the one Dr. Reed wrote about—he thought of me because I am the eldest of the family, and I remember father told him I was leaving Miss Minter's at Christmas—but do, please, answer my question."

But this Mrs. Wyndham was not inclined to do. She shook her head; then, as Ruth was persistent in demanding a reply, she said evasively:—

"I shall miss you more than I should miss Violet because you do not mind putting your hand to housework, my dear; but I am very glad you should have such a splendid opportunity offered you for completing your education, and —and perhaps, when you are gone, Violet will try to fill your place at home."

Violet did not say that she would. She was regarding her sister curiously.

Ruth did not appear so exultant at the sudden change in her prospects as might have been expected, and there was a tender gravity in her glance as it rested on her mother that Violet failed to comprehend, for she was sure that if she was in Ruth's place her delight would know no bounds.

Violet never sought to disguise the truth that she was discontented with her home—perhaps it was natural she should be that—but she was ashamed of it, too, of its poverty, and the fact that her father was, as she considered, an unsuccessful man. Success to Violet meant a handsomely furnished house, servants, fashionable clothes, and plenty of money, all of which

she hankered after, and she would have given a great deal to change places with the sister who now had the opportunity of turning her back, for two years at least, on the shabby, ill-managed home which Violet secretly despised, though it had always been rich in love.

Ruth's good fortune formed the chief topic of conversation during the remainder of the day. Ruth herself listened to the comments of the various members of the household with mingled feelings. Though everyone was pleased, for her sake, there was evidently a general impression that it would have been better for the family had Violet been the one selected to leave home.

Mr. Wyndham had determined not to answer Dr. Reed's letter till the following day, but he had not the least idea of refusing his friend's generous offer, which had arrived so opportunely, as he thought; therefore, he was considerably amazed when, that evening, shortly before it was time for him to start for the city, Ruth came to him in his study and informed him that, all things considered, she would rather not go to be educated at Helmsford College with Ann Reed.

"I want you to ask Dr. Reed to take Violet instead of me," she said falteringly; "please tell him I'm not ungrateful, but, if he does not mind, I would so much rather remain at home. Yes, father, I mean it. I thought, at first, that I should like to go, but Violet will do better at Helmsford College than I should; for she is clever and I am not, and I am wanted at home. Violet is only a year younger than I am, so she is quite old enough to go to a big school."

"But, my dear child, no mention has been made of Violet at all," Mr. Wyndham reminded her.

"No, but I am sure Dr. Reed would take her instead of me if you suggested it, father. Do ask him, and see what he says."

"But, child, it is not fair to set you aside. I greatly wished to send you to boarding-school, but I could not afford to do so, and—oh, no, you mustn't tempt me to keep you at home, though what we shall do without you, Ruthie, I really do not know."

"That is what mother and every one—even Barbara—says," Ruth told him eagerly. "Oh,

father, I do really think it would be better if it could be managed for Violet to go instead of me. I do not think Dr. Reed and his wife will mind which of us they help, and—oh, it is good and kind of them to wish to help us at all! I am not nearly so quick to learn as Violet, I am sure she would do wonders at a good school. Please do write to Dr. Reed and ask him if he would mind having Violet instead of me."

Mr. Wyndham looked searchingly at his daughter; but he could read nothing in her face to tell him that it had been a hard matter for her to come to him with this request, and that she had put aside her own feelings for the sake of those dear to her, so he answered:—

"I am surprised you do not wish to go, Ruth. I don't know what to say. I will have a talk with your mother, however, and discuss the matter with her again. If you remain at home and Violet goes I shall be able to afford you drawing and painting lessons, and—well, we'll see!"

Mrs. Wyndham, when consulted, brightened perceptibly at the prospect of keeping her

eldest daughter with her, and, finally, it was decided that, all things taken into consideration, it would be better for everybody if Violet went to live with the Reeds instead of Ruth. Mr. Wyndham wrote and intimated this to Dr. Reed, and, in due course, received an answer to the effect that Violet would be made as welcome as her sister would have been, and that she would be expected one day of the following week, as Helmsford College reopened in another fortnight's time. Violet, it is almost needless to tell, was immeasurably delighted at the turn matters had taken, and preparations were immediately commenced for her departure. She was going to a new life which would suit her better than the old, she told herself exultingly, and she was confident that Ruth did not mind remaining at home.

CHAPTER V

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

Prosperity's child

IT was a cold January day, with snow on the ground and the promise of more to come, on which Violet Wyndham travelled from London to Yorkshire. The previous evening her high spirits had failed her, and she had burst into a flood of tears on saying good-night to her mother, and sobbed forth that she wished she was going to remain at home, for that she never, never could be happy away from every one she loved; but now, this morning, as she drove off in a cab with her father to the railway station, she bravely choked down her sobs and wiped the tears from her eyes, reminding herself of all she had to gain in the new life which was opening before her.

"That's right, Violet," Mr. Wyndham said approvingly; "don't cry any more, there's a good girl." He spoke in a cheerful tone, though his heart was sorer than he would have liked to admit at the thought of separation from his little daughter. "If you're not happy with the Reeds you know you can come home," he proceeded to tell her; "but I believe you will be happy, I shall be greatly surprised and disappointed if you are not."

And you'll be a good girl, won't you, and make the most of the advantages you will have? You'll obey Dr. Reed and his wife implicitly, remembering how generously they are treating you, and try to please them, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," Violet assented; "I promise I will."

"It will be a great change for you, child, a very great change," Mr. Wyndham said impressively, "for you are going from a comparatively poor home to one of affluence. But you won't forget the old home, eh?"

"No, indeed, father," was the earnest response; "and I shall write very often, at least once a week."

"Do so, my dear; we shall look forward to your letters with much pleasure."

When the station was reached Mr. Wyndham found the train for the north was nearly due to start. He saw Violet's luggage labelled and obtained her ticket, then found her a corner seat in a second-class

compartment, opposite to an elderly lady, who, warmly clad, with her knees covered with a thick rug, was evidently prepared for a long journey.

"Is the little girl going far?" inquired the lady, looking with kindly interest from Violet to her father.

"To Barford," Mr. Wyndham answered, adding that his daughter had never taken a journey alone before, a piece of information which Violet considered he need not have given.

"Then we shall be fellow-travellers," observed the lady cordially, "for Barford is my destination, too." She spoke in a clear, decisive voice.

"I am glad to hear that," said Mr. Wyndham, with a smile, as he shut the carriage door.

The train was on the point of starting, and Violet leaned out of the window and put her arms around her father's neck and kissed him. It seemed to her that until that moment of parting she had never known how very dear he was to her. "God bless and keep you,

Violet," he whispered tenderly; "Good-bye, my darling."

"Good-bye, father—dear, dear father," she replied huskily as she was obliged to unclasp her arms and take her seat.

The train moved slowly out of the station, and Violet sank back in her corner. For a few minutes she saw nothing, for her eyes were blind with tears; but, when her sight cleared, she glanced at her companions and was much relieved to find that they were taking no notice of her. The lady opposite had opened a newspaper which she was already reading, and the other two occupants of the compartment were seated one on either side of the far window, out of which they were gazing.

By-and-by Violet began to carefully study the figure opposite to her. The lady was plainly dressed in a blue serge gown underneath a heavy blue cloak which was somewhat the worse for wear, and the rug across her knees was decidedly shabby though it looked as if it might be warm and comfortable. She wore an old-fashioned bonnet, and her white hair was brushed back

smoothly from her face—a plain face it was, with a large nose, and a large mouth, and heavily marked eyebrows. Violet had a very good opportunity for making her observations, for the lady continued reading for fully an hour, never glancing at her once; at length, however, she laid aside her paper and spoke.

"I am sure he is a very good father," she remarked, as though pursuing a train of thought; "he seemed very sorry to part with his little girl. I suppose you are going to school, child?" she questioned.

"No—yes—not exactly," Violet replied, flushing self-consciously beneath the intent gaze of a pair of very bright, dark eyes. "I am going to be educated at Helmsford College," she explained, with a little air of importance, "but I am not going to be a boarder there, I am to live with friends."

"That will be pleasant for you. You have never been away from home before, I conclude?"

"No, never; and—and I can't help feeling a bit lonely, you know."

"You are not an only child?"

"Oh, no! There are five of us; I am the eldest but one. Do you know Barford very well?" Violet inquired, thinking it was her turn to put a question.

"Very well. I have always lived there, and I hope to end my life there. I am much attached to the town."

"Is it a very pretty place?" Violet asked, naturally interested in the town which, for the next year or so at any rate, was likely to be her home.

"Pretty? No. It is a large manufacturing town full of factories and workshops. I am attached to the place because I was born there, and I have worked there all my working days."

Violet wondered what her companion's work could be, but she did not like to inquire. The lady was extremely kind to her during the journey, made her share her rug, and pointed out various places of interest which they passed. At one of the stations at which the train stopped a porter handed in a luncheon

basket containing a dainty repast for the lady, who insisted that Violet should take lunch with her. So they had a most enjoyable meal together, Violet contributing, as her share, the packet of sandwiches Barbara had cut for her. It was a delightful experience altogether, and one Violet never forgot; and it was no wonder that she grew confidential with this new friend, for she was not reserved by nature, or that, long before the journey came to an end, she had told the story of her short, uneventful life, and touched on the bright hopes she cherished for the future.

"I have only seen Dr. Reed once," she said; "but I liked him then, and father and he were great friends years ago. We none of us know what his wife is like, but I think she must be very kind, for she wrote so nicely about me. Poor mother! She cried when she read the letter, but she was pleased; she said it made her happy and satisfied to let me go."

"Would it surprise you to hear that I know the Reeds?" asked the lady, with a bright smile which made her plain face look positively handsome. Violet thought, and almost young.

"Oh!" gasped Violet, for such a possibility had never entered her mind. "Do you really know them?" she questioned excitedly.

"I do; and I can answer for it that they will be kind to you. I think, my dear, that you and I will most certainly meet another day, and I hope you will be a little glad to see me."

"I shall be very glad," Violet responded earnestly. "I have had such a pleasant journey," she continued; "and all through you. The time has passed so quickly."

"We are nearly at our journey's end," said the lady, peering out of the window; "and it is snowing fast, I see."

Violet made no response. She was beginning to feel rather nervous, and she was wondering who she would find at the station to meet her. Dr. Reed had intimated to her father that, if possible, he would be there himself; she hoped that he would manage to come. Her companion now began to collect her belongings, and, that done, she glanced at Violet, and apparently read something of

what was passing through her mind, for she said:—

"I will not leave you until I have seen you in safe keeping. Either Dr. Reed or his wife will no doubt meet you at the station, and perhaps Ann will be there, too. You will be sure to find a friend in Ann Reed."

"I hope so," Violet replied, speaking in rather a dolorous tone.

"Poor child, I can understand you feel low-spirited, for you have left all those you love in London. But you will find love awaiting you in your new home, of that I am certain, and you know you have one Friend always with you, my dear."

"I don't understand," said Violet, really mystified.

"I mean the Friend to whom your father confided you when he said good-bye. I heard him say, 'God bless and keep you,' did I not?"

At that moment the train, which had been slackening speed, slowed into Barford

station and stopped. Immediately a porter opened the carriage door, and the lady and Violet were assisted on to the platform. Looking eagerly around, Violet, much to her relief and joy, at once caught sight of Dr. Reed, who came up to her and welcomed her heartily.

"It's snowing fast," he informed her; "so I advised Ann not to come, though she had looked forward to being here to meet you, and did not wish to remain at home—I promised to explain that she has a slight cold, otherwise she would certainly have been here. Have you had a comfortable journey? Yes. That's right. Why—" his quick glance passing from her to her travelling-companion who had stood back but now came forward and shook hands with him— "where have you come from? Not from London, too?"

"Yes," the lady assented; "we—" and she indicated Violet with a smiling nod— "have made the journey together, and have become quite friendly I assure you."

"That's capital!" exclaimed the doctor, looking both surprised and pleased. "Can I

help you about your luggage?" he inquired courteously.

"No, thank you," the lady answered, "I have asked a porter to see to it. Good-bye." And with a smile of farewell she turned away, and disappeared in the crowd which thronged the platform.

Violet now pointed out her trunk, which had been taken from the luggage van, and Dr. Reed gave orders for it to be conveyed to his house by a town porter. Then he led the little girl to his brougham, which was waiting outside the station.

Never had Violet ridden in such a luxurious carriage before; and, seated comfortably by the doctor's side, with a fur rug over her knees, a sense of unreality began to creep over her, and she felt as though, presently, she must wake up to find she had been dreaming. But when she turned her head and looked at the kind face of her father's friend, she drew a sigh of contentment, for he, at any rate, seemed very real. No, she was not in the least tired, she declared, and not very cold. Dr. Reed saw that she was very tired,

however, only she was too excited to be conscious of the fact.

"We shall soon be at home," he said, by-and-by. "Ann has been on the tip-toe of impatience all day because the time has passed so slowly. She has been preparing a room for you next to her own, furnishing it to her own taste. Ah, you cannot think how she is longing to have a companion of her own age with whom she can be confidential, and you are only a year her junior, you know. How did you leave your people at home?"

"Quite well, thank you," Violet answered. "Father has lost his cough, and mother says she is sure he is better than he was before Christmas."

"That's right! I am indeed glad to hear it."

"I hope you don't mind my coming instead of Ruth?" Violet said, hesitatingly.

"I don't mind in the least," he assured her with a smile. "I trust you will be happy with us, my dear," he proceeded earnestly, "and that you and Ann will take to each other—no

doubt you will. By the way, I am glad you found such a good travelling-companion."

"I was so surprised when she told me she knew you!" Violet exclaimed. "She asked me my name and I told it her, but I did not like to ask hers. Please tell me who she is, Dr. Reed."

"She is Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway," he answered. Then, seeing her amazement, he added: "She is a lady doctor, and has practised in Barford longer than I have."

As Dr. Reed ceased speaking the carriage drew up before a handsome house in a square, the windows of which were all lit up, and Violet realised she had arrived, at last, at her new home.

CHAPTER VI

NEWS FROM VIOLET

PERHAPS Violet's first impressions in connection with her new home and its inmates will be best told in the long letter she wrote to her mother on the afternoon after her arrival at Barford, of which the following is a copy:—

*"No. 8 LAURESTON SQUARE,"
"BARFORD, January 18th, 190—"*

"My DEAR MOTHER,"

"I know Dr. Reed sent you a telegram last night to tell you I had arrived safely, but you will be expecting to receive a letter from me to-morrow; and, as I promised, I am taking the first opportunity I have of writing. I had such a nice journey—after the first hour I really enjoyed it. Please tell father the lady who sat opposite to me was very kind and made me share her luncheon, which was handed in at one of the stations in a basket. I had some of her chicken and ham, and she had some of my sandwiches, which she said were very good and cut just as she liked

them—please tell Barbara that. I did not think the lady was a person of any importance, because she was very plainly dressed and seemed quite ordinary in every way, but she turns out to be a very clever lady doctor, called Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway, and Dr. Reed knows her well and often meets her in consultation, and I find she is very friendly with Mrs. Reed and Ann."

"Dr. Reed met me at the station. I was glad to see him. I drove home with him in his brougham—it was snowing—and he inquired for you all and was so glad to hear that father's cough was gone; and Mrs. Reed came out on the doorstep, though it was so cold, and she kissed me in a way that reminded me of you, dear mother, and that made me feel all chokey and unable to say anything. And then, in the hall, I met Ann, who kissed me, too, but I really have no idea what she said, for everything was so strange that I felt quite bewildered. They led me upstairs to the room which is to be mine, where they took off my hat and jacket, and Ann unbuttoned my boots and lent me a pair of warm slippers; and then they made me sit down in an easy chair by the fire (fancy me having a fire in my bedroom!) and take a

basinful of soup, after which I was heaps better—I had been feeling rather queer and shakey before, and would have given anything to be at home, which was silly of me, of course."

"So I sat there and rested, and got beautifully warm, and by-and-by my trunk arrived, and Mrs. Reed unpacked it for me—I expected she would look surprised when she saw how few clothes I have, but she didn't, nor did Ann. My supper was brought upstairs to me; and then I went to bed and slept until ever so late this morning, and now I am only a little tired."

"We have had a great deal of snow during the night, so there will be no going out-of-doors to-day. This is a nice big house and very comfortable, but not at all grand. It is on the south side of the square, and the front door opens into the road. There is no garden—there are stables behind—but there is a large piece of ground in the middle of the square with a croquet lawn, and shrubs, and flower-beds, and the people who live in the square all pay towards keeping this ground in nice condition, so that they all have a share in it and the right to go there

whenever they please. Arm says she spends a good bit of time there in the summer, so I expect I shall, too."

"I must not forget to tell you what Ann Reed is like. She is just a little taller than I am. I know because Dr. Reed made us stand back to back this morning that he might see which was the taller, and he said she was by about half an inch—and she has grey eyes like her father's. I don't call her pretty. I don't call Mrs. Reed pretty exactly, either, but she is very nice-looking, and she seems so young to be Ann's mother—of course, I know she can't be young really."

"I find there are three servants in the house—I asked Ann, a cook, a house-maid, and a tweeny-maid who answers the door and is a sort of parlour-maid and puts her hand to anything; you see, this, being a doctor's house, people are always coming and going, so Ann says. There is a waiting-room for patients and a consulting-room close to the front door, and a surgery beyond the consulting-room. The dining-room looks out into the square, like the drawing-room, which is upstairs—it is not nearly such a grand drawing-room as the

one in Agnes Hosking's new house, but it is much more homely-looking and comfortable, and I think you, dear mother, would like it."

"I have been talking to Ann most of the morning. She has asked me such a lot of questions about you all, and about Ruth in particular; now she has left me so that I shall not be disturbed in my writing."

"By the way, I find we dine at seven o'clock. Won't it be strange for me to have dinner in the evening? I will write again very soon and tell you how I am getting on. I am longing to see what Barford is like, so I hope the weather will clear up soon."

"My bedroom is next to Ann's. It is such a nice room, rather small, but so cosy; it has been re-done up for me. The wallpaper is very pretty, just what I would have chosen, with little bunches of pink rosebuds on a white ground, and the furniture is enamelled white. Ann says her mother expects her to keep her bedroom very tidy, so I must bear that in mind and keep mine tidy too."

"Oh, dear mother, though everyone is so kind, you cannot think how much I miss you,

and last night, after I was in bed, I couldn't help having a little weep when I thought of Ruthie; I expect she missed me, too. Please give her my dear, dear love, and the same to Madge and the boys, and to father and yourself. I hope you will write to me very soon and tell me everything that goes on at home.—I am, dearest mother, Your loving daughter,"

"VIOLET."

"P.S.—Please remember me to Barbara. Ann says she is glad we are not going to school for a few days, and so am I. Tell Ruthie she must not think Ann will ever take her place with me; she isn't quite what I expected to find her, though. Good-bye."

This letter was read aloud by Mrs. Wyndham to her husband and children on the afternoon of its arrival. On the whole it was considered very satisfactory.

"But what does she mean by saying that Ann is not quite what she expected to find her?" said Mr. Wyndham. "She had formed a mental picture of her, I suppose, and the

reality has disappointed her," he added with an amused smile.

"If so her letter does not read as though she is disagreeably disappointed," his wife commented, glancing back over the epistle; "evidently the dear child has been most kindly received. Fancy that lady she travelled with being a friend of the Reeds! What a strange coincidence! Let me see, what is her name? Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway. You liked her appearance, did you not, Clement?"

"Yes," Mr. Wyndham replied, "I felt quite easy in my mind about Violet when I heard her opposite neighbour was going all the way to Barford, for she had a sensible, reliable face, and I thought she seemed a kindly soul. Events have shown that I read her aright. Violet writes a very good letter for a girl of her age, I consider."

"Ah, she takes after her father in possessing the pen of a ready writer," said Mrs. Wyndham, with a smile; "and she is very sharp and observant. Miss Minter says she shows great ability for acquiring general

information. I am sure she will do well at Helmsford College."

"I know what she means about Ann Reed's not being quite what she expected to find her," announced Madge; "I mean I know what she thought Ann would be like—proud, and stuck-up, and selfish."

"What made her think that?" questioned Mr. Wyndham, in amazement.

"She thought so because Ann is an only child, father, like Agnes Hosking," Ruth explained; "and Agnes Hosking is one of the most disagreeable girls at Miss Minter's school; her father is very rich, you know, and once mother in speaking of Ann Reed, called her Prosperity's child, and—"

"I remember I did," Mrs. Wyndham broke in; "but I did not mean to disparage her in any way, I am sure."

"Prosperity's child," Mr. Wyndham said thoughtfully; "yes, she is certainly that, she can know nothing, by experience, of the struggles and privations life brings to so many; but she wouldn't be much like her

father if she was proud or selfish, and somehow I don't fancy Andrew Reed's daughter could be either. Dear me, what extraordinary notions children do get into their heads!" he concluded with a laugh.

"I wonder if Violet will be home-sick," said Frank, "I told her she would be, but she wouldn't believe it. You see she admits that she had a 'little weep' when she thought of Ruthie. I say, Ruthie, did you cry when you went to bed by yourself and thought of Violet?" he asked inquisitively.

"I believe she did," declared Billy, staring accusingly at his eldest sister, who appeared embarrassed. "What a couple of cry-babies you and Vi must be!"

"We all cried the morning Violet left," Madge reminded him, "you, too, Billy. I saw you wiping your eyes when you thought no one was looking."

"I am sure it was only natural that we should have all been upset," remarked Mrs. Wyndham, who looked as though it would not take much to reduce her to tears at the present moment; "I cannot bear to think of

Violet separated from you others; but, at the same time, I know it is for her benefit, and I have a feeling that she will be happy with the Reeds. We shall be able to glean more from her next letter."

In the course of a few days Violet wrote again. She had been rather home-sick, she confessed, and she missed them all dreadfully; but everybody was most kind and considerate to her.

"Mrs. Reed is much more particular in many ways than you are, mother," she wrote; "and she is rather strict with the servants, I fancy, though they appear to like her. This house is kept as clean as a new pin. Mrs. Reed says she learnt the great virtues of cleanliness and order when she was a hospital nurse. Did you know she had worked for her living? She was at a hospital in London for several years. In some ways she is very particular. She won't allow the least waste, and she is as careful as though Dr. Reed was quite poor. Isn't that odd of her? I call it so. And yet, she's not in the least mean, for Polly—she's the tweeny-maid—told me yesterday that she's been so good to the cook's mother, who

has been ill, giving her food-dainties such as sick people like—and money, too."

Violet then went on to say that, as the weather had continued cold and snowy, she had only left the house once since her arrival, which occasion had been on Sunday when, with Mrs. Reed and Ann, she had attended the nearest church, situated only about five minutes' walk from Laureston Square.

"But the weather is clearing at last," she wrote; "it is thawing fast as I am writing, and the sun is beginning to shine, so I hope soon I shall really see something of Barford. Mrs. Reed said this morning that she must try to get out to do some shopping, and that Ann and I might accompany her. I understand there are some fine shops not far from here, for Laureston Square is in what is considered the best part of the town, and many of the people living hereabouts are very rich. I do not see much of Dr. Reed, for he is generally busy all day till evening, although, as you know, he keeps an assistant—Mr. Luscombe. Mr. Luscombe has lodgings not far from here, Ann tells me; he is a little man who wears spectacles, and

he is getting bald though he is quite young— young for a doctor, I mean; Ann says she thinks he is about twenty-seven.

"I like Ann. She is very good-natured, and wants to treat me just like a sister; she says she has always wished so much to have a sister. She loves to hear about Ruthie and Madge. I haven't told her what a little house ours is at Streatham, perhaps I shall when I know her better—Dr. Reed may have told her, that I don't know. I wonder what she would think of Barbara. I am certain Mrs. Reed wouldn't keep a servant who is always 'in a rush,' but I don't suppose she knows what one has to put up with if one can only afford a general servant." The letter concluded with many protestations of affection for all the dear ones at home, and requested a speedy answer from Mrs. Wyndham or Ruth.

"She is settling down comfortably and happily," said Mr. Wyndham, when his wife asked him what he thought of this last communication from the absent one, "do you not think so?"

"Yes," she agreed, "but it must be a very great change for her." She glanced meaningly around the sitting-room, as she spoke, and sighed. "I hope she will learn to be orderly," she said, "but I fear she will find it not a little hard."

CHAPTER VII

A MORNING WALK

IT was a beautifully fine January morning on which Violet Wyndham, in company with Mrs. Reed and Ann, had her first glimpse of the town of Barford. The snow had been cleared from the roads, and the sun was shining, whilst a keen, north-east wind—exhilarating to strong, healthy people—was quickly drying up the pavements.

"I shall not be surprised if we have a spell of frost now," remarked Mrs. Reed, as they left Laureston Square and turned into a wide street with large, handsome shops on either side; "I am very fond of frosty weather, myself; but, for the sake of the poor, I hope we shall not get much of it."

"Are there many poor people in Barford?" asked Violet. The street was thronged with well-clad, prosperous-looking folks, she observed.

"Oh, yes, indeed there are!" Ann hastened to reply. "This is the new part of the town, Violet; but in the old part—oh, there it is far different from this!"

"We will take a walk through the old part as soon as I have finished my shopping, then Violet will understand better what Barford is like," said Mrs. Reed; "this is really only a suburb of the place, just as Streatham is a suburb of London."

"I don't know much about London," Violet admitted, "hardly anything, indeed. Once father took Ruth and me to St Paul's, and another time we went to the National

Gallery, and he said he would take us to see the shops before Christmas, but he was very busy just then, and—and it costs money to go about, you know."

"Of course it does."

Mrs. Reed spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, and Violet, who had expected that she would evince great astonishment at her ignorance of London, was agreeably disappointed. By-and-by, Mrs. Reed having executed all her errands, at a whisper from Ann turned down a side street, which brought them to a large, red brick building, standing in its own grounds, which were entered from the road by a big, iron gate.

"There, Violet!" cried Ann. Violet looked at her inquiringly. "This is Helmsford College," Ann explained; "we day-scholars go in by that gate, it is locked now because Miss Orchardson, the principal, has not returned from her holidays yet, and the servants use a back entrance. What do you think of the place from the outside?"

"It is very big," Violet answered, somewhat awed by the size of the building; "are there a great many pupils?"

"Nearly two hundred—that is, counting both boarders and day-scholars."

"So many as that!" exclaimed Violet. "I do hope I shall be put in your class, Ann," she continued eagerly, "but I am afraid that is not very probable."

"Why not?" inquired Ann. "Oh, you think because I am a year older than you that I know more than you do. I'm not at all forward for my age, am I, mother?"

Mrs. Reed shook her head smilingly. She had already discovered that Violet was, in many ways, a precocious girl, and thought it very likely she was as advanced in general knowledge as her daughter.

Turning away from Helmsford College, they now left the fashionable suburb behind them, and soon Violet found the streets, through which they passed, narrower, the houses dingier, and the air less fresh and clear. Tall buildings with small windows and

high chimneys appeared in sight, and the only pedestrians they met were those of the working-classes, most of whom looked insufficiently clad and pinched with cold. Violet wondered how Mrs. Reed had learnt to know her way about in such a labyrinth of streets. By-and-by, on turning a corner, they came upon a figure clad in a blue serge gown with an old-fashioned cloak and bonnet, and they were accosted by the clear, decided voice of Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway.

"Mrs. Reed, you Ann too! And here is my little travelling-companion! How do you do, all of you?"

"We are quite well, thank you," Mrs. Reed answered, as they shook hands, in turn, with the lady doctor. "Ann and I are showing Violet—no need to introduce you, I know—something of Barford, and I have a call to make in this district."

"I see. I am going to visit a patient in that house opposite, a sad case."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Reed said questioningly.

"Yes. My patient is a widow, the mother of four children, the eldest—a girl—no older than this child—" nodding at Violet; "the poor woman has had a severe attack of pneumonia, but, with God's help, I'm pulling her round. During her illness the eldest girl has been the main support of the family."

"How?" asked Ann, her eyes kindling with eager interest.

"By charing, my dear. It's a fact. Fancy a charwoman of only fourteen years old! There's a heroine for you!" And with a nod and a smile the lady doctor crossed the road, opened the door of the house she had indicated, and disappeared within.

"This is a district where she has always a great many patients," Mrs. Reed explained to Violet, as they proceeded on their way, "they are mostly poor people who work in the factories."

"But can people like that pay her?" Violet asked, looking at Mrs. Reed in surprise, and then turning her brown eyes to Ann, who answered quickly:—

"Oh, very little!"

"They pay her what they can," said Mrs. Reed; "she knows what they can afford, and charges accordingly; but, frequently, I have no doubt she gets no remuneration for her services. She was born and brought up in Barford. Her father was a factory owner who made a large fortune, and she chose to become a doctor for various reasons. In those days people looked rather askance at lady doctors, so that when, having taken her diploma in Edinburgh, she returned to her native town and commenced to practise, the medical men hereabouts were not very well pleased; but they soon began to recognise her ability, and, as her patients for some years were mostly confined to those whom other doctors were in no wise eager to attend, and she never gave advice free to anyone who could make payment, they soon treated her with more cordiality. She leads a most unselfish life—a life devoted to her fellow creatures, and I do not believe there is a woman more hard worked in the town than 'Dr. Elizabeth,' as she is generally called, and certainly there is not one more respected or beloved by all classes."

"But if her father made a large fortune, if she was not poor, why did she become a doctor to work so hard?" inquired Violet, really puzzled.

"Oh, Violet, don't you understand?" exclaimed Ann. "Why, it was because she saw that by becoming a doctor she could do such a lot of good in the world. Doctors often go to see people that clergymen and ministers know nothing about. It seemed to her that God had been so bountiful to her in giving her so many talents, money, and health, and brains—she told me this herself—that she was sure He meant her to use them in the service of those not so well off as herself."

"In short, she works for Christ's sake," Mrs. Reed said softly, "for the least of His brethren. Now, Violet, you understand?"

"Y-e-s," Violet answered, rather doubtfully.

"I suppose we are going to see Malvina Medland, mother?" questioned Ann.

"Yes, my dear," was the response.

"Who is that?" Violet asked. "Malvina! What an uncommon name!"

"Isn't it?" said Ann, smiling. "Malvina is a poor, deformed girl, she has something amiss with her spine and she suffers terribly in her back sometimes, but she is the most cheerful body in the world, I should think. She lives with her mother and sister—Lottie, the sister is called—who both work in a factory. Malvina stays at home all day long and earns a living by doing plain sewing, and 'minding babies' as she calls it."

"Minding babies!" exclaimed Violet, opening her eyes very wide in her astonishment.

"Yes. She takes in the babies of women who are obliged to leave their homes by day, and looks after them—'minds them' as she would say. Why, there she is!"

Looking ahead Violet saw a girl apparently of about sixteen years of age, with a baby in her arms, standing in a doorway. At the first glance she noted the fact that the poor girl was deformed. Her face, though quite colourless, was very beautiful, with large,

limpid, blue eyes, and regular features; it lit up with a bright, welcoming smile as she caught sight of the approaching trio.

"Well, Malvina, how are you to-day, my dear?" Mrs. Reed asked kindly.

"Better than usual, ma'am, thank you," was the response, spoken in a brisk tone. "I hope you and Miss Ann are well?"

"Yes, thank you." Then, as Malvina's eyes glanced with interest at Violet, Mrs. Reed continued: "This is a friend of ours, from London, who is going to make her home with us for the time. Are you wise, Malvina, to stand out here without a hat?"

"I rarely catch cold, ma'am," smiled Malvina; "and the baby is well wrapped up—this is the only one I have to mind to-day."

"Business is rather slack then?" Mrs. Reed inquired.

"Yes, ma'am. Lots of women are out of work, I'm sorry to say, and that's hard for them and me, too. Please to come inside."

Malvina led the way into a kitchen, which appeared very dark, at first, for the window was small and high in the wall, and consequently gave very little light; but, when Violet could see better, she noticed that the room was tidy and clean, the tins on the mantelpiece shone like silver, the deal table was as white as scrubbing could make it, and there was not a speck of dust visible anywhere. Suspended before the window was a fern in a pot, which, Violet subsequently learnt, Ann had brought home to Malvina from Devonshire the preceding summer, and was now the hunchback's most cherished possession.

"Please to sit down," said Malvina, and her visitors accordingly did so, whilst she stood by the fireplace—in which was no fire—rocking the baby in her arms.

"I am sorry to hear there are so many women out of work," Mrs. Reed remarked, regretfully; "but your mother and sister are not amongst the number?"

"No, ma'am, I'm thankful to say they are not, though their wages have been cut; but 'half a loaf is better than no bread,' and we must be

glad of that. Things will be better as the spring comes on; folks will find they want new clothing, and orders will come in faster then. My mother and sister work at a factory where they make clothing, miss," she explained to Violet, who was listening to her with interest, "coats, and skirts, and blouses, and everything that people buy ready-made."

"I see," said Violet. "Do your mother and sister get good wages generally?"

"No, miss. They earn just enough, as a rule, to keep a roof over our heads, and provide food—sometimes not much of that. 'Tis a shame they should not be better paid, 'tis most unfair, but there's no helping it."

"I want three dozen yards of crochet edging like the last you worked for me, Malvina," said Mrs. Reed; "here is the money for the cotton, and perhaps you will be able to walk as far as Laureston Square with the work when you have finished it? If it is fine the walk will do you good—that is, if you are pretty well; but, remember you are not to do the return journey without a rest, you must not hurry away as you did the last time."

"Try to come on a Saturday," said Ann, "then you will be more likely to find me at home. My friend and I are going to school next week, but Saturdays are always whole holidays, you know."

"You are so kind," murmured Malvina, a faint colour creeping into her pale cheeks, "no one else is so kind except Dr. Elizabeth. I am so very glad to get this order for crochet, because I have a good bit of time on my hands now there are so few babies to mind."

"Have you seen Dr. Elizabeth lately?" inquired Mrs. Reed.

"About a fortnight ago, ma'am. My back had been very bad, paining me worse than usual, and mother asked Dr. Elizabeth to give me something to ease the pain, and she did. She came to see me and talked to me, and I think what she said and the heartening way of her did me almost as much good as her medicine. She's that cheerful!"

"You have no fire," observed Mrs. Reed, glancing at the cold hearth.

"No, ma'am. I shan't light it till just before mother and Lottie come home; one doesn't miss a fire much when the sun shines. 'Twas quite pleasant on the doorstep."

After a little further conversation the visitors rose to depart. Malvina followed them to the street door, where they said good-bye to her, and Violet noticed that Ann lingered a moment to slip something into her hand, whispering, as she did so, a few words, one of which was "coal."

"Is Barford anything like what you had pictured it, my dear?" Mrs. Reed inquired of Violet by-and-by, as they turned their backs on the narrow streets of the town for a wider thoroughfare.

"No," Violet replied frankly, "I did not think there were so many poor people living here. That hunchback girl is very poor, isn't she?"

"She is, indeed; sometimes she and her mother and sister have lacked the necessaries of life, and theirs is only one case amongst many." Mrs. Reed looked with kindly scrutiny at Violet as she proceeded: "There is, unfortunately, so little one can do

to help people like that, but that little one ought to do by living carefully and giving away all one can. You know, my dear, as a rule, it is only those who save off themselves who have anything to give; if people live up to their incomes they cannot do much towards helping other people."

Violet looked meditative, and made no answer. At that minute they came to a florist's shop, in the window of which were exhibited several pots of beautiful hyacinths nearly in full bloom. Ann had declared her intention of purchasing one of these pots on her way home; but she would have passed by now, without even glancing at the flowers, had not her mother said:—

"How about the hyacinths, Ann? I thought you proposed to make yourself a present?"

"I am not going to do so, after all, mother," Ann replied calmly, though she coloured as she walked straight on.

And then Violet realised, with swift comprehension, that Ann had given to Malvina the money with which she had intended to purchase the flowers, and she

expected Mrs. Reed would buy the sweet-scented blooms for her daughter. Mrs. Reed, however, did nothing of the kind, but merely said:—

"Oh, very well, Ann."

**"I CANNOT HELP FEELING
NERVOUS ABOUT TO-MORROW."**

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

"I CANNOT help feeling rather nervous about to-morrow," said Violet, on the afternoon prior to the day on which Helmsford College was to reopen. She and Ann were sitting by the drawing-room fire, and the conversation had been growing very confidential.

"You need not," Ann returned encouragingly, "for I assure you you will not have to go through a very trying ordeal. Miss Orchardson will say a few words to you, then she will hand you over to a governess and you will be examined on various subjects, after which you will be classed. I am very hopeful that you will be in my class. It will be nice to be doing the same work, won't it?"

"Very. Have you an especial friend at school, Ann?"

"No. I am not quick at making friends. Father says I require a lot of knowing before anyone understands me."

"I think you do," Violet allowed; "I have known you a week, but I don't think I quite understand you, yet."

Ann laughed, and coloured as she replied:—

"I daresay not; and I don't think I quite understand you, Violet. You are rather reserved."

"Reserved!" echoed Violet, in astonishment. "Oh, I am not that! At home they always called me outspoken. In what way do you consider me reserved?"

"You don't tell me all I should like to know about your home. Perhaps that sounds inquisitive, you look as if you think so, but I should be so interested to hear more about your sisters and brothers. They must miss you dreadfully."

"They do," Violet admitted, a tender smile creeping over her pretty face, "especially Ruth." Her hand moved towards her pocket as she spoke, and she produced therefrom a letter which she opened. "I received this from Ruth this morning," she said, "I will

read it to you, if you like, but I expect it will surprise you. Would you like to hear it?"

"I should, indeed. But are you sure you wish to read it to me?"

"Oh, yes! I don't mind—I mean, you may as well hear what Ruth has to say, for you're sure to find out all about them at home sooner or later. You know my home is not like yours. Oh, it's not unhappy, no indeed! But there's no one to manage things; mother tries, but—oh, I can't explain! Listen to this, then perhaps you'll understand what I mean." And Violet proceeded to read aloud:—

"MY DEAREST VI,"

"Mother intended writing to you this evening, but she has one of her bad headaches and has gone to bed early to try to sleep it off; she sends her fond love to you and says I am to tell you with what pleasure we look forward to your letters. The Reeds must be very kind, good people, and I like what you have told us of Ann; she must indeed be very different from Agnes Hosking—by the way, Madge tells me that

Agnes Hosking has not returned to Miss Minter's this term."

"I don't think there is much news—much good news that is. We have had a most trying day. Barbara fell down the kitchen stairs this morning with a tray of breakfast things, and, though she wasn't much hurt, which is a great blessing, the china was all smashed. It wasn't her fault that she fell, she wasn't careless; Frank had left a ball on the stairs, and she unfortunately slipped her foot on it. Poor father did not come home from the office till four o'clock this morning, and the noise of Barbara's fall disturbed him—he got up after that and went out without having any breakfast, and mother cried and spoke crossly to Barbara, who said she'd leave, but she didn't mean it."

"It seems to me everything has gone wrong to-day, I think it's often the way when the morning begins badly. We had a nice leg of mutton for dinner, at least it ought to have been nice, but it was so dreadfully underdone, and father could not wait to have it put back in the oven, as he had an engagement to keep; so we had to eat it as it was or leave it, and we left it. Father didn't

say much about it; but I have quite made up my mind, Violet, that I will help Barbara with the cooking, I have told mother so and she agrees."

"In the middle of the afternoon the Vicar called, and Barbara showed him right into the sitting-room without any warning—she ought to have remembered that we were airing the clothes, which had just come back from the wash, but she forgot. The Vicar was very nice, as he always is, but I am sure he must have noticed that mother had been crying; however, she cheered up, and talked about you and explained how kindly and generously the Reeds are treating you. He wouldn't hear of my getting him any tea—I was relieved at that for I was afraid Barbara might not have thought of getting boiling water in readiness."

"One thing I think you will be very glad to hear, and that is that it is quite decided I am to have drawing and painting lessons. I am so pleased about it myself. I mean to work my hardest, and then perhaps some day I shall be able to earn money and help father; meanwhile, I'm going to try to get things in

less of a muddle at home. I am afraid that will be very difficult."

"We are all pretty well, and father's cough has not returned. Oh, Vi, I do miss you so much, especially when bed-time comes. The last few nights Madge has slept with me, and I expect she will continue to do so. Mind you tell me how you get on at Helmsford College; it will be very strange for you, at first, to be in such a large school. Write soon, dear Vi, to your ever loving sister,"

"Ruth."

"There!" cried Violet, as she returned the letter to her pocket and glanced quickly at Ann to see the impression it had made upon her.

"What do you think of it?" she asked.

"I think I wish I had a sister like Ruth to write to me," Ann answered, smiling; "I am sure you two must be very fond of each other."

"Oh, indeed we are! Ruth is such a dear girl."

"I am certain she is, and unselfish, isn't she? Yes, I thought so. What a good thing your servant wasn't injured when she fell downstairs, she might have been killed."

"And then it would have been Frank's fault. Boys are so careless and thoughtless, at least ours are. I suppose other people's boys would be made to pick up their toys, but Frank and Billy leave theirs about everywhere. Barbara must have been very cross to say she would leave; I am glad she is not going, for I do not know how they would manage at home without her now. She suits us, she does not mind muddling along—oh, Ann, what you must think of us! But, there, you don't know what it is to keep only one servant."

"No," admitted Ann, "but mother does. She was one of a long family, and her father—he was a curate—could only afford one servant, but she says their home was always very comfortable. Thank you so much for reading Ruth's letter to me. I suppose she is fond of drawing since she appears so pleased at the thought of taking drawing and painting lessons?"

"Yes, that is her forte; but she is not clever in anything else—except in housework. She helps Barbara in many ways."

Ann nodded comprehendingly. She was looking into the fire with thoughtful eyes, and Violet wondered what was passing through her mind.

"Do you know, Ann, that your father is going to allow me the same amount of pocket money as you get?" Violet asked by-and-by. Then, as her companion quietly assented, she added: "He says I may spend it just as I please."

"Of course, Violet. I do, and neither mother nor father ever question me how I spend it."

"Do you think Dr. Reed would mind if I sometimes send part of it to Ruth?"

"Certainly not. The money will be your own to do as you like with it," Ann responded quickly, her grey eyes deepening and darkening as they always did when anything pleased her. Her sympathy, ever on the alert, had gone out to Ruth as Violet had read her letter. "I spend my pocket money to please

myself," she proceeded; "sometimes in one way, sometimes in another."

"You gave Malvina Medland money to buy coal, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I didn't know you noticed it, you are very sharp, Violet. Poor Malvina! It is dreadful to have no fuel in cold weather, and I suspect there was not much in the Medland's house to-day."

"Malvina did not appear to mind."

"She never complains. It is not her way to do that, but I do not suppose she feels less on that account. Did you notice how clean her home was? She takes a pleasure in keeping it so. Oh, here's mother!"

Mrs. Reed, who had been paying a round of calls, now entered the room, and, a few minutes later, afternoon-tea was brought in, and the girls' confidential chat was at an end.

On the following day Violet was duly installed as a pupil at Helmsford College, and, much to her gratification, found herself placed in the same class as Ann; but, what

was her astonishment when, on scrutinising the countenances of her other class-mates, she saw the familiar face of Agnes Hosking. For a moment she could scarcely believe the evidence of her own eyes, but they had not deceived her.

Agnes was no less surprised than Violet at this unexpected meeting, and she seized the first opportunity which presented itself of speaking to her, explaining that she herself was a boarder at Helmsford College, and demanding to know how Violet came to be there.

Violet answered her somewhat reservedly, merely saying that she was living with friends in Barford, for she was most undesirous that Agnes Hosking should be made acquainted with the circumstances under which she was an inmate of Dr. Reed's house. Agnes immediately saw that there was something Violet was wishful to hide; however, she kept that discovery to herself, and said she was glad to meet an old friend. After that Violet felt obliged to introduce her to Ann; but she took care to explain to Ann, subsequently, that she held no very high opinion of Agnes Hosking.

"I wish she was not here," she said, with a sigh, a worried expression settling on her face; "she will be sure to tell the other girls all about me—how poor we are at home, and—and other things."

"What will that matter?" asked Ann, looking surprised. "She cannot say anything against you. A great many people are poor without being able to help it."

"But she thinks so much of money, and once she called father 'a newspaper hack,' I was so indignant, and so was Ruth when I told her."

"I should think so!" Ann exclaimed, with a flash of her grey eyes. "I know how I should feel if anyone spoke in a disparaging tone of my father."

"I daresay Agnes will speak of father as 'a newspaper hack' to the girls," Violet said, "it would be like her to do it."

"Never mind. If she does I shall make it my business to tell them what a clever man he is;" Ann declared, "and they will believe me. Don't let the thought of anything she may say trouble you, Violet, for a girl like that

will have very little influence over anyone you would care to make your friend; besides, she seems inclined to be friendly with you herself, so why should she wish to disparage you or your family?"

"The worst of it is one cannot trust her. She is very spiteful, and if I annoyed her in any way she would do her best to pay me out for it."

"Well, then, beware of her," advised Ann, "but don't be afraid of her all the same."

Violet laughed, and said she would not; nevertheless she was anything but easy in her mind about Agnes Hosking, and determined to keep on good terms with her, if possible. She thought a great deal of the opinion people held of her, and she had hoped to figure at Helmsford College as the companion and friend of the prosperous doctor's daughter, not as the child of a struggling journalist, and she feared she would be disappointed. The presence of Agnes Hosking had overshadowed what would otherwise have been a very happy and promising day.

CHAPTER IX

ONLY A SERVANT

FOR the first week or so after her arrival at Barford Violet was most careful in keeping her bedroom in good order, for she was delighted with the pretty little room, which was a picture of daintiness and freshness; but it was not long before she began to grow careless about it, and there came a day when, on her return from school in the afternoon, Mrs. Reed followed her upstairs and told her in a tone, which, though kind, betrayed displeasure, that she really must learn to be more tidy and not leave her bedroom in such a litter again.

"I—I am very sorry," stammered Violet, crimsoning with mortification, as she cast one hurried look around and saw that Mrs. Reed had not spoken without reason, "I—I was in a hurry, and I had no time to put things straight before I left for school."

"I don't think that is an adequate excuse, my dear," Mrs. Reed said gravely, "for it would have taken you no longer to have put that wet towel on the towel-horse than to have flung it on the bed. Then look at your boots and shoes strewn about the floor as though you had no cupboard to keep them in, and your desk left open, and your mother's letter—I see it is hers by the writing on the envelope—on the dressing-table. I have no reason to think that there is anyone in the house who is sufficiently prying and dishonourable to read another person's letters, but it is always unwise to leave correspondence about."

"Yes, I know it is," Violet admitted, taking her mother's letter from the dressing-table and slipping it into her pocket, whilst she remembered there was a great deal in it she would not care for a servant to see. She then proceeded to close and lock her desk; after which she collected her boots and shoes and put them in the cupboard; hung up in its proper place in the wardrobe a skirt which she had thrown over the back of a chair; took the damp towel off the bed; and otherwise tidied the room.

"That's better," Mrs. Reed said approvingly, "you must be more careful in future. I cannot endure disorder, and there is really no excuse for it in this case, for there is a place for everything."

"I won't leave my room so untidy again," promised Violet, "but I—I really was in a great hurry, and I didn't think what I was doing. I just did as I should have done at home and left my things all higgledy-piggledy."

Mrs. Reed could not refrain from smiling at this frank admission.

"It is a very great pity to get into the habit of doing that, Violet," she said; "and really it is quite as easy to be tidy as untidy. You shared a bedroom with your elder sister, at home, did you not?"

"Yes. I am afraid our room was always in more or less of a muddle. Sometimes Ruth used to have what I called 'a tidy fit,' but it never lasted very long; for I was always forgetting, and she would be disheartened."

"Poor Ruth!" said Mrs. Reed, sympathetically.

"I am afraid it was hard lines on her," Violet admitted. "I expect if you saw what our home at Streatham is like you would be quite shocked," she continued, shaking her head and sighing, "but you don't know how difficult it is to be orderly in a little house with a lot of people in it."

"Oh, yes, indeed I do," Mrs. Reed answered, smiling; "I was brought up in a little house myself, and there were so many of us young folks that my father used to say we reminded him of birds packed in a nest. Tidiness is a mere matter of habit, my dear; the home where it is practised is generally a comfortable one, be it a palace or a cottage. Here's Ann coming to hear what I am lecturing you about. Come down to tea now, both of you."

So saying Mrs. Reed left the room, whilst Ann stood on the threshold regarding Violet inquiringly.

"Oh, Ann, I am ashamed of myself!" cried Violet, and her face showed that she spoke

the truth. "I left my room in such a muddle," she went on to explain, "and your mother has been speaking to me about it—very kindly, but I know she is vexed with me, and no wonder. I ought not to be disorderly, for, as Mrs. Reed says, there's a place for everything; it's not as it was at home where Ruth and I had no wardrobe, only pegs behind the door to hang our things on."

"You'll be more careful another time," Ann said, consolingly; "mother wasn't angry, you know, Violet," she added, as she saw her companion's brown eyes were a trifle misty.

"Oh, I know she was not! Well, I must try not to give her cause to complain of me in that way again."

Violet did try, but often she relapsed into her disorderly habits, thereby bringing rebuke upon herself. She was always so genuinely sorry and repentant afterwards that Mrs. Reed refrained from speaking to her as sharply as she would otherwise have done, remembering, too, the manner in which the girl had been brought up in her own home.

Truth to tell Violet's new home was very unlike what she had expected. She had anticipated the house of a successful man, as she knew Dr. Reed to be, would be far different from what it actually was. She had imagined it managed regardless of expense, and she soon found, to her secret astonishment, that it was not, and that the strictest economy was practised by its mistress. There was enough of everything, but there was nothing superfluous. Mrs. Reed was one of the most careful of housewives, and, unlike poor Mrs. Wyndham, she knew to a farthing the amount of her expenditure.

Dr. Reed and his wife noted with satisfaction that Violet was becoming very friendly with Ann. Since Violet had read Ruth's letter to Ann she had been more open with her, and was no longer averse to talking of her home. The two girls now prepared their lessons together of an evening, the younger proving herself quite the equal of the elder in most subjects, for she was forward for her age, and, being very quick to learn, she bade fair to make good use of the advantages which had so unexpectedly fallen to her share, and

for which she felt really very deeply grateful.

The first week Violet received her pocket money she found there were so many little things she required for her own use that she put aside the idea of sending Ruth a part of it on that occasion, as she had fully intended doing, and spent it entirely on herself. Next week it was the same, and so the week after, until she began to tell herself that Ruth, not being at school, did not need money so much as she did.

"She would only spend it on pencils and paints," she reflected, "and she does not know what pocket money I get or anything about it."

Her conscience told her she was acting selfishly, but she did not listen to it, and she took care not to tell Ann that she had not fulfilled her intention of sending money to Ruth, so that Ann concluded she had done so.

In a very short while Violet had won the good opinions of those teachers with whom she came in contact at Helmsford College,

for she was always attentive and eager to learn. She grew popular, too, with her classmates, and, though they soon found that she was cleverer than most of them, that indisputable fact did not evoke jealousy as it might have done if she had not been unfailingly good-tempered and obliging. It was supposed by those who thought upon the matter at all that Dr. Reed was Violet's guardian, as, of course he was, only no one guessed that he was paying for her education out of his own pocket and giving her a home besides.

Finding Violet made herself popular at school, Agnes Hosking thought it worth her while to cultivate her acquaintance, and made much of the fact that they had been school-fellows previously; and she refrained from telling anyone of the shabby little home at Streatham where Violet had lived all her life till now, or that Mr. Wyndham was a not very successful journalist.

"It must be very pleasant for you living with the Reeds," she remarked to Violet on one occasion; "much pleasanter than being a boarder here. I suppose the Reeds are very old friends of yours?"

"Dr. Reed is a very old friend of my father's," Violet replied; "he came to see us at Streatham last November, but I never saw Mrs. Reed or Ann before I came to Barford."

"And you like them?" questioned Agnes curiously.

"Oh, yes! Ann and I have become great friends already, and Mrs. Reed is exceedingly kind to me. Of course I missed all my own people dreadfully at first, but now I'm very happy with the Reeds."

"It must be a great change for you," Agnes observed meaningly. Then, as her companion coloured with annoyance, she continued: "I hear Dr. Reed has the best paying practices in the place, he attends all the rich families, and yet they say he was a mere nobody to commence with—I mean, he has made his position himself."

"Yes," assented Violet, curtly.

"I heard one of the girls say that his relations—they live in Devonshire, I believe—are all working people, and that his mother was only a servant."

"Nonsense!" cried Violet, sceptical about the latter statement. "I know his father was a farmer in Devonshire, and his mother is still living—I have seen her likeness. She looks a dear old soul; she couldn't have been a servant."

"Well, of course you would know as the Reeds are such friends of yours," said Agnes, "but I was certainly told it as a fact."

"I don't think it can be true, but I'll ask Ann," Violet replied, eager to be in the position to contradict what she considered an idle report.

And ask Ann Violet did that same day, after they had prepared their lessons in the evening, in the upstairs room which had formerly been Ann's nursery. They were gathering together their books when Violet, with some hesitation, commenced:—

"Oh, Ann, I want to ask you something; but, before I tell you what it is, you must promise you will not be offended with me."

"I promise," Ann replied, smiling; "what is it?"

"Well, I was talking to Agnes Hosking to-day—she is a very inquisitive sort of girl, you know—and she said that someone had told her that—that your grandmother, your father's mother—"

"Yes?" Ann said interrogatively, as her companion appeared embarrassed and hesitated; "what had someone told her about Granny?"

"That she was a servant," Violet answered; "of course I didn't believe it, but I said I'd ask you," she added hastily.

"Agnes Hosking is quite right," Ann said, and her voice sounded cold and proud to Violet's ears, whilst her grey eyes glowed brightly, "Granny was a servant in her young days. What of that?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Violet replied, much taken aback; "only I did not know, and—and—"

"I never thought of mentioning the fact to you—"

"No, no," Violet interposed, "of course not. I would not have spoken of it if I had thought it was true, but I never, for a moment, believed that it was."

"Do you think I mind your mentioning it?" Ann asked, with a touch of irritation in her tone, and an unwonted expression of displeasure on her face. "You surely cannot imagine that I am ashamed for it to be known that my grandmother was 'only a servant' as people say? Why, I am as fond and proud of Granny as though she was a duchess, aye, prouder, and no duchess could be a better or a sweeter woman—I have often heard mother say that."

She paused for a minute, and her voice softened as she proceeded:—

"My father says he is proud of his ancestry; his people were working folks, it is true, folks of the class Jesus chose His disciples from, but they were honest and always did their duty in life; and father says to serve others is the highest privilege, we all ought to be servants in one way or another in this world; don't you remember that our Lord told His disciples that the greatest amongst

them must be servant of all? You can tell Agnes Hosking her statement that my grandmother was a servant is quite correct. Never think I wish to keep that a secret."

"I hope you are not angry with me," Violet said, looking, as she felt, deeply distressed, "you promised you would not be offended. Oh, Ann! I have not said anything to distress you, have? You must not be annoyed because I am surprised—"

"Oh, I am not!" Ann broke in. "Of course it is natural that you should be surprised, I realise that. But I thought you spoke as though I might be ashamed of Granny's having been a servant."

This had actually been the case, and Violet looked abashed. She knew if her grandmother had been a servant she would not have people aware of it for the world; nevertheless she could not but admire Ann for being above what she recognised to be a despicable feeling.

"I am so very sorry if I have hurt you in any way," she murmured; "but—but I didn't

understand. I have no grandmother myself, and I didn't know you loved yours so much."

The next day Violet informed Agnes Hosking that she had been right, and that Dr. Reed's mother had been a servant.

"How sly of Ann Reed not to have told you before!" exclaimed Agnes, secretly delighted that she had been the one to enlighten Violet. There was a malicious gleam in her eyes as she spoke.

"Not at all," Violet returned; "she did not think of telling me, and you are mistaken if you imagine she wishes to keep it a secret. She loves her grandmother dearly." And with that she brought the conversation to an abrupt close.

CHAPTER X

CONCERNING LOTTIE MEDLAND

"SPRING is really coming now," announced Ann Reed, as she stood at the dining-room window one Saturday afternoon towards the end of February; "I believe I see some crocuses in the garden. By the way, Violet, you have not been there yet."

"No," replied Violet, folding up the letter she had been engaged, for the last half hour, in writing to her people at home; "but there's not much to be seen in a garden in the winter, is there? I've finished my letter, so I'm ready to do anything you like, now. Are you thinking of going out?"

"I thought it would be nice to have a stroll round the garden."

Violet agreed, and, five minutes later, the two girls left the house together. Having posted Violet's letter at the pillar-box, at one corner of the square, they entered the garden, which they had entirely to

themselves, and spent a half hour in pacing the winding paths which led through little shrubberies, and by rockeries and flower-beds, promising, in the course of a few weeks, to be gay with spring flowers where as yet only a few hardy snowdrops and yellow crocuses had ventured to bloom.

"This is an almond tree," said Ann, pausing to indicate a leafless tree under which there was a seat, "the scent of the flowers is delicious; it will be in blossom in another month if we do not get very cold weather again. I often sit here in the summer, I choose this seat if I can get it because I can see our door and watch who comes and goes. There's someone there now. Why, I do believe it's Malvina Medland! Oh, Violet, let us go back, for mother's not at home and, Malvina's so shy that for certain she'll refuse to go in if she doesn't see one of us, and she ought to have a really good rest. I expect she's brought the crochet edging."

The two girls hastened back to the house, which they reached at the moment Malvina was turning from it. The expressive face of the poor girl changed from disappointment to keenest pleasure as she caught sight of

them, and a glad light shone in her blue eyes.

"Oh, Malvina, how naughty of you to think of going away without a rest!" cried Ann, reproachfully. "You must come in and have a cup of tea. Mother's not at home, but I expect she will be back presently; you must wait and see her—without, of course, you are really in a hurry?"

"I am not in a hurry, miss," Malvina answered; "but the servant said Mrs. Reed was out, and so I left the work with her. It is such a beautiful afternoon that I thought I would bring the crochet myself, though Lottie said she'd find time in the evening to run round with it if I liked."

Ann led the way into the house, and into the dining-room where she placed her visitor in an easy chair near the fireplace and removed her cloak; then she flitted away to order tea, leaving Malvina to be entertained by Violet. For a few minutes Violet was at a loss how to commence a conversation, but, at last, she remarked:—

"I suppose you do not take many walks in the winter?"

"No, miss, because you see I can't walk fast enough, if the weather's very cold, to keep myself warm; and I never leave home if mother and Lottie are away at work. The factories shut early on Saturdays."

"Why did not Lottie come with you?" inquired Ann, as she re-entered the room, followed by the tweeny-maid with the tea-tray.

Malvina appeared slightly embarrassed at this question, and she answered with some hesitation:—

"I—I hardly know, Miss Ann. I did ask her to come, but—but she has her own friends and she likes to spend her spare time with them, and—and she walks much quicker than I do."

"I daresay she does," Ann responded. "Polly, I wish you would get cook to cut us a few tongue-sandwiches," she said, turning to the servant, "I am sure Malvina could eat some

after her walk, and I think I could, couldn't you, Violet?"

"Yes," nodded Violet, seeing that she was expected to assent. It had not occurred to her before that she and Ann would have tea with Malvina, and she could not help wondering what their school-fellows would think of such an arrangement; several of them had already confided to her that they considered Ann Reed very odd because she habitually went her own way, and acted as she liked without troubling her head about the opinions of others.

Seated by the fire, Malvina, who had looked cold and weary, soon grew warm and comfortable. The tea refreshed her, and she did full justice to the tongue-sandwiches—the truth being that she had had but a scanty dinner; whilst a little flush, born of excitement at the novelty of the situation, crept into her pale cheeks. The conversation was mostly between her and Ann. Violet was surprised to see how the latter, by her ready tact and sympathy, won the other's confidence, so that it was not long before Malvina was pouring out a tale of woe.

"It's Lottie mother and I are worrying about, Miss Ann," she said, her voice tremulous, her eyes misty with tears; "and—and it's owing to her I came this afternoon. I ought not to have pretended it was the beautiful weather which had enticed me out, for it wasn't that altogether. I came because we couldn't trust Lottie—it's dreadful to say it of my own sister!—and—and we want the money so badly."

"Then I am glad we stopped you from going without it," Ann replied; "you must wait till mother comes and she will pay you."

"Thank you, miss. We ought not to be so short up to-day, but—" and there was mingled shame and indignation in the girl's voice— "Lottie's not brought home her money this week, not a penny of it, and we have the rent to pay, and—oh, it's cruel of Lottie, that it is, when mother works so hard, and, for that matter, so she does herself!"

"And you work hard, too, Malvina," Ann said gently. "What has Lottie done with her money? Spent it on a new hat or something of that kind, I suppose?"

"No, Miss Ann, I only wish she had," was the mournful response, "it would have been thoughtless and selfish of her, but mother and I wouldn't have minded that so much. She has spent it in betting."

"In betting!" echoed Ann, looking astounded. "But, Malvina, I never knew—why, surely girls don't bet?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh, yes, indeed they do," Malvina declared, with a sob; "you wouldn't know it, but they do. A lot of betting goes on amongst the factory women and girls, and the bookmakers have their agents everywhere—even in the workshops, and lately poor Lottie's been led away by them. She thinks she's going to make her fortune, I believe."

"Oh, Malvina, how dreadful!" cried Ann in a shocked voice, exchanging a look of concern with Violet who was no less astonished and dismayed than herself. "I've heard father say that this is a terrible place for betting," she continued, "but I never imagined that girls would go in for it. Lottie must be out of her mind."

"If Lottie is out of her mind there are many others like her," Malvina asserted, shaking her head sadly. "You can understand what a great trouble this is to mother and me, Miss Ann, can't you?"

"Oh, indeed, yes! I am so sorry for you!"

"You see, Lottie won't listen to reason. Mother's told her that she'll end by bringing us to ruin, but she doesn't believe it. The first bet she made she won, and that made her go on; but she loses much more than she wins now, and the last three weeks she hasn't put a penny towards the housekeeping, and she's grown so ill-tempered, so unlike herself, and the most extraordinary thing is that, though she's bound to see the misery betting brings to others, it doesn't teach her a lesson. There's a family living in the same house as we do, they have the third storey, and sometimes the children haven't food to eat though their father's in regular employment; it's because his earnings mostly go in betting. I could tell you of a great many cases as bad, but I don't think I ought to. I see I've shocked you, Miss Ann, and you, too, miss," she concluded, glancing at

Violet, who had been listening to all she had said with the keenest interest.

As a matter-of-fact Violet was even more shocked than Ann, for she knew nothing about the vices of big towns and cities; she had been shielded in her home from the knowledge of a great deal which had never been hidden from Ann, who was fully aware that intemperance and gambling were at the root of much of the poverty and misery which overshadowed the wage-earning classes in Barford. But Ann had not realised before to-day that even young girls were in the habit of betting, and, though she did her best to console Malvina by saying she trusted Lottie would soon see the error she was committing, her heart was filled with dismay, for she had frequently heard her father say that the mania for betting grew, and she foresaw continued trouble for Malvina and her widowed mother.

By-and-by Mrs. Reed appeared upon the scene, much to the relief of mind of her daughter, and, having examined Malvina's work and expressed her satisfaction with it, she promptly paid the money due for it and gave an order for some more. Then, cheered

and refreshed by the good meal she had had, Malvina took her departure, saying she would now be able to reach home before dark.

As soon as Malvina had gone, Ann informed her mother of the tale she and Violet had heard about Lottie. Needless to say Mrs. Reed was much concerned, though she was far less surprised than the girls had been. She felt very grieved for poor Mrs. Medland and Malvina; but she shook her head when Ann asked her if she could not interfere in the matter; she could not see her way to do so.

That night, after dinner, when the doctor came into the drawing-room for the quiet hour he always so greatly enjoyed, Ann immediately spoke to him of Malvina's visit and the trouble in connection with Malvina's sister, and, though he did not know the deformed girl except by name as a protégé of his wife's, he showed no lack of interest in all his daughter told him.

"Isn't it sad, father?" she said earnestly, after she had given him all the details of the

situation, "sad for poor Mrs. Medland and Malvina, I mean?"

"Yes, and sadder still for the misguided girl—Lottie, do you call her? What sort of girl is she?" he asked, glancing at his wife.

"Very good-looking, and not at all loud in her manners like so many of the factory hands," Mrs. Reed replied; "but she is very unlike Malvina, who is about a year her senior, I believe. Lottie has not been earning her own living long. I had hoped the family would have been in more comfortable circumstances now, but of course if Lottie squanders her wages the others have no chance of getting on. She will drag them down."

"I call Lottie a wicked, selfish girl," said Ann, with unusual severity in her tone, "she's very fond of dress and pleasure—very different from Malvina."

"My dear Ann, isn't it natural that a healthy girl should be fonder of dress and pleasure than a poor hunchback?" questioned her father gravely. "Did it never occur to you that by reason of her affliction your

deformed friend is set apart from many temptations? Don't let your sympathy for one sister make you too hard on the other."

"But, Dr. Reed, it is very selfish of Lottie to spend her money in betting!" exclaimed Violet, her brown eyes sparkling with indignation. "And surely it must be wrong to bet?"

"Surely it is," agreed the doctor; "for, look at it in what light you may, it cannot be argued that any good can come of it, whilst we see its evil results on every side. I have little doubt that this Lottie is a foolish, ignorant girl—a selfish one, too, as you say—led away by the hope of making money without working for it. We must try not to be too hard upon her, however, but remember her temptations. Poor girl, she is greatly to be pitied. I wish something could be done to prevent the factory women betting, but it is a difficult problem to tackle. By the way, I think you remarked that these Medlands are patients of Dr. Elizabeth's? Would a word of warning from Dr. Elizabeth have any influence with this girl, Lottie, I wonder?"

"I don't know, perhaps so," Ann replied; "mother does not think she can interfere, and, when one comes to think about it, if she did Lottie would know that Malvina had been talking to us about her, and she might be resentful to her sister."

"I really know very little of Lottie," Mrs. Reed remarked, "I never knew any of the family till Dr. Elizabeth asked me if I could give Malvina an order for some crochet. No, I don't think I can interfere in this case."

"No," agreed her husband, "but Dr. Elizabeth might. She feels very strongly on this betting question, and I believe, if it was suggested to her, she would make it her business to see if anything can be done to keep this poor girl from ruin—it means ruin if she persists in the course she has begun."

"Oh, let me go and see Dr. Elizabeth on Monday!" Ann cried eagerly. "Will you go with me, Violet?"

"Yes," assented Violet; "she lives a good way from here, does she not?"

"A good way—about a mile. We shall not be able to go till late in the afternoon, after school hours; but we shall be more likely to find her at home then than earlier in the day. We will tell her about Lottie Medland, and she will know if anything can be done to help her."

After that the conversation passed into another channel. Seeing his daughter was very troubled about the Medland family, Dr. Reed sought to distract her thoughts by talking to Violet of her relatives, and soon Ann was laughing at an account of some of the mischievous pranks the twins were in the habit of playing on their much enduring sisters and Barbara.

"You know they don't mean to be naughty, but they're high-spirited like all boys," explained Violet, who, now she was separated from her little brothers, thought of them very tenderly indeed; "it really used to be very funny to hear them teasing Barbara, and she's very fond of them both, though she pretends she's not. Billy used to mimic her, and it was impossible not to laugh, and then she would run after him and chase him out

of the kitchen, and Ruth would have to go down and make peace."

"So Ruth is the peacemaker?" Dr. Reed questioned, with a smile.

"Yes," assented Violet. She always talked unreservedly to the doctor now, and he considered her a very bright, frank girl, as indeed she was with people she trusted, and she had learnt to trust Dr. and Mrs. Reed, and Ann. "I don't know what they would have done at home if you had said you wouldn't take me instead of Ruth," she proceeded candidly; "mother said in her last letter that Ruth is more than ever her right hand in the house."

"How does she get on with her drawing?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, capitally! She tells me she puts all her spare time to it; she means to be a great artist some day, I wonder if she will."

"Time will show," Mrs. Reed said, smiling, "I hope so. If she really has a talent for drawing and painting and works hard, no

doubt she will get on. She is evidently ambitious."

"She wants to be able to make money so as to be able to help father," Violet explained.

"That is a worthy ambition," Dr. Reed declared heartily, "and an unselfish one, too. She is fond of her father—like another person I could mention," he added, with a quick glance at Ann.

Violet saw the look, and a sharp pang shot through her heart, whilst the home-sickness against which she had secretly fought—she had been successful in hiding it from the Reeds—and conquered altogether, as she had considered, returned as strong as it had ever been. At that minute she would have given anything for a glimpse of the shabby little Streatham home, and the faces of those who had never appeared so dear to her, when she had seen them every day, as they did now. For a few minutes Violet's brown eyes were dim with unshed tears.

CHAPTER XI

A CALL ON DR. ELIZABETH

Dr. ELIZABETH RIDGEWAY'S home was in the old part of Barford, a house in a street which was an important thoroughfare and where a great deal of business was done, for it was situated in the very heart of the town. She had occupied the same abode for more than thirty years, and she was attached to it. She loved the various sounds, to which many would have objected, caused by the constant traffic and the noise from the factories which were like so many human hives, the doors of which opened at certain hours to pour forth their hundreds of working bees.

She lived a simple, hard-working life herself; and, when, one evening about six o'clock, she was informed that Mrs. Reed and two young ladies wished to see her, she had just finished her tea, after a busy day, and was hoping to have an hour's rest before

going out again to visit a patient who was in a critical condition.

"Show them in here," she said; and a minute later she was shaking hands with her visitors. Then she ascertained they had had tea, and, when they were seated, she told them that she was very glad to see them, adding that she was a little tired, and nothing did her so much good as a chat with friends.

"Violet and Ann are very desirous to solicit your help for someone in whom they are greatly interested," Mrs. Reed explained almost immediately, "and as, of course, I do not care for them to be out alone after dark, I came with them. We thought we should be more likely to find you at leisure at this hour than earlier in the day."

"Quite right. I have had a very full day, for, as you are doubtless aware, there is much sickness about; but I have an hour to spare now, and I am at your service. If I can do anything for anyone in want of my assistance I will most gladly. How well my little travelling-companion looks!" Dr. Elizabeth concluded her sentence with a smiling glance at Violet, who, with her usual

quick observation, had already made mental notes of everything in the simply furnished room.

"I think she does," agreed Mrs. Reed; "my husband was saying only yesterday that Yorkshire air evidently suits her."

"The change is doing her good;" said Dr. Elizabeth, decidedly. "Ann is looking well, too. I do not think they overwork you at Helmsford College," she remarked, looking from one to the other of the girls.

"We are not worked too hard, but quite hard enough," Ann replied; at which the others laughed. "That is what I think," she proceeded, "but then I'm not a book-worm and not so fond of learning as Violet—she loves books, and she remembers everything she reads, and everything she is told, too."

"Ah, a certain little bird informed me that Violet bids fair to be a clever woman some day, and that she is considered a most promising pupil at school," observed Dr. Elizabeth.

"I cannot guess who told you that," Violet said, her pretty face colouring, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, "but I am trying to get on. I should so much like to be a clever woman," she admitted.

"Should you? Why?" asked Dr. Elizabeth.

"Why?" repeated Violet, somewhat astonished at the question. "Oh because I want to get on in the world," she answered; "I am going in for all sorts of examinations later on, and I mean to work hard and pass them and become a highly educated woman like Miss Orchardson."

Dr. Elizabeth exchanged a quick glance with Mrs. Reed, then she looked earnestly at the eager countenance of the sanguine speaker, and said:—"Well, perhaps if you work hard you will one day gain your ambition—perhaps, for it will be as God wills, and often He withholds from us what we most desire."

"Yes," agreed Violet, thinking of the many years during which her father had laboured—in vain, it seemed to her—in the hope of bettering his position, whilst men

less gifted had passed him by in the race for success, "I have often wondered at that! But I shall try my hardest to get on."

"Quite right," nodded Dr. Elizabeth, "do your best and leave the result to God. I wonder if you know this verse:—"

"Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,

Do noble things, not dream them, all day long;

And so make Life, Death, and that vast "Forever"

One grand sweet song."

"But it's possible to be good and clever as well, Dr. Elizabeth," said Ann. "It seems to me I know many clever people who are good, don't you, mother?"

"Certainly, I do," Mrs. Reed answered, "but everyone cannot be clever, and everyone, who wills, may be good."

"That's what I mean," said Dr. Elizabeth, her eyes still on Violet who was looking thoughtful. "And now tell me whom do you want me to help and what can I do?" she proceeded to inquire, turning her attention to Ann.

"We want you to help Lottie Medland by speaking to her about the way she is going on," commenced Ann eagerly; "you know Lottie, the sister of poor Malvina Medland?" As Dr. Elizabeth assented, she continued, speaking fast— "Lottie has taken to betting—oh, isn't it dreadful? It is so sad for Malvina and her mother, for you know they are really most respectable people. Malvina came to our house on Saturday with some work she had done for mother, and she seemed unhappy—as a rule she is cheerful and bright—and by-and-by she told Violet and me what was troubling her. Lottie spends nearly all her money in betting now. Of course poor Mrs. Medland and Malvina are terribly worried, for it makes things very short at home, and, apart from that, they are frightened to think what will become of Lottie. Oh, Dr. Elizabeth, don't you think you might speak to her and point out to her how wrong it is to bet? Father thought you

might be able to find an opportunity to do so."

Dr. Elizabeth's face had been very grave as she had listened, and, for a few minutes after Ann had ceased speaking, she sat in silence, her brows puckered in a frown.

"I will certainly make an opportunity of speaking to Lottie," she said, at length, "but whether I shall be able to do any good or not remains to be seen. Poor, misguided girl! I am deeply grieved to hear this of her. Every day of my life I am brought in contact with untold misery caused by betting and gambling."

"My husband's experience is the same," said Mrs. Reed sadly, "it is very dreadful, and one can do so little to fight against the evil—"

"Except speak a fearless word against it on every possible occasion," interposed Dr. Elizabeth; "I never scruple to do that, and very sour looks I get turned upon me sometimes, I do assure you. But I have never held my tongue yet when I have considered

it my duty to speak out, though I believe I'm often dubbed a busy-body for my pains."

"It's a good thing for the world in general that there are some busy-bodies in it," remarked Mrs. Reed. "But, to return to Lottie Medland. I am sure she will be more likely to listen to you than to anyone else; you are such a friend to the factory women and girls."

"I try to be," Dr. Elizabeth rejoined, simply; "but there's little enough I can do for them, poor things. Yes, I'll certainly speak to Lottie."

"Thank you," said Ann, "I felt sure you would; and, oh, I do hope she will give up betting for her mother's sake and Malvina's, if not for her own!"

"Dr. Elizabeth," said Violet, a recollection suddenly crossing her mind, "how is the mother of that little girl who goes out charing?"

"She is quite convalescent now, and the brave little charwoman is consequently in high spirits and feels, I verily believe, that

she has not a trouble in the world; I came across her a few mornings ago whitening the doorstep of a house where she is often employed, and she was singing light-heartedly."

"What sort of people employ such a child?" asked Mrs. Reed.

"Oh, all sorts of people. She has one engagement to scrub out a greengrocer's shop daily before breakfast, but that is her only standing engagement, I believe."

At that moment the conversation was interrupted by a servant, who brought the information that there had been an accident in the next street and medical assistance was required, therefore a messenger had been sent to summon Dr. Elizabeth. On hearing this the visitors immediately took their departure.

A few weeks later Malvina again visited Laureston Square. Mrs. Reed was not at home, and the two girls were at school; so she left her work, and the next day, after school, Ann, accompanied by Violet, took the money she had earned to her.

Malvina was alone when her visitors arrived, for her mother had gone to do her weekly marketing, and Lottie was out with a friend. This Malvina explained; then, when she had received her money and been assured, in answer to her anxious inquiry, that Mrs. Reed was pleased with her work, she said confidentially, the sensitive colour spreading over her face:—

"I feel I must tell you about Lottie, for I spoke to you, the other day, of the way she'd been going on. I know you'll be glad to hear that she's handed over every penny she's earned this last fortnight to mother. I do believe she's turned over a new leaf and given up betting."

"Oh, this is good news!" cried Ann, delightedly, exchanging a meaning glance with Violet. "What has made her give it up, do you imagine?" she inquired.

"I can't tell miss; I only know that God has heard our prayers for her—mother's and mine—and answered them. I hope she won't give way to temptation again."

"Oh, I trust she will not," said Ann earnestly; and after that the subject dropped.

But, on the way home, Violet, who had been unusually silent and thoughtful, reverted to it by remarking abruptly:—

"I cannot see that Malvina's prayers can have had anything to do with Lottie's giving up betting. It seemed so odd to hear Malvina say what she did and to know that it was really Dr. Elizabeth's doing. There's no doubt in my mind that Dr. Elizabeth has seen Lottie, and given her a good talking to. Don't you think so, Ann?"

"Oh, yes! But Malvina was right in what she said."

"I can't see how you make out that. We asked Dr. Elizabeth to interfere—or rather, you did, Ann. God had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, Violet, don't you think He may have used us to do His work? I like to think He did, that—in a little way—we were able to serve Him."

"What a funny girl you are, Ann!" exclaimed Violet.

"Why?" Ann asked, in astonishment.

"You are always seeing God's hand in everything."

"I try to; one is so much happier if one does. It's such a comfort to know there's Someone who manages things right if you trust Him. Father says that was the most valuable lesson Granny taught him when he was a little boy, to do his best and leave the result to God—by the way, Dr. Elizabeth gave us that advice the other day. I wish you knew my grandmother, Violet."

"Does she never come to stay with you?" questioned Violet, who had often wondered if she did, but had never liked to inquire.

"She has not visited us for a long while now; you know she is an old woman, and the journey has become too much for her to undertake. We shall go to see her in the summer holidays, in August, if all's well. I wish you could be there too, Violet; but, of course, you would rather be with your

people at home. Oh, look! There's Lottie Medland! She is the middle one of those three girls opposite."

Violet glanced across the street, and perceived three girls strolling along arm in arm, talking and laughing loudly. They were all showily dressed, she noticed, in tawdry finery; but the one in the centre, who looked only a little older than herself, had a more refined countenance than the others. Though not the possessor of a beautiful face like her sister, Lottie Medland was a decidedly nice-looking girl, and, at the present moment, she appeared full of animation. Suddenly she caught sight of Ann and Violet, and, evidently recognising the former, she drew back from her companions on the pretence of being attracted by something in a shop window.

"I wonder why she did that," said Ann, as she and Violet passed on; "I nodded to her, but perhaps she did not see me." She spoke half inquiringly.

"Oh, yes, I am sure she did," Violet returned decidedly, "but she did not want you to

notice her. I believe she was ashamed for some reason or other."

"Do you think Malvina can have told her that she spoke to us about her betting?" suggested Ann, dubiously.

"Oh, no! I expect she was ashamed to be seen in company with those two fast-looking girls."

"Perhaps that was it."

"Most likely, I think. At any rate, I would not distress myself about it," Violet advised, smiling, for she was more than a little amused because the other took the matter so seriously and appeared so concerned; "one would really think, Ann, judging from the expression of your face, that you had been 'cut' by a friend."

CHAPTER XII

A SOLICITED INVITATION

AS the school term progressed and Agnes Hosking continued to evince a friendly spirit towards Violet, the uneasiness which the latter had experienced when she had discovered her old school-fellow at Helmsford College lessened considerably, if it did not altogether leave her; and she was beginning to tell herself that, perhaps, after all, she had misjudged Agnes, when she was enlightened as to the reason of the other girl's overtures of friendship.

It came about in this way. One fine March afternoon Violet was standing, with several of her school-fellows, watching a game of hockey, which was being played on the College ground, when Agnes came up and entered into conversation with her. At first Violet, who was intent on the game, in which she was greatly interested because Ann Reed was one of the players, paid but little attention to what Agnes was saying; but, by-and-by, she became aware that her

companion was bemoaning the fact that she had no friends in Barford to ask her out to tea on the weekly holiday, and that she was hinting that an invitation to spend a Saturday afternoon at the Reeds' house would be very welcome.

"I've spent all my Saturdays here so far—not one of the day-scholars has asked me to her home," she complained, "it's hard lines on me, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Violet, but without much sympathy in her tone; "you're in the same box as a great many others, though, and with such a lot of girls you cannot very well be dull."

"I find it very monotonous, and so would you if you were in my place."

"I daresay." There was indifference in Violet's voice and manner.

"You have the best of it, Violet. Anyone can see you have a very good time with the Reeds."

"They are such very kind people," Violet replied, heartily.

"I suppose they let you do as you like in every way?" suggested Agnes.

"There you are quite wrong. I am treated just as Ann is, but she can't do exactly as she likes always."

"At any rate she can ask her friends to tea with her on Saturdays, if she likes, can't she?"

"Oh, yes! The Garrets came last week."

The Garrets were two girls whose parents were in India. They were boarders at Helmsford College and spent their holidays with their grandmother, their father's mother, who lived in a fine, old country house about three miles from Barford. They were pleasant, unaffected girls, the younger about the age of Ann herself, the elder a year her senior.

"I wish you'd get Ann Reed to ask me to tea on Saturday, Violet," said Agnes, in a coaxing tone, perceiving that she would not

acquire her end by hinting, and, accordingly, speaking out, "I should like to see what her home is like."

"It's not nearly such a grand home as yours," Violet answered evasively, finding herself in an awkward position, "you wouldn't think much of it."

"Nonsense! You say that to put me off!" Agnes exclaimed, an angry flush rising to her face. "I know the Reeds are well-to-do people," she continued; "I see what it is, you want to keep your friends to yourself, and I call it very mean of you. You know very well that if you suggested to Ann that she should ask me to tea one Saturday she would do it; she's very good-natured, and you and I are such old friends—"

"That's not true!" Violet broke in impetuously, growing very red and speaking with a want of caution she afterwards regretted. "You know you were never friendly with me when we were at Miss Minter's, nor with Ruth. You used to snub us, and I haven't forgotten it. Why should I pretend to Ann that I wish to ask you to tea when I don't? You wouldn't want to be Ann

Reed's visitor if she lived in a poky house—
"

"Like your home at Streatham," interrupted Agnes, a gleam of malice in her eyes. She laughed in a sneering fashion. "No, I wouldn't," she declared, emphatically, adding: "I think you'd better get her to ask me, though, all the same."

There was a decided threat in the girl's tone, and Violet cast a suspicious, inquiring glance at her.

"I want to be friendly with Ann Reed," Agnes continued, "I was sent to Helmsford College that I should make friends with girls whose parents hold good positions, and, though Ann's grandmother was only a common servant, I've heard from several of the day-scholars that Dr. Reed and his wife visit in the best society in Barford, and that the doctor's practice brings him in a big income. Don't be nasty, Violet; for if you are I shall make things very disagreeable for you, and you won't like that."

"I don't understand what you mean," Violet said uneasily. She was trembling with

indignation and apprehension of she knew not what.

"Don't you? Nonsense! You know well enough. Do you imagine that I haven't found out you're here under false pretences?"

"False pretences!" echoed Violet, her voice shrill with wrath. "How dare you say that to me? It's not true! You know it's not!"

"Hush, hush!" cried Agnes, glancing quickly around. Violet's late companions had moved away, however, and, as no one was very near, Agnes continued: "It is true, so what is the good of your denying it. You pretend that you are on an equality with the Reeds when it's no such thing. They have taken you out of charity, and are providing for you in every way. Oh, it's useless your being angry and looking at me in that haughty way, for I've found out all about it from friends at Streatham."

Violet had grown exceedingly white, and she could scarcely speak for passion. At that moment she felt that she positively hated Agnes Hosking; but, with a great effort, she succeeded in curbing her rage, and answered

with a calmness which surprised her companion:—

"I have made no pretence about anything, and you have no right whatever to speak to me in such an insulting fashion. If I am living on the Reeds' charity, what is that to you?"

"But are you?" asked Agnes, who was by no means sure of what she had stated.

"You say so," Violet responded haughtily, "but, if you are in the least doubtful on the point, why not ask Ann? She will no doubt tell you the truth. By all means ask Ann."

But Agnes had no intention of doing that. She began to see that she had gone too far and had made a mistake in taunting Violet, so she commenced to temporise.

"We won't quarrel, for that's foolish," she said; "but, really, it was your fault that I spoke out as I did. Haven't I tried to be friendly with you? Wasn't I pleased to meet you here? And yet, when I suggested that you might get Ann Reed to ask me to her house to tea you began to put me off

immediately. That aggravated me, naturally, and I am quick-tempered. Come, Violet, get Ann to invite me for next Saturday afternoon and I will promise not to let you down before the other girls."

"How could you 'let me down' as you express it?" Violet inquired, vainly trying to hide the anxiety she was experiencing.

"I could tell them that your father is so poor he couldn't possibly afford to pay for you to board with the Reeds or for your school fees, and you wouldn't like everybody to know that, I suppose? I can assure you that your position here would be very different to what it is if it were known you were being educated by charity. I will keep all this to myself, though, if you will only do what I ask you."

Violet was silent. She had entirely lost all interest in the game of hockey now, and, though she still gazed at the players, it was with unseeing eyes which noted none of their movements. Her thoughts had flown to her own home, to her hard-working father who certainly did his best for his family, to her mother, and sisters, and the boys. Why

should she mind if her companion spoke of the poverty of her home to her school-fellows? she asked herself. The Reeds saw nothing to be ashamed of in connection with it, and, though the majority of the girls at Helmsford College were the children of wealthy parents, and it would certainly be humiliating to have her private affairs brought under discussion, she felt most disinclined to give way to Agnes Hosking.

Ah, but what she did mind was that Agnes would inform everybody that she was being educated at the expense of Dr. Reed—by charity, as she had said. There lay the sting. So kind and considerate had the Reeds been to her that her position in her new home had seemed quite natural, and the thought of being pointed at as an object for charity galled her immeasurably. Never before in her life had she experienced such a sense of keen humiliation, and she felt she should never be able to hold up her head at Helmsford College again if Agnes carried out her threat and told the girls that she was being educated by charity. How much did Agnes know? she wondered. Did she know that Dr. Reed paid all her expenses and even kept her supplied in pocket-money? Would

she tell the girls that? Oh, it was unendurable even to contemplate it! She would do anything to prevent it.

"Well?" said Agnes interrogatively, at length. She had been watching the varying expressions which had flitted across her companion's telltale countenance with evident curiosity.

"If I get Ann to ask you to tea next Saturday will you promise not to meddle in my concerns?" asked Violet, rather shame-facedly.

"Oh, yes! I don't want to be nasty in any way," Agnes returned, with a gleam of triumph in her eyes. It was true, then, she thought, that Violet was being provided for by Dr. Reed. Her last letter from home had informed her that such was reported to be the case; now, Violet's behaviour set the matter beyond a doubt.

"Well, I will do as you wish," Violet told her, after a minute's hesitation.

"Oh, thank you!"

"You needn't thank me."

"You won't bear malice, Violet?" questioned Agnes, glancing rather doubtfully at her companion's gloomy countenance.

"You've said to me what I will never forgive," Violet answered deliberately, "but I'm not going to quarrel with you. I think you are the meanest girl I ever met, though, and I know I'm foolish to give in to you like this, but—but—"

She turned away with trembling lips and eyes dim with tears of mingled anger, shame, and humiliation. She was fully aware that she was acting foolishly and weakly; but public opinion meant so much to her, and she feared to jeopardize her position at Helmsford College. Her school-fellows were very friendly to her now, but who could tell what their treatment of her would be if they became aware that she was being provided for and educated by charity?

As soon as the game of hockey was over Ann joined Violet, and the two girls left the College grounds and turned homewards together. For a while Ann talked of the game

and the various players, but by-and-by she remarked:—

"I saw you and Agnes Hosking together, but I fancied you did not look very pleased, Violet."

"No," Violet answered laconically, with a deep-drawn sigh. She longed to take Ann into her confidence, but she realised she could not do that after the promise she had made to Agnes. Already she was beginning to wish that promise had never been given. "Agnes tells me that she has spent all her Saturdays at the College so far," she continued, after a brief pause, "no one has asked her out to tea, and—and she put it to me that she would much like to come to tea with us. I wonder if Mrs. Reed would let us ask her, Ann?"

"Oh, yes," Ann replied readily, though she was decidedly surprised. "It is very kind of you to wish it, Violet, for I know you are not very fond of her," she added.

"I am not fond of her at all; but she has no friends in the place, and—and if you do not mind—" Violet broke off, and looked at her

companion half deprecatingly, half appealingly.

"I do not mind at all," Ann asserted. "Agnes has always been most friendly to me, but I have kept her rather at a distance on account of what you told me of the way in which she used to treat you and your sisters. We'll ask her for next Saturday if mother agrees, shall we?"

"Thank you," said Violet, in a low voice which trembled slightly.

"You really wish it, don't you?" Ann asked, a puzzled expression crossing her face. Then, as Violet assented, she said: "Is there anyone else you would like to invite with Agnes, or shall we have her alone?"

"Oh, have her alone," replied Violet; "that will be the best way."

So it was settled, and the following day, Mrs. Reed's consent having been obtained, the invitation was given and accepted. In the letter which Violet wrote home in the evening, she mentioned that Agnes Hosking was coming to tea on Saturday, a piece of

news which was received with great amazement by her sisters, Ruth openly avowing that she was sorry to hear it.

"Why should you be sorry, my dear?" asked Mrs. Wyndham, who had read Violet's letter aloud. It had arrived by the afternoon post, and was under discussion at the tea-table.

"Because I mistrust Agnes Hosking," Ruth promptly replied; "you cannot imagine how insufferably insolent she used to be to us at Miss Minter's, simply because she was a rich man's daughter and had plenty of money to spend whilst we were poor. I was so annoyed when she took Violet to her home—or, rather, I was annoyed on hearing about it afterwards. Violet ought not to have gone, but she was curious to see what the Hosking's house was like, she realised that Agnes only took her there to show off."

"Perhaps Agnes has improved," suggested Madge; "you know Violet has said in several of her letters that she seemed to wish to be friendly."

Ruth shook her head incredulously, for she had good reason to mistrust her old school-

fellow, and many a slighting remark the arrogant girl had made to pain and annoy her returned to her memory. She considered Violet very foolish to have become intimate with Agnes Hosking, as she argued that she must have done if she was on sufficiently cordial terms with her to introduce her into the Reeds' home. She would have been shocked and dismayed had she known the true facts of the case; and as it was, she blamed Violet openly, and wondered how she could endure to cultivate the friendship of one who had sneered at her father—an unpardonable affront in Ruth's sight—and slighted her sisters and herself.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TORTOISE-SHELL PURSE

WHEN Violet awoke on the morning of the day on which Agnes Hosking was expected to tea, the rain was descending in torrents, and she hoped the weather would prove too bad for the visitor to come; but, to her secret disappointment, towards mid-day the sky began to clear, and by two o'clock the sun was shining and the rain had gone. At three o'clock Agnes appeared, accompanied by a junior governess, Miss Wilcocks, who left her at the doctor's door, according to Miss Orchardson's instruction.

"As though I was not to be trusted to walk the short distance from Helmsford College alone," Agnes muttered to herself, as she looked after Miss Wilcocks' retreating figure.

Ann and Violet met their visitor in the hall, and the former inquired if she would like to go for a walk before tea or if she would prefer to spend the time indoors.

"It has cleared up so nicely that we thought perhaps you'd like to be out in the sunshine," Ann said; "if so, there's a walk we might take you not far from here—to Upcott Hill, from which one has a most lovely view, and—"

"Oh, I've been there on several occasions with Miss Wilcocks and some of the boarders," Agnes interrupted, "I'd much rather go into the town and have a good look at the shop windows."

"I'm afraid we cannot do that," Ann returned; "I'm sorry, but mother doesn't care for us to go into the town on Saturday afternoons without she is with us, because it is generally thronged with rough sort of folks, and to-day there is an important football match to be played here, and that always brings a lot of people to the place, so the streets will be crowded."

"If we can't go into the town I would as soon stay in the house," said Agnes, not attempting to disguise her disappointment. She thought Mrs. Reed was absurdly particular.

"Then come up to my room and take off your hat and jacket," Ann replied; "I'm afraid you're disappointed, Agnes, but you don't realise what the town is like on a Saturday afternoon. Come with us, Violet."

So the three girls went upstairs to Ann's room—a little room very similar to Violet's, with white enamelled furniture and a pretty, light wall paper. Agnes glanced around her with curious eyes, and, as soon as she had taken off her outdoor garments, she requested permission to look at the pictures and knick-knacks which ornamented the walls. Ann exhibited her treasured possessions with pleasure; they were most of them little presents which had been given to her by her parents at various times.

"This is where my grandmother lives," she said, indicating a framed photograph of a small, white-washed house, actually a cottage, with lattice windows and a strip of garden before it; "it faces the sea, and Granny spends a great part of her time in the summer sitting under the porch, knitting. She says knitting is her one accomplishment, she is very clever at it and makes all sorts of things—counterpanes, and curtains, and, of

course, she always keeps father supplied with socks. She knitted my first socks, too, of fine thread; mother has them now, they are so pretty—like lace. When I look at that photograph I can picture Granny most vividly. She has splendid sight for her age, and can see a great distance; she loves to watch the vessels passing up and down the channel, and she knows such a lot about ships, and can tell such wonderful sea-stories—true ones."

Agnes stared at the photograph in silence, rather wondering that Ann should have pointed it out to her, for the cottage was such a very unpretentious dwelling. Why did Dr. Reed allow his mother to occupy such a humble abode? She could not imagine anyone living there from choice.

"Have you a grandmother, Agnes?" asked Violet, making a shrewd guess at what was passing through the visitor's mind, and anxious to prevent her putting her thoughts into words.

"Oh, yes! father's mother. She lives at Bath in a large house—a much larger house than this one—and she's very rich; my

grandfather left her a lot of money when he died. I am to spend my Easter holidays with her."

"That will be nice for you," remarked Ann. "Bath is a very pretty place, I've heard. I suppose you are very fond of your grandmother?"

"Well, no, I cannot say I am," Agnes admitted, with a laugh; "she's an exceedingly cross old woman who says things—disagreeable things, you know—on purpose to hurt and annoy people."

Violet with difficulty repressed a smile, for she could not help thinking that Agnes must rather resemble her grandmother in disposition; she made no remark, but Ann said gravely:—

"I can never understand how any one can like to do that. What makes her so unkind?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Agnes answered, shrugging her shoulders, "it pleases her, I suppose; people put up with her, you know, because she has plenty of money, and she likes spending it. She gives me lots of

presents. Look at this. She sent it to me on my last birthday."

Agnes produced a purse from her pocket as she spoke, and handed it to Ann.

It was a very handsome purse, evidently an expensive one, made of tortoise-shell with rims and clasp of gold.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Ann, and, having looked at the outside of it, she passed it to Violet who declared it was the most beautiful purse she had ever seen.

"Open it," said Agnes, "look at the inside."

Violet did so. The purse was lined with red morocco leather and contained a sovereign, several shillings, and a few coppers. It suddenly occurred to Violet that it was Agnes' intention to impress her with the sight of so much money—it seemed a great deal to Violet—and she shut the purse somewhat hastily and returned it to its owner, who slipped it into her pocket remarking that it was real tortoise-shell, and she believed her grandmother had given a good bit for it.

"I am sure she must have done so," said Ann, "especially if the rims and clasp are gold."

"Oh, they are," Agnes assured her, "real gold. Grandmother never buys anything that is not the best that can be had for money."

"Take care you do not get your pocket picked," advised Violet.

"Oh, I'll be careful that does not happen," Agnes returned, "but, to be on the safe side, I'll carry my purse in my muff on my way home so that it will be in my hand all the while. I'll not lose it, you may depend."

After that, Agnes, at her request, was shown Violet's bedroom; and then they went into the drawing-room, where the visitor met with a cordial reception from Mrs. Reed, who supposed her to be an especial friend of Violet's, having been told that she and Violet had attended the same school at Streatham, and made her take a chair by her side and talk to her.

Agnes thought Mrs. Reed very agreeable, and, being on her best behaviour herself, she

made a not unfavourable impression upon her hostess.

For the time present, at any rate, Agnes had laid aside her arrogant manner, and perhaps the company in which she found herself had a beneficial influence over her, for she talked without any attempt to be boastful, and even Violet was obliged to admit to herself that Agnes could be nice if she liked.

By-and-by tea was brought in and a plentiful supply of sweet cakes such as school girls love, and, whilst the young people were regaling themselves on these dainties, Dr. Reed returned home and came upstairs to the drawing-room. He was introduced to Agnes, who was secretly delighted to make the acquaintance of the popular doctor; but he did not stay long, merely remaining to drink a cup of tea and eat a slice of bread and butter, laughingly waving aside the cakes his daughter would have pressed upon him.

The afternoon slipped quickly away—too quickly to please Agnes. Miss Wilcocks would call for her at half past six o'clock, she explained to her companions, and she

must have her outdoor things on by that time so as not to keep the governess waiting.

"Oh, it's only just six, so you needn't hurry," said Ann, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, "I want you to come downstairs and look at my birds. I have several canaries, they are so tame that they will feed from my hand."

Accordingly she led the way downstairs, Violet and Agnes following, and, after inspecting the birds in their cage on a table before the dining-room window, Agnes said, with real regret, that she thought now she really must get ready to go.

"Perhaps you ought," agreed Ann; "you must come again another Saturday afternoon," she added, hospitably.

"Thank you," Agnes answered, looking very pleased; "I have had a very enjoyable time."

As they were crossing the hall they met Polly, the tweeny-maid, on her way to answer the front door-bell, and, expecting Miss Wilcocks had arrived, they lingered to ascertain if such was the case. It was not

Miss Wilcocks on the doorstep, however, but Lottie Medland, who had brought a parcel containing some needlework which her sister had been entrusted to do for Mrs. Reed. Ann hurried forward immediately, and invited her to come in; but Lottie demurred shyly, and stood hesitating in the doorway.

"Mother is at home, and I am sure she will like to see you, Lottie," Ann said kindly; "besides, you will want to take Malvina the money for her work, will you not?"

Accordingly Lottie came in and took a seat in the hall, whilst the servant closed the front door. Agnes and Violet had disappeared, so Ann, having told Lottie she would not be kept waiting long, followed them upstairs, pausing at the drawing-room door to inform her mother of Lottie's arrival. By that time someone else was at the front door, and, as Ann crossed the landing, she recognised Miss Wilcocks' voice inquiring if Miss Hosking was ready to leave.

"Miss Wilcocks has come," she said, entering her bedroom where Agnes had already put on her hat and jacket, and,

gloves in hand, was in conversation with Violet.

"Has she? Then I must go," Agnes declared. She took up her muff from the bed as she spoke, and left the room with the others.

In the hall they found Mrs. Reed talking to Miss Wilcocks, whilst Lottie Medland, who had risen from her chair, waited at a little distance. Agnes made a neat little speech to Mrs. Reed, thanking her for a pleasant afternoon, then goodbyes were exchanged, and governess and pupil took their departure.

"Now I am at liberty to have a word with you, Lottie," Mrs. Reed remarked, with a kind smile, as she opened the parcel which Lottie had handed to her and looked at its contents. "Yes, this is quite right," she proceeded, "and the sewing is excellent, as usual. I am glad to tell you that I have succeeded in obtaining an order for Malvina, from a friend of mine, for some plain needlework. I hope to find time to see her about it next week. Will you tell her so?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Lottie, "she will be glad—oh, very glad!"

She spoke in a flurried tone, and glanced around her nervously. As soon as she had received the money for the work she had brought she moved towards the door. Seeing she was evidently ill at ease neither Mrs. Reed nor Ann attempted to detain her longer, but they were both surprised at her manner, and the latter wondered if she suspected them of knowing the trouble she had given her people; it really looked as though she did.

Meanwhile Miss Wilcocks and Agnes Hosking had returned to Helmsford College, and, ten minutes subsequently, the latter, looking much perturbed, sought Miss Orchardson, and, having found her in her private sitting-room, informed her that she had left her purse at Dr. Reed's.

"How very careless of you!" exclaimed Miss Orchardson. "Is there much money in it?"

"One pound, seven shillings, and five pence half-penny," Agnes responded glibly; "it is a

very expensive purse, one my grandmother gave me," she hastened to add.

"Then you should have taken better care of it," Miss Orchardson observed, with some severity.

"Yes," Agnes agreed; "please, may I go back and fetch it?"

"Certainly not. Where did you leave it?"

"On Ann Reed's bed," was the unhesitating reply.

"On Ann Reed's bed! How came you to leave it there?"

"I was afraid of having my pocket picked, so I put my purse into my muff when I went upstairs for my outdoor things, and the muff was on the bed. When I took up my muff I forgot about my purse, and I suppose it slipped out."

"You suppose? It may not have done so. You very probably lost it in the street."

"No," Agnes replied, shaking her head decidedly, "I am quite sure I did not. If the purse had been in my muff when I put my hands into it I should have felt it, and I should remember having done so; but I am positive it was not there, and I never thought of it till I was putting away my outdoor things just now. Oh, I feel certain that it is on Ann's bed!"

Agnes had been filled with dismay when she had found that her purse was not in her possession, for her first idea had been that she had lost it; but, on second thoughts, she had been confident she had not done that, and therefore she had come to Miss Orchardson to request that she might be permitted to return to Laureston Square in search of it.

"Are you really certain that the purse was not in your muff when you left the Reed's house?" the head mistress inquired, after a brief deliberation.

"Yes," Agnes returned positively; "I believe it must be on Ann's bed. I remember I snatched up my muff hurriedly when I heard

Miss Wilcocks had come for me, and my purse must have slipped out then."

"I will send and make inquiries. But remember, if it is lost it is entirely your own fault, you should have taken proper care of it. If the purse is anywhere in the Reeds' house, you will get it again; if not, I shall conclude that you lost it on your way home."

Thus it was that, between eight and nine o'clock that same evening, a messenger from Helmsford College arrived at the doctor's house in Laureston Square, with a note from Miss Orchardson to Mrs. Reed explaining that Agnes Hosking considered she had left her purse on Ann's bed, and requesting that, if she had done so, it might be entrusted to the bearer of the note. But no purse was to be found on the bed or anywhere else in Ann's room, and a message to that effect was sent back to Helmsford College.

"She must have lost it," said Violet decidedly, when she was discussing the matter with Mrs. Reed and Ann, after the departure of the messenger; "I saw her slip it into her muff before she put on her hat and

jacket. Depend upon it she lost it going home."

"Perhaps to-morrow it may be found on the staircase or in the hall," suggested Ann, "we must all keep our eyes open for it, and the servants must be careful in shaking the mats. I wish she had not brought the purse with her this afternoon. By the way, Violet, did you notice what money was in it?"

"Yes," assented Violet, "there was a sovereign, some shillings, and some coppers. She told me to open the purse or I should not have done so."

"Of course not!" said Ann quickly, noticing that Violet had flushed sensitively.

"I am sorry the purse contained so much money," said Mrs. Reed, who was looking rather troubled, "for, though she apparently believes she left it here, I fancy she has lost it out-of-doors, in which case it is most unlikely that she will get it again; and, apart from the money, I have no doubt that she sets great store on the purse, as it was, you tell me, a gift from her grandmother."

"I think she values it more because it is very handsome and cost a good bit," said Ann gravely, exchanging a meaning glance with Violet. "I hope it will be found," she continued, "but if she had left it on my bed it would be there still. Who would take it away?"

This was an unanswerable question. It was felt that Agnes had placed the members of the doctor's household in a very awkward position; for, if she had actually left her purse on the bed, what could have become of it? It must have been moved, but by whose hand?

CHAPTER XIV

THE EASTER HOLIDAYS

"WELL?" It was Monday morning. The scene was the day-scholar's dressing-room at Helmsford College, and the speaker was Agnes Hosking. She had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of Ann Reed and Violet Wyndham, for the past half hour, to ascertain if her purse had been found, and now addressed them in a tone of inquiry.

"Well, we have brought you no news of your purse, Agnes, I'm sorry to say," Ann replied; "you couldn't have left it in our house, because we've searched for it everywhere, and it's not to be found. I'm afraid you lost it in the street."

"That I am sure I did not," Agnes declared, decidedly. She was rather a nice-looking girl, as a rule; but sometimes her countenance was marred by an unpleasant expression, and it was now.

"You must have done so," Violet said, a trifle impatiently; "I remember seeing you put it in your muff—"

"Of course you did, I saw you watching me," Agnes interrupted; "but I believe the purse dropped out when I took my muff up from the bed."

"I don't 'think it could have done so," said Ann gravely; "and I don't think you should say so," she added, regarding Agnes with a look of distinct disapproval in her grey eyes.

"Why not?" queried Agnes.

"Because, if you left the purse in our house, what do you imagine has become of it?" Ann asked, anxiously. Then, as Agnes made no response, she continued: "Father is coming to see Miss Orchardson about it by-and-by, I believe he is going to suggest having some bills printed—giving a description of the purse and offering a reward for it—and placarded about the town. He thinks there might be a chance of your getting it again that way."

"Yes, unless it has been stolen—" Agnes was beginning when the expression of Ann's face, an expression of intense indignation, caused her to stop suddenly in some confusion.

"Agnes, you cannot realise what you are saying," Violet said sternly, "who would steal your purse?"

"Oh, I suppose some people would consider it worth stealing!" Agnes returned, with a disagreeable laugh and a toss of her head. "But, there, perhaps after all I've lost it—though I don't believe I have. It's very vexatious anyway, whether it's lost or stolen."

"Yes, it most certainly is," Violet answered; "but there's no one to blame, unless it is yourself for not having been more careful of such a valuable object." There was a scornful intonation in Violet's voice as she spoke.

Two or three day-scholars, who had been listening to the conversation, now drew nearer, and began to ask questions. Agnes immediately turned her attention to them, and told them of her loss, whilst Ann and Violet took off their hats and jackets and hung them on their accustomed pegs against the dressing-room wall. There was an unwonted look of severity on Ann's face,

and Violet's brown eyes were sparkling with anger.

Later in the day Dr. Reed called and had an interview with Miss Orchardson, as a result of which the next morning the hoardings of the town were decorated with bills which read as follows:—

"Lost, on Saturday, March 16th, between No. 8 Laureston Square and Helmsford College, a tortoise-shell purse with gold clasp and rims, and lined with red morocco leather, containing money—amount known. Whoever will return the same to Miss Orchardson, Helmsford College, will be handsomely rewarded."

"If the purse has fallen into honest hands it will be returned," Ann remarked, as she paused with Violet to read the bill, "if otherwise, I suppose Agnes will always believe that she left it at our house. Do you imagine that she thinks one of the servants has it?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know, I'm sure," Violet answered; "I'm almost afraid she does."

"Our servants are such honest, respectable girls, too!" Ann cried, really distressed. "I cannot think how Agnes can be so persistent in declaring she did not lose the purse in the street; I consider, to say the least of it, that it is very inconsiderate of her, for she must see that she puts us all in a very awkward position."

"She only thinks of herself," said Violet, in a troubled tone; "I wish we had not asked her to tea. It was my doing, but—"

She broke off and heaved a regretful sigh, whilst Ann said quickly:—

"Never mind; you did it for the best, out of the kindness of your heart. You felt she had no friends in the place, and you were sorry for her. Don't blame yourself; you could not possibly foresee that anything disagreeable would happen."

Violet turned her head aside that her companion might not observe her guilty flush, and her eyes filled with tears. It was like Ann to think better of her than she deserved, she told herself, for Ann was quick to credit others with good intentions.

What would Ann say, she wondered, if she knew what had influenced her really to procure an invitation for Agnes Hosking to spend an afternoon at No. 8 Laureston Square? Would she despise her? Violet feared that she would.

Several days passed, and no one returned the purse. Agnes was sorry, for she was most desirous to regain possession of it, especially as she was to visit her grandmother at Easter, and would probably be blamed for having lost it; but, at the same time, she felt rather triumphant, for if it had been proved that she had dropped the purse out-of-doors, everyone would have been in the position to say 'I told you so,' and that would have made her look very small, for she had been so positive in stating that it had not been in her muff when she had left No. 8 Laureston Square.

The more she turned the matter over in her mind the more certain she became that the purse had been stolen from the doctor's house—from Ann's room; but her suspicion, which she had fixed on someone, did not rest upon one of the servants, as Ann imagined. For a while she kept her suspicion

to herself, nor daring to put it into words; but there came a day, towards the end of the term, when she whispered it, in confidence, to a couple of her class-mates.

The two she had chosen to make her confidantes were not ill-natured girls; but they proved unable to keep a secret, and repeated what she had said to them to several others, and very soon it was known by the majority of the pupils at Helmsford College that Violet Wyndham was suspected by Agnes Hosking of having stolen the missing tortoise-shell purse. It was not said openly, however, and the term ended, and the school broke up for the Easter holidays without either Ann or Violet guessing the suspicion which had been so unscrupulously attached to the latter.

Easter was late that year, towards the end of April, and the weather during the holidays was mild and sunny. Violet now saw something of the neighbourhood surrounding Barford, for Mrs. Reed took her and Ann for several trips to various places of interest in the district; and one day they spent with the Garret girls at old Mrs. Garret's beautiful home, which was situated

in the midst of some of the most romantic scenery in Yorkshire.

Cicely and Clara Garret were quiet, rather delicate girls, with the pale complexions and languid ways of Indian-born children. They had heard the story which had been whispered at school against Violet Wyndham, but neither of them put the least credence in it; they had discussed the advisability of speaking to Ann upon the subject, but had decided not to do so, hoping the matter would blow over by another term. Both of them liked Violet greatly, perhaps because she was so different from themselves, so full of life and high spirits, and, from the fact of knowing the report which had been spread about her, they made so much of her and treated her so very kindly when she visited them with Mrs. Reed and Ann that she could not but be flattered by their behaviour.

Violet's letters to her own people, at this period, were full of contentment. It did indeed seem to her that her lines had fallen in pleasant places. Yes, she was very, very happy. And then, there dawned a day when an unexpected joy came to her, and she

sought Mrs. Reed and Ann and imparted to them the wonderful news that the opportunity for which her father had been working and waiting so long had come at last; he had obtained a post with a really good salary as editor of an important newspaper.

"I've had a letter from father himself," Violet told them, half crying, half laughing in her excitement; "and mother has written, too. She is so delighted, and she says I shall hear from Ruth to-morrow. Oh, Mrs. Reed, oh, Ann, I can hardly believe it is true! It's the first piece of really good luck that has come our way!"

"Oh, my dear, don't speak like that," expostulated Mrs. Reed, "don't call it luck; I don't like that word at all; for there's One above who orders our lives for us, and now He is going to allow your father to reap the fruit of his years of labour, don't put it down to luck. I thank God for your father's success, and you will not forget to thank Him, too, will you, my dear?"

"No," Violet answered, in a low, serious voice, impressed by the tender gravity of

Mrs. Reed's look and tone; "oh, I am thankful, very thankful!"

"So am I, and I am so very, very glad," Ann said; and she put her arms around Violet's neck and kissed her, and Violet returned the caress warmly, feeling herself to be the happiest girl in the world.

The next morning brought a long letter from Ruth, who spoke of her father with her usual loving pride. She had always been sure that some day his great abilities would be recognised, she wrote, and already he was looking younger and brighter than she had ever known him. "We shall be much better off, now, dear Vi," Violet read, "but, of course, we shall not be rich people, and there are several debts owing which it will take father some time to clear off, so we must continue to live quietly. At first, when father accepted this new appointment, mother talked of moving into a larger house and keeping a second servant, but father pointed out to her that that would not be wise, at any rate at present, because the boys will be growing more expensive every year, and we ought not to live up to our income if we can help it—we haven't been able to help it so

far. So we are going to remain on here—I am sure it will be for the best, though mother is a little disappointed—and father says we ought to be very comfortable now we shall have more money to make things nice."

"There is a talk of our all going away for a holiday, in August, whilst the house is being repapered and repainted throughout, that would be a great treat for us all, wouldn't it? And then you would be with us, and we would go to some pretty place by the sea where we could all have a good time together. Oh, I think it's a splendid idea! And oh, dear Vi, I do indeed think things are going to be easier for us at home now. I used to feel, sometimes, that God had forgotten us—that He didn't care how hard father worked or how he tried to get on. I hope it wasn't very wicked of me, for I know we always had a lot to be thankful for, but father used to earn so little for all he did—he'll still have to work very hard, of course, but as he says 'Remuneration sweetens Labour' and he won't be working with the feeling that he isn't properly paid."

Violet experienced a slight sensation of disappointment on reading her elder sister's

letter, for she had allowed her imagination to run away with her and had pictured a general exodus from the little Streatham home to a larger, grander abode. It had seemed to her, because her father had obtained a really good appointment, that his fortune was made; but now she began to realise that this was far from being the case. However, her disappointment did not last long, and by-and-by it was quite lost in the pleasure the anticipation of joining her family by the sea-side in the August holidays gave her.

"Agnes Hosking will be sure to hear the good news about father," she remarked to Ann, "she won't be able to sneer at him again. Ours is not such a bad little house at Streatham after all," she allowed, "I daresay it can be made rather nice; but, you see, we never used to have any money to spend on it. Things will be different now."

"Oh, yes," acquiesced Ann, "of course they will."

It touched Violet to see how thoroughly the Reeds entered into her joy, and her sense of gratitude towards them deepened. What good friends they were to her, and how she

had grown to love them—the kindly doctor with his big generous heart; Mrs. Reed with her sound common sense and wide sympathies; and Ann—Prosperity's child, as Mrs. Wyndham had named her—who never forgot those less favoured with this world's goods than herself, and made allowances for everyone's shortcomings with that saving grace of charity which thinketh no evil.

Thus, in almost unalloyed happiness, the Easter holidays slipped by for Violet Wyndham, and in the first week of May she returned, with Ann Reed, to Helmsford College to take up her school-life again, utterly unconscious of the cloud of suspicion which already overshadowed her, and with no presentiment of trouble to come.

CHAPTER XV

THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE SUMMER TERM

IT was the first Saturday afternoon of the summer term, and the boarders at Helmsford College, with a few of the day-scholars, were spending it in the College grounds, amusing themselves in various ways, the majority playing games whilst the less energetic girls sat talking or reading on the seats which were placed in shady spots commanding views of the tennis courts and croquet lawn.

Agnes Hosking had been engaged in a set of tennis, but it had come to an end, and she now sought a seat with the intention of resting after her exertions. Looking about her she caught sight of Arm Reed and Clara Garret together, and went to join them. They politely made room for her between them on the seat on which they were sitting, and Clara remarked:—

"We've been watching you, Agnes; you play tennis remarkably well. I suppose you must have had a great deal of practice?"

"Oh, yes," Agnes rejoined, her expression one of gratification, "I used to belong to a tennis club at Streatham last year, and I've played a great deal these holidays."

"Did you visit your grandmother at Bath?" inquired Ann.

"Yes, for ten days. The remainder of the holidays I spent at home."

"I wonder if you saw anything of Violet's people?" said Ann; "they live near you, do they not?"

"Fairly near. I saw Ruth and Madge Wyndham—I met them, in fact, but I didn't speak to them. They seemed to wish to avoid speaking to me, which was not surprising—considering all things." And Agnes smiled enigmatically.

"Considering all things?" echoed Ann; "I don't understand what you mean. I have heard, though, that you used not to get on

well with Ruth Wyndham," she continued, with a touch of coldness in her tone, "Violet told me that."

"Did she?" Agnes looked slightly taken aback for a minute, then she went on: "We were never friends, certainly; we had nothing in common. The fact is, Ruth Wyndham is one of those reserved, proud sort of girls who make few friends. And what has she to be proud of, I should like to know? She is not bad looking, I admit; but she's always shabbily dressed, and I hear that, now she's left school, they make a regular drudge of her at home."

"How hard for her!" exclaimed Clara Garret, pityingly. "Are the Wyndhams so very poor, then, Ann? I did not know that."

"Oh, they are poor enough," Agnes returned quickly, though she was not the one addressed; "they live in a small villa and only keep one servant—I saw her cleaning the doorstep one day and she was such an untidy creature!—and Mrs. Wyndham wears gowns seasons old, and looks as though she had the cares of the world on her shoulders."

"Somehow I never thought of Violet Wyndham's people as poor," said Clara, her countenance showing plainly her great surprise.

"She looks flourishing, doesn't she?" said Agnes, with a sarcastic smile. "Look at her now! Hear her laughing!"

Violet was playing tennis, and, as Agnes spoke, her clear laugh rang out full of merriment. In her plain blue serge skirt and white blouse, with her luxuriant brown hair waving over her shoulders, and her face aglow with enjoyment, she made a very attractive picture, and Clara exclaimed, with genuine admiration:

"How lovely she is! Yes, really lovely with that bright colour in her cheeks and her sparkling brown eyes! I coil her one of the prettiest girls in the school, and she has such a winning way with her, too. My grandmother was quite charmed with her that day you brought her to see us, Ann."

"I am glad of that," Ann said, looking very pleased; "most people like Violet. We are all very fond of her at home."

"By the way, is it true that your father is paying her fees for her education here?" asked Agnes, bluntly, her gaze fixed with undisguised curiosity upon Ann.

Ann started and coloured. Her eyes had been following Violet's movements, but now she turned them upon Agnes, and looked her straight in the face.

"Had you not better inquire of Miss Orchardson?" she said, her voice betraying the annoyance she felt; "not that I think Miss Orchardson would gratify your ill-bred curiosity any more than I intend to do," she added scornfully.

"Well, don't be angry at my asking you, I meant no harm," Agnes faltered; "you are so touchy." She was secretly furious because Ann had called her question ill-bred, but she was most undesirous of having a serious fall out with her. "They say at home that your father is providing for Violet Wyndham and educating her at his own expense," she continued, "and, if he is, I call it most kind and generous of him, for she must cost him a pretty penny. But I much doubt if she's as grateful as she ought to be. She thinks too

much of herself—all the Wyndhams do. You may call her one of the prettiest girls in the school, Clara, but 'handsome is as handsome does,' and you know my opinion of Violet Wyndham!" So saying, she rose, laughed disagreeably and meaningly, and marched away.

"What does she intend us to understand by that?" asked Ann, in bewilderment, glancing inquiringly at her companion who was looking very distressed; "what does she mean?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Clara, the colour flooding her usually pale cheeks. "Oh, dear me, that's not true," she said, as she met the direct gaze of the other's honest eyes, "but I hate to tell you about it. How can Agnes be so horrid and—and ungenerous! She's jealous of Violet because she's better looking and more popular than herself."

"What are you talking of, Clara?" questioned Ann, her bewilderment deepening; "what is there to tell me? I must know. Come, do speak out."

"I wonder you didn't hear it last term!" exclaimed Clara, in agitated tones. "Cicely and I thought of telling you in the holidays, we thought you ought to know, but—but—"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about," Ann declared, "please do explain. It has something to do with Violet and Agnes Hosking, I suppose?"

"Yes. Agnes suspects Violet of — oh, you mustn't think that either Cicely or I believe it—of having taken her purse."

For a few minutes there was dead silence after this. Every vestige of colour had left Ann's face, and she appeared too shocked to speak. She sat quite still, staring straight in front of her, seeing nothing; but, by-and-by, she turned her eyes upon her companion again and said in a trembling voice:—

"Tell me all you know."

"I will," Clara responded, "though there's really little to tell. Agnes says that Violet had a better opportunity of taking her purse than anyone else, for she saw her put it into her muff and she was the last to leave your

bedroom when you three went downstairs after Miss Wilcocks had arrived. Was that so?"

"Yes," assented Ann, after a brief reflection.

"Well, Agnes thinks that Violet probably saw the purse drop out of her muff on to the bed and remained behind to secure it—"

"It is cruel and wicked of Agnes to suggest such a thing!" Ann broke in, passionately. "What good would the purse be to Violet? She could never use it!"

"No, of course she could not; but there was a sovereign in it, and several shillings, and—oh, don't look at me so reproachfully! Do you imagine that I suspect Violet of being a thief, too? No, no, indeed I do not! Both Cicely and I like her and trust her, let me assure you of that."

"Do many of the girls believe this story against her, Clara?"

"Well, some do, but a great many do not. I daresay she'll never hear it herself; I'm sure I hope she won't, for it would make her very

unhappy. Is it really true that her people are so poor?"

"They have been rather badly off, hitherto; but it will be different for them in future, if all goes well. Mr. Wyndham has lately accepted a very good appointment as editor of one of the best paying papers in London."

"Oh, I am glad!" Clara exclaimed heartily; "I suppose Agnes does not know that?"

"I expect not. Oh, Clara, I am so grieved at what you have told me! I don't know what I ought to do about it."

"I am afraid there is nothing to be done," returned Clara, with a grave shake of her head.

"I am really afraid there is not," agreed Ann. "It has often crossed my mind that Agnes might suspect one of our servants of having taken her purse, and that was bad enough, but this—oh, this is dreadful! I call it positively wicked to speak of a suspicion, specially one based on such slight grounds. I wonder if I had better speak to Agnes about it?"

"I should not; I should let her go. She does not actually say that Violet has stolen her purse, only that she suspects her of having done so, and she says she has a right to think what she likes. My opinion is that she did not mean this story, which she has trumped up against Violet, to become so generally known, for she told it as a secret in the first place; of course it did not remain a secret long, then she got frightened—I know she did because she tried to hush the matter up—but she couldn't take back her words. She allowed her temper to get the better of her discretion when she spoke of Violet as she did just now."

"Do you think she really suspects Violet of having stolen her purse?" asked Ann; and the expression of deep concern and anxiety on her face was intensified as her companion nodded assent.

At that point their conversation was interrupted by Violet herself, who joined them in the best of spirits. She and her partner had won the set of tennis they had been playing, and she was pleased and triumphant on that account. With her customary quickness she noticed that both

Ann and Clara looked embarrassed, and she jumped to the conclusion that they had been talking about her, and, in consequence, when she and Ann were walking home together, a half hour later, she said:—

"I saw Agnes Hosking sitting with you and Clara—she has scarcely deigned to notice me this term, by the way—and I thought she appeared to be watching me and discussing me, was she? I always feel uneasy when her eyes are upon me."

"Why?" asked Ann, quickly, with a keen glance at her companion.

"Well, I hardly know why, but I think it is because she has such a malicious tongue and I'm rather afraid of it," was the reply.

"I cannot imagine why you should be," Ann said, in a troubled tone, "but I remember you seemed quite upset the first day of last term when you found Agnes was at Helmsford College; afterwards, though, you appeared to get on with her fairly well. Has she been disagreeable to you in any way lately?"

"No, oh, no! She has taken no notice of me this term, as I told you just now, but I am always afraid she will set the girls against me, I know she is quite capable of doing that. In some way or other I must have put her out, for, though I've spoken to her twice, she hasn't answered me; but I can't think what I have done to offend her. I'm sure I've done all I can to please her—even to getting you to ask her to tea."

"I wish you had not done that!" Ann exclaimed involuntarily.

"So do I," Violet responded, with a sigh.

There was a brief pause during which Ann studied her companion's countenance with troubled eyes. Why did Violet appear so uneasy? Oh, surely Agnes' suspicion of her could not be correct. Ann put the thought away, and blamed herself for having admitted it into her mind for a moment, but it returned when Violet, speaking in a low, hesitating voice, went on to say:—

"You don't know what a weak character I am, Ann; if you did you'd despise me, I'm sure. I can't think of that afternoon Agnes

Hosking came to tea with us without the bitterest regret and humiliation."

"Oh, Violet," faltered Ann, "won't you explain to me what you mean?"

"I can't now, perhaps I may some day," Violet answered; and after that she changed the conversation.

During the remainder of the day, and for many days subsequently, Ann was in a most unhappy frame of mind, whilst, for the first time in her life, she shrank from taking her mother into her confidence. On hearing from Clara Garret of the tale against Violet, which was being whispered throughout the school, she had utterly disbelieved in the possibility of its truth; but Violet, by her words and manner, had caused an ugly doubt to enter her mind.

Had Violet been assailed by a sudden temptation and given way to it? Then, believing she had been sending home part of her pocket-money to Ruth, Ann began to ask herself where she had procured the money to purchase the tennis racquet which she had bought on the first day of the term. Poor Ann

was very wretched indeed, for she had grown to love Violet with a deep, sisterly affection, and it was the keenest pain to doubt her integrity.

Meanwhile, Violet was becoming conscious that the manner of many of her school-fellows had changed towards her. The Garrets remained as friendly as ever; but several of her class-mates treated her with decided coolness, whilst Agnes Hosking never spoke to her at all. And then she found out that the circumstances under which she was living with the Reeds and was being educated at Helmsford College had become public property, and she put down the difference in the behaviour of the girls to that fact; no doubt Agnes had informed them that she was being educated by charity, she thought bitterly. If she had taken Ann into her confidence at this time much unhappiness might have been saved, but she did nothing of the kind; and Ann, observing that something was weighing on Violet's mind, grew more and more troubled herself. Thus the commencement of the summer term was overshadowed for the two girls.

CHAPTER XVI

NOT WORTH BOTHERING ABOUT

ONE afternoon, on Ann and Violet's return from school, they found Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway in the drawing-room with Mrs. Reed, having tea. Dr. Elizabeth smiled as she observed the expression of astonishment which flitted across Violet's face at sight of her, and she said with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes:—

"I suppose it is rather wonderful to find me sipping tea in a leisurely fashion at this hour; but I'm as fond of my tea as most women, I think, though I'm generally obliged to forego the luxury of dawdling over it. Well, my dears, how are you?"

Both girls declared themselves very well. They were pleased to see Dr. Elizabeth, and their countenances plainly denoted the fact. Mrs. Reed gave them their tea, and, whilst they were drinking it, Dr. Elizabeth told Violet that she had heard of her father's appointment, and mentioned the paper in

which she had seen it announced, adding that Mr. Wyndham's capabilities were spoken of in most eulogistic terms.

"Oh, how glad I am to hear that!" Violet cried, her face lighting up with a smile of intense gratification.

"Dr. Elizabeth has saved the paper for you, my dear," said Mrs. Reed; "she is going to send it to you. You will like to have it, will you not?"

"Indeed I shall," Violet replied. "Thank you, Dr. Elizabeth."

"I should have brought it with me had I known I was coming here when I started from home this afternoon," remarked Dr. Elizabeth; "but I did not anticipate that I should be anywhere in this direction. My first visit was to poor Malvina Medland who has been in bed for the past fortnight—"

"Oh, we did not know that," interposed Ann, in accents of much concern; "excuse my having interrupted you, Dr. Elizabeth," she continued hurriedly, "I hope Malvina is not very ill?"

"She is not dangerously ill, but she is in great pain, and much troubled about her sister, who has been causing her and her mother a great deal of anxiety again."

"Do you mean that Lottie has been betting?" questioned Violet.

"I do."

"Oh, dear," sighed Ann; "we quite thought she had given up that altogether. You spoke to her about it, did you not, Dr. Elizabeth?"

"Yes. I had a very serious talk with her and pointed out the misery her conduct would bring about if she persisted in it; she appeared to see it all and promised me not to act so foolishly and wickedly in the future. It seems that she really kept her word for some weeks, but during the last month or so she has been betting again, with the result that she has squandered most of her earnings. And now Malvina is so ill that she is unable to do anything, and consequently they are dependent upon Mrs. Medland's wages for their daily bread. Poor Malvina! Her sufferings are very great at times; she is obliged to lie in bed altogether to rest her

back. I feel great sympathy for her, and for Mrs. Medland too; they are in a sorry plight, and my visit to Mrs. Reed this afternoon is really to ask her to help them. I want her to go and see Malvina."

"Of course she will!" Ann exclaimed, with certainty in her tone.

"Yes," Mrs. Reed assented readily, "I am going to-morrow, and cook shall make some nice, strong beef tea for the poor girl. I have been wondering why she has not sent back the last lot of needlework I gave her to do; I had no idea that she was laid up again."

"Do you think she is too ill to see Violet and me?" asked Ann.

"On the contrary, I believe a visit from you young folks would do her a lot of good," Dr. Elizabeth replied; "she is certainly better than she was a few days ago, but every attack of illness she has weakens her so greatly that she never quite regains the amount of strength she had before."

"We will go to see her on Saturday," Ann declared decidedly; "won't we, Violet? You will come with me, I know."

"Yes," Violet agreed, somewhat reluctantly, for she shrank from witnessing suffering, and Dr. Elizabeth had given them to understand that Malvina was in great pain.

"I think it's shocking about Lottie," said Ann; "whatever will become of her, Dr. Elizabeth?"

"I cannot say," the lady doctor answered sadly; "the girl's head seems quite turned by this gambling mania. I fear she is under the influence of bad companions, judging from all accounts; her occupation brings her in contact with those who you may depend do their utmost to lead her astray. Next to drink, betting is the greatest curse in England, especially in large towns like this where bookmakers have their agents everywhere. Do, you two young people, go and see Malvina by all means, you'll find her wonderfully cheerful considering the circumstances of her lot; there's a brave Christian soul in that misshapen body of

hers, and she bears her cross without complaint."

Thus it came about that the following Saturday morning, about eleven o'clock, found Ann and Violet standing at the door of the house where the Medlands lived, waiting for an answer to the former's knock. Presently the door was opened by a girl, who might have been any age from twelve to sixteen, clad in a neat print gown and a big apron. She had a slight, childish figure, and a face which looked prematurely old; and she held a hat in her hand as though she was about to put it on to go out.

"We have come to see Malvina Medland, if you please," said Ann, as she surveyed the trim little body before her, wondering who she could be; "we know she is ill, but I think she might like to see us."

"Please, miss, are you Dr. Reed's daughter?" questioned the small person, her shrewd eyes fixed on Ann's face.

"Yes," assented Ann, with the smile of goodwill which few people were able to withstand.

"Then will you please to go straight upstairs. Dr. Elizabeth told me you'd most likely be here to-day, and Malvina's expecting you. 'Grace,' said she to me, 'I've visitors coming, two young ladies as I had tea with once.' She'd have been dreadfully disappointed, I can tell you, if you hadn't come."

"I suppose you are a neighbour?" questioned Ann.

"No, miss. I live in another street—ten minutes' walk from here. Dr. Elizabeth's engaged me for an hour every morning and every afternoon to see to Malvina whilst she's ill; I'm not a sick-nurse by profession, but I can turn my hand anyway, and I'd do almost anything to oblige Dr. Elizabeth. Well, I must be off, now."

"But do you leave Malvina in bed with the street door unlocked?" asked Violet, aghast at the idea.

"Dear me, yes, miss. I don't suppose the street door is ever locked, for that matter; you know there are other families living in the house besides the Medlands. Bless you, Malvina won't come to any harm, and there's

nothing much for anyone to steal. Go straight upstairs, you'll find Malvina ready to receive you."

So saying the small person stepped out into the street, and, placing her hat on her head, marched off. She walked with remarkably long steps for her size, and she never looked back. Ann and Violet watched her out of sight, then they exchanged amused glances and laughed, and the former said:—

"Why, Vi, depend upon it that is the little girl of whom Dr. Elizabeth spoke so highly, the one who goes out charing, you know."

"I expect so," replied Violet; "what a funny little creature she is!"

Entering the house they closed the street door behind them, then went up the steep stairs and stopped on the first landing.

"This way, please!" cried a feeble voice, which they recognised as Malvina's, "I'm in here."

"In here" proved to be a little back room, not much larger than a good-sized cupboard,

with a bed in one corner, on which the sick girl lay. She received her visitors with a bright, welcoming smile, and assured them, in answer to their sympathetic inquiries, that she was really better.

"It's so kind of you to come," she said, gratefully. "Dr. Elizabeth said she thought you would, and your mother, Miss Ann, told me when she was here yesterday that you meant to come. I am so very glad to see you. Please to sit down."

There was but one chair in the room, and that a very rickety one. Ann motioned to Violet to take it, whilst she perched herself on the edge of the bed and presented Malvina with a bunch of roses which she had brought for her, knowing her love for flowers.

"They came all the way from Devonshire, packed in damp moss," she explained, as Malvina took the nosegay with a cry of mingled admiration and delight, "and they grew in my grandmother's garden. Look at this white rose bud; is it not perfect? Granny will be so pleased when I write and tell her I gave the roses to you—the first roses of

summer, I think they must be. I'm glad you like them, I can see that you do. Aren't they wonderfully fresh considering they have made such a long journey? They arrived by parcel post this morning, and, though they were a little drooping then, after they had been in water an hour they had quite revived."

"They are lovely," said Malvina, earnestly, "and their scent—oh, it's delicious! How good of you to give them to me!"

Whilst Ann continued to talk to Malvina, telling her the names of the roses and drawing her a word-picture of old Mrs. Reed's sea-side home, Violet was making good use of her eyes. What a poor room it was! Excepting the bed and the one chair there was no real furniture. An upturned box served for a wash-hand stand; there was no dressing-table, no set of drawers, no looking-glass. A pang of pity shot through Violet's heart mingled with a sense of shame. How often had she grumbled at the bedroom at home which she and Ruth had shared, and yet how comfortable it had been in comparison to this bare room! She was

beginning to realise what it really meant to be poor.

By-and-by Violet turned her attention to her companions again. Malvina's eyes were still feasting on the roses, and there was a smile hovering around her lips—yes, actually a happy smile; and yet she had scarcely slept throughout the night on account of the pain which had racked her feeble frame.

"There's not a lady in the land better looked after than I am now I'm ill," she declared; "I've everything I want. Your mother brought me such nice, strengthening things to eat, Miss Ann; I've just had a cup of beef tea, which Grace Jones warmed for me. It's done me a lot of good."

"Is Grace Jones the girl we saw at the door?" inquired Ann.

"Yes, miss. Dr. Elizabeth's paying her for looking after me a bit; she generally comes for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon, but she won't be here this afternoon because, as you know, the factories shut early on Saturdays, and

mother will be at home to bear me company."

"You have been in bed a fortnight, haven't you?" said Violet.

"Yes, miss; but I hope to be about again soon. Dr. Elizabeth says I must have patience, for if I worry it keeps me from getting better."

"I daresay it does. I expect you have been having a very dull time, haven't you?"

"No, miss. I daresay this room strikes you as being dull, but I don't find it so. You see the window faces the east and I get the morning sun, which is a great blessing; and the sparrows are fine company, they wake up so early. I do love sparrows. Many a morning this past fortnight I've lain awake, in pain, listening to them, and you can't think how happy it's made me, and how it's comforted me to hear them twittering —I daresay you can guess why?"

"No," Violet answered, shaking her head.

"I think I can," Ann said softly, "they remind you of what our Saviour said about them, is it not so?"

"Yes," nodded Malvina, "I like to remember how He said, 'Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings and not one of them is forgotten before God.' And then I think if God is caring for them He is caring for me."

"To be sure," agreed Ann. "He cares for all of us, even if we do wrong and forget Him. Father told me the other day of a grand old soldier who, before he went into battle, always used to pray, 'Lord, if I forget Thee, do not Thou forget me.' I like that prayer, don't you?"

"Yes, indeed," rejoined the sick girl. A slight shadow had crossed her face, and now she said falteringly, "Oh, Miss Ann, I think my poor sister Lottie is one of those who have forgotten God. She has taken to betting again."

"Yes, Malvina, we know," Ann answered sadly, "and we are so very, very grieved."

"She's clean off her head, it seems to me, and I don't know what will be the end of her—it makes me shudder to think. I thought she had turned over a new leaf and was going to be a good, steady girl, she certainly gave up betting for the time; but now she's as bad about it as she was before. She's growing reckless and takes no notice of anything mother says—but, hush, here's mother!"

The door opened to admit a pale, weary-looking woman, whose face, however, brightened with a smile at the sight of her daughter's visitors. She thanked Ann and Violet most gratefully for having come to see Malvina, and admired the beautiful, Devonshire roses.

"Malvina's so fond of flowers," she said, "you couldn't have brought her any present she would like better, Miss Ann."

Not long after that Violet and Ann said good-bye to the invalid, and followed Mrs. Medland downstairs. They lingered for a few minutes talking with her in the kitchen, then started for home. Both girls were silent at first, their minds occupied with their own

thoughts, but by-and-by Ann touched Violet on the arm and whispered:—

"There is Lottie Medland looking into the window of that newspaper shop."

Violet followed the direction of Ann's gaze and recognised Lottie, who was standing on tip-toes, endeavouring to look over the shoulders of a small crowd, comprised of men and women of all ages, congregated outside the shop in question.

"She is trying to read the telegram posted up against the window," said Ann; "oh, Violet, isn't it sad?"

"Sad?" echoed Violet, in astonishment; "why?"

"Because, for certain it's a telegram about some horse race or other."

Violet looked more scrutinisingly at the crowd, some members of which appeared exultant, others downcast, and then she saw Lottie Medland turn sharply away, with an expression of disappointment on her countenance, and join a girl of about her

own age with whom she walked off—not homewards, however, but in the opposite direction. For some distance the two kept ahead of Violet and Ann, but by-and-by they disappeared into a dirty-looking shop, in the windows of which second-hand jewellery and clothing were exhibited for sale.

"It is a pawn shop," said Ann, as she and Violet passed by; "oh, poor Lottie, has it come to this with her! Oh, poor, poor girl!"

"She must have fallen very low," said Violet, in a tone of great disgust. "Come, Ann!" she exclaimed, rather impatiently, as her companion seemed inclined to linger, "you are not thinking of waiting to speak to her, surely! Let us go home. Such a wicked girl is not worth bothering about!"

"Oh, Violet, don't say that!"

There was grief and reproach in Ann's voice, and her eyes were full of tears. Violet had never seen her so moved before, and she gazed at her in astonishment. Why should she be so upset on account of this foolish, headstrong girl? Violet had never felt that love for humanity at large which springs

from a love of God, and, though she was sorry for Mrs. Medland and Malvina in their trouble about Lottie, she certainly had but little if any sympathy for Lottie herself.

"What have I said that you should look so hurt and speak to me so reproachfully?" she asked, as they quickened their footsteps.

"You said Lottie was not worth bothering about. Oh, Violet, father was right when he said that we must not be too hard on her—I know I was inclined to be hard on her, myself. We don't know what her temptations have been; perhaps we should do as she does if we were in her place; we might forget God, too. But He won't forget her, if she has forgotten Him; He cares for her, and, oh, don't ever say she isn't worth bothering about again."

"I won't," Violet answered, her cheeks crimsoning at this rebuke, though it had been gently spoken; "I am ashamed I said it, I am indeed."

CHAPTER XVII

EXPLANATIONS

IT was a perfect summer evening. The day had been an oppressively hot one with scarcely a breath of air stirring, but now, as the sun set, a soft, refreshing breeze began to rise, which was very welcome. Malvina Medland, on her bed of pain, felt the difference of the atmosphere with thankfulness; she was certainly better, but her recovery from her attack of illness was being made very slowly, and Dr. Elizabeth was anything but satisfied with her progress.

Seated on her favourite seat beneath the almond tree in the garden of Laureston Square on this particular evening, Ann Reed had been thinking of Malvina, and wondering how she had endured the heat of the day. Ann had found it a wearisome, dragging day herself, and she knew it must have been a trying one for Malvina; but now her thoughts had turned from the sick girl to

Violet, and very troubled thoughts they were.

"I don't understand her," she mused, "I cannot believe she knows anything about Agnes Hosking's purse, for when mother mentioned it at the breakfast-table, this morning, and said how much she regretted that it had never been found, she did not seem embarrassed in the least. I was so relieved to see that! And yet she cannot bear to speak of the afternoon Agnes came to tea with us, she gets red and looks ashamed, and what can she have to be ashamed of? I wish the girls did not slight her so at school; I know some of them do, and she must notice it. It's strange that she never mentions it to me, I am always expecting her to open up the subject. Can she know what Agnes has been hinting about her? If so, she evidently does not mean to openly resent it. Ah, here she comes! Father is right—he said yesterday she was looking rather pale. I'm afraid she's unhappy."

A minute later Violet had joined Ann on the seat. She seemed tired and out of spirits; doubtless the heat of the day had tried her, too.

"I've only just finished my lessons," she remarked; "I've been so slow over them this evening. How nice it is to have it a little cooler!"

"Yes," agreed Ann; "it's very pleasant here, isn't it? So quiet, and the scent from the flowers is lovely. I wonder why flowers always smell their sweetest after sunset? How the term is flying, isn't it, Violet? Here we are in the last week of June; why, in another month we shall be commencing the holidays."

"I shall be so glad when they come," Violet admitted; "not that I am not getting on all right with my work, for I am," she hastened to explain, "but I daresay you've noticed that it has been anything but agreeable for me at school this term. I have had the cold shoulder shown me by several of the girls—not that I care!" she added bitterly, and, certainly untruthfully.

"Oh, Violet!" exclaimed Ann, "I am so sorry, and I am sure you do care. I can see it is a trouble to you. Do you—do you know why—"

"Do I know why I am being treated so?" Violet asked, as her companion hesitated to proceed. "Of course I do," she declared vehemently; "it is Agnes Hosking's doing, not a doubt of it."

"I-I am afraid it is."

"It is very hard lines on me. I cannot help it if—if we've been poor—I'm sure I've hated being so—and I ought not to mind anything Agnes may have told the girls about me, I ought to be above minding, I think you would be, Ann, but— but—" and Violet broke down, with quivering lips and eyes swimming in tears.

"Oh, don't cry, don't cry," said Ann, in much distress; "you have your friends at Helmsford College who believe in you—the Garret girls, for instance. It was Clara who told me what Agnes Hosking had been saying; she trusts you entirely, indeed she does, and Cicely, too."

"Clara trusts me?" Violet exclaimed, looking puzzled, "I don't understand. I don't suppose Agnes has said anything that is not true."

"Oh, Violet, you don't mean that, you can't!" cried Ann, in a shocked voice.

Violet wiped the tears from her eyes, and regarded her agitated companion with increasing bewilderment. During the last few weeks she had been conscious of a change in Ann's manner to her. It was not that Ann had been less kind than she had been before; indeed, if anything, she had been kinder; but she had certainly showed herself less inclined to be confidential, and often Violet had caught her watching her with a dubious, puzzled expression on her face.

"It isn't possible you could have done such a thing," Ann proceeded, "there's some mistake. Tell me, what is it you think Agnes Hosking has hinted to the girls about you?"

"I don't think she has hinted anything," Violet returned; "no doubt she has told plain facts in the most objectionable way possible. She's said, I expect, that I'm a poor girl whom your father has taken into his home out of charity, and, therefore, that I'm beneath her in position and may be slighted and snubbed as she and her friends please. She's a horrid, mean girl, that's what she is,

and I hate her! I wish I'd defied her from the first instead of—oh, Ann, you'll despise me I know, but I feel I must tell you all about it, whatever you may think afterwards!"

"Yes, do," said Ann eagerly, "I fancy we are at cross purposes somehow. As to father's having taken you into his home out of charity—if Agnes said that, why it's only her ill-bred way of putting it; she knows nothing about it, and she should mind her own business. But what is it you're going to tell me?"

Thereupon, with burning cheeks, Violet confessed that she had entered into a sort of compact with Agnes to obtain an invitation for her to No. 8 Laureston Square, in return for which she had been given a promise that Agnes would not make public her private affairs. Ann listened in silence, naturally greatly astonished, her eyes fixed gravely on her companion's crimson face.

"Do you utterly despise me?" Violet asked wistfully, when she had concluded her tale—it had been a difficult one to tell.

"No," Ann responded, "but I don't understand you quite." There was a look of relief on her face, for it was plain to her now, beyond a shadow of doubt, that Violet knew nothing of the lost purse. "I never trouble about what people think of me," she continued, "I am sure it is a mistake to do so. But, Violet, you are wrong in imagining that the girls who have snubbed you have done so on account of—of your position. If you had not induced me to ask Agnes to our house we should have been spared a lot of unhappiness, for she says—it is best to tell you the truth, for I foresee you will find it out—that she suspects you of having taken her purse. Yes, that is what she has been telling the girls, and I—I have not liked to speak to you about it for —for—"

"She suspects me of having taken her purse!" Violet cried excitedly. "Why, how could I have done that? What an absurd thing to suggest!"

"She says you might have taken it up from my bed as you were the last of us to leave the room that evening—"

"I remember I was," interrupted Violet; "but I never saw her purse after she put it into her muff. And she suspects me of having taken it—stolen it! She considers me a thief!"

The girl was trembling with anger, her eyes flashed, and she clenched her hands in her rage. Suddenly she turned upon Ann, almost fiercely, with the question:—

"Do you suspect me, too?"

"No, Violet no," Ann replied earnestly; "but I have not known what to do. I have been so anxious, and—and puzzled. I have not been able to understand you. You seemed so bitterly to regret having induced me to ask Agnes to tea—of course I see why that was now—and once or twice I—I have half doubted you, against my will, I—I could not help it. Oh, forgive me! I am sure now that you know nothing about the purse! Oh, I have been so wretched!"

Violet stared at her companion in silence for a minute, then she covered her face with her hands and burst into a flood of passionate tears. Ann sat by her, silent and miserable, incapable of offering any consolation, and

when, by-and-by, she ventured to put her arm around her she was promptly repulsed.

"Let me alone!" Violet cried. "To think that you should have believed me to be a thief! Oh, it is horrible—horrible!"

"Violet, don't be too hard on me!" Ann said, pleadingly; "you must remember that it was your own conduct which made me doubt you; and it was the very faintest doubt, indeed it was, I put it away again and again, and then something you would say or do would bring it back. And—and I could not understand where you got the money to pay for your new tennis racquet, and—"

"Why you know I have the same amount to spend as you have yourself!" broke in Violet, looking both surprised and reproachful.

"Yes; but I know, too, that you have been sending a part of it to Ruth, and so—"

"I haven't, I haven't!" Violet interrupted again. "I quite meant to do so, but I found there were so many things I wanted," she added, greatly abashed.

"Yes, of course," Ann returned, hurriedly, trying in vain to conceal her astonishment; "you must not think I wish to pry into your private affairs, Violet. Your money is your own to do as you like with; but you must remember that you did tell me you were going to send some to Ruth, and that misled me."

"Do your mother and father know that Agnes Hosking suspects me of having stolen her purse?" demanded Violet, in a hard tone.

"No," replied Ann; "I have not told them."

"Then I shall," said Violet proudly; "I wonder if they will believe that I am a thief! Perhaps they will send me home in disgrace!"

"You know they will not."

"How can I tell? Why should they not believe this tale against me if others do—if you did?"

"Violet, you are most unjust." There was deep pain in Ann's voice.

In her heart of hearts Violet knew that this was true, for she recognised that she herself had given her companion sufficient cause to mistrust her, but she was not going to acknowledge that now.

Dr. and Mrs. Reed had gone to a dinner-party and were not expected home till late, so she would have no opportunity of speaking to them that night, but she was determined to inform them of the ugly suspicion Agnes Hosking entertained of her the first thing in the morning; she would ask them to let her go home, she thought she could not endure to return to Helmsford College again to be pointed at as a thief. Her eyes were quite dry now; her sense of passionate indignation had overcome every other feeling.

In silence the two girls sat side by side whilst the twilight faded and the shadows of evening began to gather. At length Violet gave a shudder, as though she was cold, and, rising, declared her intention of returning to the house.

"Yes, I think it is time we went indoors," said Ann; "for the dew is falling. My blouse

is damp, I feel, and yours must be, too; we had better go in and change them. We are friends, are we not, Violet?"

Then, as Violet vouchsafed no response, she continued gently: "At any rate, I am your friend whatever your feelings may be towards me, and—and I am so sorry for you, dear. You must not take this matter too much to heart. Agnes can only influence a few of the girls against you, after all; she has very little power in the school really. Now we have had this talk together I know better how to act. I will speak to Agnes myself—"

"Oh, I will not trouble you to do that," Violet interrupted coldly, "you had much better not interfere. I—I don't suppose I shall go back to Helmsford College; I shall ask your father to send me home. I wish I had not come here!"

"Oh, Violet, don't say that!"

"I do say it, and I mean it."

After that they returned in silence to the house, and went upstairs to their respective rooms. As soon as Ann had changed her

blouse she crossed the landing to Violet's door, and inquired if she was coming into the drawing-room, for they had previously arranged to practise a duet, which they were learning on the piano.

"No," Violet answered curtly, "I am going to bed."

"Going to bed!" echoed Ann. "Oh, please, don't! Are you not well? Have you taken cold?"

"I don't know and I don't care," was the reckless response; "I only want to be left in peace. Do go away."

Ann did as she was requested, but by-and-by her kind heart prompted her to return. This time she opened the door softly, and, entering the room, crossed to the bed. She could not see Violet very plainly, for there was no light in the room save that which the stars gave—Violet had pulled up the blind before getting into bed—but she guessed that she was not asleep, and, stooping over her, she imprinted a kiss on her forehead. The next minute Violet's arms were around her neck and the kiss was warmly returned.

CHAPTER XVIII

AGNES HOSKING APOLOGISES

"VIOLET, it is time to get up."

Violet started up in bed and saw Ann standing by her side, fully dressed. The bright, morning sunshine had been streaming into the room for hours, but it had failed to awaken Violet, who, after Ann had left her on the previous night, had lain awake till nearly daybreak, too agitated to rest, and then had fallen into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

"Is it very late?" she asked, as she yawned and rubbed her eyes.

"It's nearly breakfast-time. Get up and dress as quickly as you can; and, Violet, I waited up till mother and father came home last

night and told them all about Agnes Hosking—I mean about her suspicion of you."

"Well?" questioned Violet, anxiously; "they don't believe that I know anything about the purse, do they?"

"No, certainly not."

"Did you explain to them how I came to get you to ask Agnes here?"

"Yes."

"Then they know everything?"

"Everything."

Violet asked no more questions, but jumped out of bed, and Ann left her to dress and went downstairs to the dining-room. Dr. Reed stood by the window, on the look-out for the postman; he glanced around with a smile as his daughter entered the room and gave her a hearty kiss as she joined him and slipped her arm through his.

"You look brighter than you did last night, my darling," he remarked affectionately; "worries never seem so formidable by daylight, do they?"

"No," she replied; "but I am still very unhappy about Violet, father. She declared last night that she would never enter the doors of Helmsford College again, and I am sure she meant it."

"Doubtless she did; but I believe she will change her mind this morning. Poor little thing, I am very sorry for her! Here comes the postman! Run and take the letters from him, my dear."

Ann obeyed. The letters proved all to be for her father, and scarcely had he finished reading them before Mrs. Reed and Violet entered the room, and the breakfast was brought in and placed on the table.

During the first part of the meal the conversation was on different subjects; but by-and-by Dr. Reed turned to Violet, who was hardly eating anything, and was looking nervous and ill at ease, and said with a

kindliness of tone which brought the tears to her eyes:—

"Ann has been telling me that things have not been going very pleasantly for you at school this term, Violet; I am sorry to hear that."

"Oh, Dr. Reed, I cannot go back to Helmsford College now I know what Agnes Hosking has been saying of me!" Violet responded, almost tragically; "it is impossible!"

"Why?" inquired the doctor quietly.

"Why? Do you think I can endure to be in the company of those who consider me a thief?" Violet asked, casting a glance full of reproach at him, her voice trembling with excessive agitation.

"You cannot?" he questioned. "I should not have thought you were one to play the coward like that. Of course I cannot insist on your returning to school against your will, I should not dream of doing that; but I certainly advise you strongly to go with Ann this morning in the usual way. An unjust

suspicion has been laid upon you, which I admit is very galling and hard to bear, and some few of your school-fellows have allowed an ill-natured girl to prejudice them against you, but I understand that you have your supporters at Helmsford College, and if I were you I would face this unpleasant affair and not run away from it. You have nothing to be ashamed of—that is, as far as the loss of the purse is concerned," he concluded, and Violet knew he was thinking of the motive which had influenced her in obtaining Agnes' invitation to his house.

"What do you imagine would be thought of you at school if you left suddenly in the middle of the term, Violet?" asked Mrs. Reed; "perhaps you have not considered that. I am sure, upon reflection, that you will see my husband is right. To my mind it is always better to face a trouble than to turn one's back on it. Do you know what I would do if I were you? I would take no notice of Agnes Hosking's cruel insinuations, I would show myself above noticing them. Depend upon it, that is the wisest way for you to act, and time will show that you have been most unjustly suspected. We, that is my husband, and Ann, and I, all know that now; and you

must not fancy, my dear, that we do not fully sympathise with you, for indeed we do. We are more grieved on your account than we can express."

They had done breakfast now, and, as his wife finished speaking, Dr. Reed pushed back his chair from the table. Violet addressed him quickly:—

"I hope I don't seem ungrateful," she said, "please believe I am not that. I—I want to do what is right, and, if you think it will be best, of course I will go to school as usual."

"I am sure that will be best," Dr. Reed answered, looking pleased; "I did not think your father's daughter would prove a coward and run away."

He left the room without saying any more, and, half-an-hour later, the two girls went to school, both feeling depressed, but on the best of terms with each other.

Ann knew that it was her mother's intention to call on Miss Orchardson and inform her what the result of Agnes Hosking's visit to No. 8 Laureston Square had been, but she

did not tell Violet that; therefore, when, in the midst of a French lesson, in the afternoon, a messenger from Miss Orchardson appeared in the class-room where it was being given, desiring that Miss Hosking might be sent to her in her private sitting-room, Ann was the only one in the class who was able to guess why she was wanted.

Agnes stood in awe of the headmistress, and her expression was one of decided uneasiness as she left the room. She was not absent very long, and when she returned, looking pale and rather frightened, Miss Orchardson was with her.

"I am sorry to interrupt the class, mademoiselle," the headmistress said, addressing the French governess; "but Agnes Hosking has an apology to make to Violet Wyndham, which it is my desire should be made publicly. As you are all aware, Agnes was so unfortunate as to lose a valuable purse last term, and it appears that she gave out that she suspected Violet Wyndham of having taken it. She has confessed to me that she had no actual ground for her suspicion, and she wishes to apologise for the

annoyance and unhappiness she has caused. She has behaved very badly, but an apology seems to be the only reparation she can make."

Violet, in her surprise, looked far more confused than Agnes, who now mumbled a few words of apology and resumed her seat. Then Miss Orchardson left the room, and the French lesson was resumed. Soon after that work came to an end for the afternoon, and the day-scholars went home, whilst the boarders repaired to the playgrounds where Agnes' apology to Violet Wyndham formed the general topic of conversation.

Agnes herself had no idea who had made Miss Orchardson acquainted with her unscrupulous conduct, and she had been considerably alarmed at the extent of the headmistress' knowledge. She had been obliged to admit that she had no direct charge to bring against Violet, and had readily agreed to offer her an apology, glad to think the matter could be settled so easily.

"I did it to satisfy Miss Orchardson," she said to the girls, in answer to their curious

inquiries, "but I have my own opinion all the same."

Meanwhile, Violet and Ann were on their homeward way together. There was a sparkle of triumph in Ann's grey eyes, for she was hopeful now that Violet's enemy had been completely routed.

"I wonder who can have told Miss Orchardson," said Violet, not a little puzzled at the turn events had taken; "was it you, Ann?"

"No. It was mother, I expect. She meant to, I know; for she and father agreed last night that it was not right to allow Agnes to continue to spread such a wicked story about you. Oh, Violet, I wish I had told mother what was going on at school weeks ago! She would have put a stop to it before. This only shows it's always right and best to be quite open about everything. By the way, have you told your people at home how unhappy you have been?"

"No; ought I to do so, do you think?"

"I hardly see how you could explain by letter."

"Ruth would blame me for having had anything to do with Agnes, I feel certain of that. She wrote and said she was greatly surprised when I told her we'd asked Agnes to tea. Perhaps I shall tell her all about that some day, and then she'll understand how it came about."

Ann looked thoughtful. She was thinking how strange it was that Violet should have minded her school-fellows knowing of the straitened circumstances of her people at home, and what great store she must set on money and position to have imagined that she had been slighted on account of her not possessing either the one or the other.

"I wonder if Agnes has heard of father's appointment, yet," Violet proceeded presently, "I wish she could have seen that paragraph about him in the newspaper Dr. Elizabeth sent to me, I almost wish I had kept it to show her, but I forwarded it to Ruth; I should like her to know that my people are shortly to be in a better position."

"I don't see that it matters whether she knows it or not," Ann replied, a trifle impatiently.

"No, of course it does not, but—oh, Ann, I don't believe you mind in the least what people think of you!"

"I mind what those I love think of me, but I don't bother about the opinions of others. Father says we should do what we believe to be right, be quite straight in every way, and never trouble about what people may be thinking."

"I wish I could do that!"

"Well, why can't you?"

"I don't know. I do mind what people think of me. Ruth used to say it was very weak and foolish of me, and I suppose it is."

"I am sure it is." Ann was silent for a moment, then she went on: "The first term I was at Helmsford College—I had a governess before that—the girls put me through a regular list of questions. It seemed

they wanted to find out all about father's family—"

"How rude of them!" broke in Violet; "I hope you didn't gratify their curiosity? should have told them to mind their own business!"

"Well, I did nothing of the kind," Ann replied with a smile; "I told them about my grandfather, that he had been a working farmer who had laboured with his hands, and I told them all about dear old Granny, and how father had made his own way in the world—I was very proud to tell them that!"

"And were the girls as nice to you afterwards as they were before?" asked Violet, struck with amazement.

"Oh yes! I have always got on very well with all the girls; they are not so narrow-minded as you think them."

"It was very plucky of you to speak out," said Violet, "I'm sure I could not have done it myself. Oh, Ann, you believe I love father, don't you?"

"Why, of course I do!"

"And yet I've been so ashamed that people should know he was not a prosperous man. That's one point on which Ruth and I have been so different. You're like Ruth. I believe if you knew her you'd like her much better than you do me."

"I don't believe I should. People who are alike never get on so well together as those who are not; I have often heard that remarked, haven't you?"

"Yes; but Ruth is nicer than I am in every way, she's so unselfish and sweet-tempered."

They were nearly at home now, and, in turning the corner of the street which led into Laureston Square, they came face to face with Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway, who stopped to speak to them for a minute.

"I have been to see your father, to make an appointment with him to meet me to-morrow," she explained to Ann, "I want his opinion of a patient of mine—that poor girl, Malvina Medland."

"Is she worse?" Ann questioned, in dismay.

Dr. Elizabeth briefly assented; then, being apparently in a hurry, she said good-bye and went on her way. Violet and Ann exchanged concerned glances, and the latter said, with a serious shake of the head:—

"She must be very ill if Dr. Elizabeth wants father to see her. Oh, Violet, I do hope she is not going to die!"

CHAPTER XIX

ANN'S PROMISE

THE summer term was drawing to a close, and the girls at Helmsford College were full of plans for the coming holidays. Most of those who had believed Agnes Hosking's story against Violet Wyndham, and had snubbed her in consequence, had changed their behaviour during the last few weeks and made kindly overtures to her; but there were still a few who stood by Agnes, though, after the apology she had made, they could not openly say that they did so.

"Never mind," Ann said consolingly, on one occasion, when Violet had remarked despondently that she feared her character would never be fully cleared from suspicion; "you must have patience, it will all come right some day."

"I wish I could think so," Violet responded, with a sigh, "but I fear that is not likely. I wonder if you would be patient in the circumstances?" Her tone was sceptical, and

she told herself that it was easier to preach than to practise.

"I hope I should try to be," answered Ann, guessing the thought in the other's mind; "I know it is very hard for you, Violet."

"Speaking of patience makes one think of poor Malvina Medland," said Violet; "I am sure it is marvellous how she bears pain as she does."

"She is obliged to bear it," sighed Ann, "and she is too unselfish not to do so as bravely as possible; Dr. Elizabeth says she has the spirit of a martyr, full of endurance and faith."

Malvina was at present in the Barford hospital, whither she had been removed a few days subsequent to the one on which Dr. Reed had seen her. She had become so much worse that she had required constant attendance, and nursing which she could not possibly have received in her own home. Ann had been to visit her once with Mrs. Reed since she had been in the hospital, and had found her uncomplaining as ever though in much pain. Everyone was most kind and good to her, she had declared gratefully, and

she hoped soon to be ever so much better; certainly it was a great disappointment that she should have had a relapse. Dr. Reed had shaken his head gravely when his daughter had repeated to him what Malvina had said, and she had immediately realised that he took a very serious view of the poor girl's condition.

Malvina's bed in the hospital was one of many in a bright, airy ward; and yet she was home-sick there, and would have given anything to be back in her small, bare room at home. But she was not unreasonable. She knew that her mother could not leave her work to nurse her, and the doctors considered her too ill to be left alone or to the occasional ministrations of the little charwoman, and therefore the hospital was the right place for her to be. She missed her mother and Lottie greatly, though they seized every possible opportunity of coming to see her on the days visitors were allowed in the wards; and her heart was very sore on her sister's account, whilst she was haunted day and night by harrowing thoughts in connection with her.

Mrs. Reed had been to see Malvina several times, and, on the occasion when Ann had accompanied her, the sick girl had inquired for Violet, whom she had spoken of as "the pretty young lady with the beautiful brown eyes." Ann had promised to bring Violet to see her, and Violet—truth to tell, flattered by Malvina's description of her—had quite willingly agreed to go.

Thus one hot afternoon in the last week of July found Ann and Violet visiting Malvina in the hospital. Malvina was in less pain than usual to-day and able to talk—of late she had been frequently too weak even for that much exertion. Violet thought she must certainly be better, for there was a pink flush on her cheeks, and her blue eyes were very bright. Her visitors were accommodated with chairs one on either side of her bed, and she looked from one to the other of them and smiled contentedly as she said:—

"It's so kind of you both to come! I do love having visitors, and I'm feeling so much easier to-day that it's a pleasure to talk."

"Oh, you will soon be well again, now," Violet declared cheerfully, "you are looking

ever so much better than I expected to see you."

"I'm in much less pain, miss, and that's a great mercy," Malvina replied, "but I doubt if I'm really better for all that. I asked the house surgeon the other day if he thought I was improving at all, but he put me off—wouldn't say, you know. So, yesterday, I asked Dr. Elizabeth; I was certain she would tell me the truth."

"And what did she say?" asked Ann gently, with a sinking sensation in her heart and anxiety in her face and voice.

"That I was not better yet, and that mine is one of those puzzling cases which baffle doctors, and I must have patience a little longer."

"A little longer?" echoed Violet. "Oh, that sounds hopeful, doesn't it? Are you happy here, Malvina?"

"Happier than I was at first, miss; I felt so lonely for the first few days. Oh, I don't mean lonely in that way," she continued, as her companions glanced along the rows of

beds with their sick occupants, "but I felt so strange, and—I daresay it seems absurd—I missed my sparrows, especially of a morning. Lottie tells me she feeds them with crumbs every day on the sill of my bedroom window, just as I used to do. The sweet little creatures! They are so tame—almost as tame as your canaries, Miss Ann!"

"I suppose you often see Lottie?" questioned Ann.

"Oh, yes, miss. You know she's really a good-hearted girl, and she's very fond of me; but I'm so unhappy about her. She goes on betting, and she's a great trouble to mother on account of her flighty ways. She means no harm, I'm sure, but—" and Malvina broke off and shook her head whilst an expression of deep sadness settled on her face.

"Poor Lottie," said Ann, softly, "poor girl!"

There was a brief silence after that. Many of the other patients had visitors, too, and there was a low hum of conversation throughout the ward.

"The summer holidays commence next week," Ann informed Malvina by-and-by, "I am going to spend them with my grandmother at Teymouth."

"And I am going home to my own people," said Violet, her pretty face glowing with happiness.

"We are to travel to London together," explained Ann, "and I am to break my journey there in order to spend a few days with an aunt—mother's sister. Mother and father hope to join me in Devonshire, in September, if all's well. You will have to say good-bye to us to-day, Malvina, for nearly two months."

"For nearly two months!" echoed Malvina. There was a wistful expression in her blue eyes. "That is a long, long time to look forward to," she went on gravely, "and I—perhaps I shall not be here when you come back to Buford."

"I hope not," said Violet, with a smile, "I hope by then you will be at home again."

"I did not mean that," Malvina answered in a low tone, "I think, sometimes, that I shall not get about again; it will be as God wills, and—and—yes, He knows best. You mustn't be grieved," she proceeded, as Violet looked at her in consternation and then glanced quickly at Ann, "I may be quite wrong, only I have felt of late, after suffering a great deal, that perhaps I shall not get well."

She raised herself on the pillow as she spoke, and fixed her eyes on Ann with an appealing look in their blue depths.

"Miss Ann," she said earnestly, "you've been a good friend to me ever since I knew you, and that emboldens me to ask you a great, great favour. I want you to promise me something. It's asking more than I ought of you, I daresay, and perhaps you'll think it bold and presumptuous of me—"

"No, I am sure I shall not think that," Ann interposed hastily. "Tell me what it is you wish me to promise; anything I can do for you I most certainly will."

"Thank you, miss. I want you to promise that, if anything happens to me, you'll be a

friend to Lottie if you can. You said 'poor Lottie, poor girl,' just now in a way that made me think you didn't despise her quite. Oh, Miss Ann, Lottie isn't a good girl, I know that! She's made bad companions, and perhaps I'm wrong to ask you this, perhaps your mother and father would be angry if you had anything to do with her!"

Ann shook her head, for she knew better than that; but she had had very little intercourse with Lottie, and she scarcely knew what answer to make. She did not think it likely she would ever have an opportunity of being a friend to her.

"Nobody cares for Lottie as I do," the sick girl continued mournfully, "not even mother—but I'm forgetting, God cares for her. She's one of His poor wandering sheep. Yes, He cares for her."

"Malvina, if I can be a friend to Lottie I will," Ann promised earnestly, "you may take my word for that."

A look of radiant happiness lit up the invalid's face. "Thank you, Miss Ann," she said gratefully, "oh, thank you! I shall be

more easy about Lottie now! She's selfish and flighty, but she's got a heart all the same, and she loves me—that's why I've been worrying about her so much, wondering how she will take it if—if I don't go home any more."

At that moment a nurse came up, whispered something to Ann, and moved away again.

"She says we must not stay any longer," Ann said, in response to Violet's inquiring glance; "we must go now, Malvina." She rose and held out her hand, which the invalid took and held tightly. "I'm afraid we must say good-bye," she added, with a slight break in her voice.

"I am sorry you must not stay longer now, for I know we shall not meet again for a long, long while," Malvina whispered, her voice sounding very feeble and tired, "but we shall meet again, I am sure of that."

"Yes," assented Ann, "I, too, am sure of that."

She bent and kissed Malvina tenderly, as a sister might have done. "Good-bye," she said, "God bless you."

"He is with me, Miss Ann," Malvina answered; "He will be with me all the way."

"Good-bye," Ann said again; then she drew her hand gently away from the sick girl's clinging fingers, and walked swiftly down the ward towards the door.

It was Violet's turn to say good-bye now. She did so kindly, but somewhat hurriedly, and joined Ann who was waiting for her at the door. Glancing back the two girls saw that Malvina had raised herself on her elbow, and was gazing after them. They smiled and nodded, and so bright was her smile in return that Violet thought she could not be so very ill. She made some remark to that effect as soon as she and her companion had left the hospital and were out in the street, but received no reply, and, glancing at Ann, she saw that she was incapable of speech, and that her eyes were almost blinded with tears.

For a few minutes the girls walked on, side by side, in silence; but Ann soon regained her composure, and then Violet asked in awed tones:—

"Do you think that she is going to die—that she won't get over this?"

"I have a feeling that she is not going to live very long, and I know father considers her very ill," was the grave response.

"And yet you agreed with her when she said you would meet again!" cried Violet, considerably surprised.

"Yes, but I did not mean that we should meet in this world, nor, I think, did she," Ann replied, in a voice which was still tremulous with emotion.

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Violet, with a faint shudder.

"Dreadful? Why? It would be dreadful if I thought we should not meet again—if we looked forward no further than this life."

"You are such a strange girl," Violet said wonderingly, "so very different to what I expected you would be."

"You have several times told me that," Ann said gravely, "you make me curious to know what you had pictured I should be like."

Violet made no response to this. As their visit to the hospital had not been of such long duration as they had anticipated it would be, instead of going straight home the two girls lingered looking in the shop windows. By-and-by their conversation turned to the approaching holidays, to which both were naturally looking forward with the keenest pleasure.

"It will be so nice travelling together," Ann said; "it seemed such a long journey last year when I took it alone—mother did not join me at Teymouth till the holidays were half over, seven weeks is too long a time for her to be away from home."

"Did you stay in London last year?" asked Violet.

"Yes, for nearly a week, at Hampstead with Aunt Louisa."

"Is she nice?" inquired Violet.

"Aunt Louisa? Oh, yes! She's very like mother. Her husband — Uncle John — is a barrister, you know. They haven't any children."

"I suppose they are fashionable people?"

"I suppose they are," Ann admitted, with an amused laugh; "they have a beautiful home, and Aunt Louisa goes into society a good deal."

"Wouldn't you rather spend your holidays with them than with your grandmother?" questioned Violet.

"No, indeed! I'd far rather be at Teymouth with Granny. I've been thinking how nice it would be if you could persuade your people to go to Teymouth; you know Ruth wrote and said that they talked of going away for a change."

"Oh, what a splendid idea!" cried Violet, her face lighting up with excitement. "But could we get lodgings at Teymouth, I wonder?"

"Yes, I believe so; I can easily find that out for you when I get there, and I will let you know. It's not a fashionable place, though, Violet."

"Oh no, I understand that. I think father would like it better on that account, and mother, too. There's a nice beach, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Madge and the boys would be delighted with that, and—oh, I do wish it could be managed for us to meet you there! I want you to know Ruth, and I'm sure you'd like mother. You can't think how I'm longing to see them all, I never seemed to love them so dearly when I was at home."

Ann made no response, for her attention had been attracted by two factory girls who had brushed by them, one of whom was Lottie Medland, the girl she had promised to befriend; and, as Ann looked after her and

caught the sound of her light, careless laugh, she sighed, and her face grew sorrowful again, whilst her thoughts returned to Malvina grieving about her sister in the midst of her pain.

CHAPTER XX

VIOLET AT HOME AGAIN

"OH, mother, how glad I am to be at home again!" cried Violet Wyndham, sincerity in her tone, her eyes shining with a joyous light.

The Wyndhams, mother, father, and children, were assembled in the sitting-room on the evening of Violet's return to her home, after the evening meal, which had been later than usual on the traveller's account. The gas was lit, but the blind was up and the window open wide to admit as much air as possible, for the weather was almost intolerably hot in London. Close to the window Mrs. Wyndham was seated, Violet at her side, and her husband opposite to her, whilst the others hovered around.

"I wonder how many times you've said that within the last hour, Violet," remarked Mr. Wyndham, smiling. "She doesn't appear the least tired, does she?" he continued, addressing his wife; "see what a colour she

has! she makes Ruth and Madge look quite pale."

"Oh, I'm not in the least tired," declared Violet, "though it was a very hot journey and the air seemed to get closer and closer as we came further south. I am glad you have met Ann, father; what did you think of her?"

"My dear Violet, I only saw her for a minute or so before her aunt came up and took her away. I noticed she had her father's eyes, however."

"Yes," nodded Violet. "I was disappointed that you did not see more of her, but one cannot say much on a railway-platform, anyway."

"She has gone to stay with a sister of her mother's, has she not?" questioned Ruth. She sat with her eyes fixed on Violet's face, not saying much, but listening attentively to all Violet said.

"Yes. Her aunt met her and took her away in a grand carriage with a pair of horses and servants in livery, whilst father and I got into a humble cab." Violet laughed gaily, and

proceeded: "Oh, dear me, how that cab crawled along—or so it seemed to me. I was in such a fever of impatience to get home, wasn't I, father?"

"You were, my dear," Mr. Wyndham replied, "and when at last the cab pulled up you wouldn't wait for me to open the door but opened it yourself, jumped out, and simply flew like a whirlwind into the house."

"Yes," smiled Violet, "and there, in the passage, were mother, and Ruth, and Madge, and the boys—"

"And she kissed all round beginning with mother and ending with me," broke in Billy, "and then she made a rush towards the kitchen stairs to look for Barbara who was coming up, and they bumped against each other and Barbara's cap fell off!" He burst into a roar of laughter, in which his brother joined, at the remembrance of the scene.

"It was a clean cap," said Madge; "Barbara had put it on in honour of Violet; she has been as excited about your return as any of us, Vi."

"Yes," said Frank, "and she's been making such preparations for your arrival, scrubbing and cleaning, and she's been as cross as two sticks."

"You know, dear, she generally is cross when she's more than usually busy," Mrs. Wyndham observed; "I think it's because she does not know what to do first. I make it a rule now to leave her to herself at such times, that's far the best plan."

"Violet doubtless remembers Barbara's peculiarities," remarked Mr. Wyndham, with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

They all laughed; they were ready to laugh at very little that evening, for it was so delightful to be all together again, and it added to the pleasure of the occasion to see how full of contentment and happiness Violet appeared. Her eyes took in everything about her as she talked, the fresh curtains in the window, the flowers on the table, and many other evidences that went to prove that efforts had been made to make the room look as attractive as possible on her arrival. She guessed that Ruth had been hard at work all day, and there was tenderness as well as

affection in her glance as it rested on her elder sister.

"I can hardly realise now that I have been away from you all for more than six months," she said by-and-by, "and yet, sometimes, at Barford, I used to feel as though I had been parted from you for years."

"You have been very happy, haven't you, dear?" questioned her mother; "the Reeds have been unfailingly kind to you, haven't they?"

"They have been kindness itself always. I've been treated like Ann in every way. At first everything was very strange and I thought Mrs. Reed very strict and particular, but I don't think that now. I've grown to understand her, and I love her dearly. Indeed I have met with a great deal of kindness from everyone, except—except—"

Violet's voice faltered and broke off, whilst the flush in her cheeks deepened and her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"My dear, what is it?" questioned Mrs. Wyndham, in dismay.

"I didn't mean to tell you to-night," said Violet; "but I suppose I may as well and get it over. I couldn't very well write and explain."

"Someone has been unkind to you?" asked Ruth; "not Ann, surely?"

"Ann?" cried Violet; "what can you be thinking of, Ruth? Why Ann wouldn't be unkind to anyone—not to her worst enemy! But I don't believe she ever had an enemy. It's Agnes Hosking! She's a mean, wicked, cruel—"

"Hush, hush, Violet," interposed her father; "don't get excited and use such violent language. Why, your face is crimson with passion! Try to tell us quietly what Agnes Hosking has done."

Accordingly Violet told the tale of the loss of the tortoise-shell purse, which was listened to with great interest, but when she came to speak of the suspicion which had been put upon her, her parents looked very

grave and the indignation of her sisters and brothers knew no bounds.

Agnes had behaved most shamefully, they declared, and she ought to have been severely punished in spite of her apology.

"It is a great pity she was invited to the Reeds' house at all." Ruth observed, when they had all quieted down a little; "I said so at the time, I remember. How did it come about, Violet?"

"She asked me to get her an invitation and I did," Violet admitted, "no one had invited her out to tea all the term. I made a mistake in acting as I did, and I have had to suffer for it. Ann is always hoping the purse may turn up, but that's most unlikely now; I expect Agnes dropped it in the street, and whoever picked it up kept it—you see there was considerably more than a pound in it. Oh, dear, it has been a most disagreeable affair altogether, and has caused me more unhappiness than I can express!"

"I have no doubt of that," said Mr. Wyndham; "but we won't let it overshadow your first evening at home, Violet. You have

been badly treated, but the truth will prevail—it always does sooner or later—and I believe those girls who have been prejudiced against you will eventually learn that they have done you an injustice, though they may not acknowledge it in so many words."

"I am sure your father is right, Violet darling," said Mrs. Wyndham eagerly, with a brightening countenance; "no one who really knows you could believe you capable of—of theft." She hesitated over the last word, and flushed sensitively.

"No, indeed," agreed Madge. "Oh, you poor, dear Violet, how miserably unhappy you must have been!" The little girl's voice was full of sympathy.

"And how miserably unhappy we should have been if we had known what was going on!" cried Ruth.

"I'm glad we didn't know," said Billy ingenuously. "It wouldn't have done any good if we had," he added quickly, wondering if his candid remark had sounded a little unkind, he had not meant it to be that.

"Don't you think we might, with advantage, change the subject of our conversation?" suggested Mr. Wyndham. "You have said enough about your enemy for to-night, Violet, let us hear about your friends—those two girls whom you went to see in the Easter holidays, for instance. Let me see, what was it they were called?"

"Garret," Violet replied, and forthwith launched into a lengthy description of the Garret girls, whom, next to Ann Reed, she counted as her best friends, and Agnes Hosking's name did not occur in the conversation again.

The family party did not break up till late that night, and long after the rest of the household slept Ruth and Violet talked in their own room. They had so much to say to each other, and excitement kept them from feeling sleepy.

"I believe you have grown inches," declared Ruth, as she sat on her sister's box, whilst Violet, standing before the dressing-table, brushed her wavy brown hair, "and you are looking remarkably well. How do you think father is looking?"

"Capital! I noticed the difference in him the instant I caught sight of him when our train ran into the station; he looks so much younger and brighter than when I went away, and I'm sure he doesn't stoop so much. Oh, Ruthie, you can't think how rejoiced I felt when I heard of his good fortune!"

"I think I can," Ruth replied, smiling happily. "Were you disappointed when you heard we were going to remain on here?" she inquired.

Violet nodded. "Just a little," she admitted, "but it is a nice little house really; I thought how comfortable the sitting-room was to-night, you've improved it."

"Oh, you noticed that!" Ruth exclaimed, much gratified; "I was so afraid the house would appear very mean and small after the one you have been accustomed to lately."

"It's home," Violet said softly, "going away has taught me one thing at any rate, that there's no place so dear as home."

Ruth's face glowed with delight. She had not dared to expect that Violet would return in

this contented frame of mind, and she was secretly a little puzzled. It was beginning to dawn on her already that her sister had altered—improved, she thought.

"But, as I said downstairs, I've been very happy at Barford," Violet proceeded; "except for the unpleasantness in connection with Agnes Hosking everything has gone well. Oh, Ruthie, I'm so ashamed when I think of—but there I'll tell you all about it!" And forthwith she explained the pressure Agnes Hosking had put upon her to obtain the invitation to Laureston Square, and how she had weakly yielded to it. She did not look at Ruth the while she was speaking; but, when she had ceased, she glanced around at her and saw an amazed, shocked countenance.

"Oh, Violet," gasped Ruth, at length, "what could the Reeds have thought of you?"

"I don't know what Dr. and Mrs. Reed thought of me, for they never said. I explained everything to Ann, and she told her parents. Ann was amazed, she didn't seem able to understand me—"

"I understand you," interposed Ruth, reproach in her voice, "you were ashamed that your well-to-do school-fellows should know of our poor circumstances, and yet you were not ashamed to bribe Agnes to hold her tongue—it was actually that."

"I knew you would be very disgusted with me," sighed Violet, "and I admit that you have reason to be. Oh, Ruthie, I wish I were more like you and Ann Reed! I wish I didn't care for outside opinion; Ann doesn't care in the very least, and I know if she had been in my place she would have defied Agnes Hosking. That's what I ought to have done, but I was such a mean-spirited coward. You can't think worse of me than I think of myself; only, do believe that in the same circumstances I would act very differently now."

She looked at her sister appealingly as she spoke, and there was a ring of sincerity in her tone, which the other could not fail to note. "You do believe it, don't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," Ruth answered. She never could be angry long with Violet, and, rising, she went to her side and kissed her affectionately.

"Oh, Ruthie, what a dear you are!" cried Violet, as she warmly returned the caress. There was a little choke in her voice. A moment later, she exclaimed: "Listen, surely that's the dining-room clock striking twelve!"

"Yes. We must go to bed and not talk any more to-night."

Accordingly they went to bed, and as soon as Violet laid her head on the pillow she discovered that she really was tired, so that it was not long before she was fast asleep. Ruth lay quietly by her side, listening to her regular breathing, and thinking over all she had heard that evening. It was nearly daybreak before she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

AT TEYMOUTH

IT was a cloudless August day, oppressively hot in the sunshine but pleasant in the shade, and there was shade on the beach at Teymouth beneath the shelter of the high, red cliffs where a happy party, consisting of Mrs. Wyndham and her five children, was assembled.

The plan which Ann Reed had suggested, that the Wyndhams might take lodgings at Teymouth for their summer holiday, had actually been carried out, and now they were in residence at a farm house situated about half a mile from the village, and thoroughly enjoying the novel experience of life in the country.

This afternoon the young folks had made a huge fire of drift wood, over which they were trying to boil a kettle of water preparatory to making tea, whilst a table-cloth—kept in place by a big stone at each corner—had been spread on the sand and

displayed a tempting repast of bread and butter, cake, and a big tin of clotted cream.

"I hope they'll come soon," said Violet, who was feeding the fire with sticks, "for the kettle is beginning to sing; but they are not in sight yet, and old Mrs. Reed does walk so slowly."

"She'll get along quicker with father to lend her an arm," observed Ruth; "as soon as the kettle boils I think we had better make the tea."

They were waiting for Ann and her grandmother, and for Mr. Wyndham who had gone to offer the old lady his assistance down the somewhat uneven path which led to the beach. The Wyndhams had been at Teymouth a fortnight, during which time they had seen Ann and her grandmother nearly every day. Mr. and Mrs. Wyndham seemed to have cast off all their cares and to be enjoying their holiday as much as their children; they felt they might do so with easy minds.

"Here they come at last!" cried Madge, presently. "Does the kettle boil?"

"Yes," Violet answered. "Ruthie, make the tea. Oh, dear me, I do hope the water is not smoky!"

Ruth made the tea, and a few minutes later old Mrs. Reed, leaning on Mr. Wyndham's arm, with Ann on her other side, joined the party, and was made very comfortable in a deck chair, which had been brought down to the beach on purpose for her and placed in a sheltered spot. Though Ann's grandmother was eighty years of age she did not look so old, for her face was singularly unwrinkled and her brow smooth, whilst her intellect was as bright as it had ever been, and her sight and hearing were good. She was a little stiff and slow in her movements, as the result of rheumatism, from which she occasionally suffered, but she was a wonderful woman for her years. There was a strong likeness between her and her son, and consequently between her and Ann. All three had the same fine grey eyes, and the same open, kindly expression of countenance.

"You ought not to make so much of me," the old lady said, in a voice which had more than a touch of west-country dialect in its

pleasant tones, "for think how I shall miss your attentions by-and-by!"

"We won't think of 'by-and-by,'" replied Mrs. Wyndham; "let us live in the present and enjoy these happy hours as much as we can. Ruth, will you pour out the tea, my dear? Boys, make yourselves useful and hand around the plates. We must make tables of our laps."

The meal commenced right merrily. Everyone was in good spirits, and the tea, though it proved a trifle smoky, was not enough so to be spoilt, and was drunk and enjoyed; in fact Billy went so far as to declare that he preferred the flavour of smoky tea. Full justice was done to the eatables, too, and the plates of bread and butter and cake were soon emptied, whilst, at the completion of the repast, only about a teaspoonful of cream remained at the bottom of the tin, which had been full to the brim.

"I hope everyone has had enough," said Mrs. Wyndham; then, as they all declared they had made capital teas, she indicated the empty plates and quoted: "Enough is as good as a feast."

"I call it a feast when one has cream," remarked Madge; at which they all laughed, and Mrs. Reed promised to send her some cream on her birthday if she would tell her the date, which she was only too pleased to do.

As soon as tea was over the boys and their father wandered off around the cliffs, whilst Mrs. Wyndham and the girls, having packed the tea things into baskets, settled themselves to enjoy a chat with Mrs. Reed. The latter was a most entertaining companion; for she owned a wonderful memory which went back more than seventy years: She talked to them now of her youth, of the time when she had been her granddaughter's age.

"I was in my first situation, then," she said; "you must understand that my father was a hard-working man who farmed a few acres, and I was the eldest of a long family—we all had to turn out and earn our own livings as soon as we were old enough."

"Did you like being a servant?" asked Madge curiously.

"Not at first, my dear," Mrs. Reed admitted, with a bright smile at her little questioner; "I had to work very hard, and I was at the age when young girls naturally like amusements; but, by-and-by, as I tried to do my duty, I grew to like it better. 'Tis the working bee that gets the best sweets from life, after all."

"Do you really think that?" Ruth inquired; then, as Mrs. Reed emphatically assented, she begged her to tell them some more about her youthful days.

The old lady willingly complied, and, from speaking of her girlhood, she went on to her married life and the birth of her son. She told them how the boy had always evinced an eagerness for knowledge, and how she and his father had worked and saved so that he might have the advantages of a good education and a fair start in life.

"My husband was very proud of our boy, but I don't think he ever guessed he would do as well as he has," she said simply; "my son never caused me a moment's anxiety in my life," she added with a tender smile.

"He always loved you too well to do that, Granny," said Ann, her open face glowing with gratification as she listened to her father's praise.

It was very pleasant there in the shelter of the cliffs. Presently a fleet of fishing boats, with unfurled to catch the evening breeze, appeared in sight, going up the channel, the light from the setting sun shining full upon them.

"How pretty they look!" cried Ann; "I wish they would come nearer so that we could have a better view of them."

"They will not do that," said her grandmother; "they are Brixham trawlers, and will keep well out at sea."

The conversation then turned upon fishing and boating, and, subsequently, to the expected visit of Dr. and Mrs. Reed, which had been arranged for the early part of September. Dr. Reed meant to take a fortnight's holiday and intended to leave his practice to the care of his partner, Mr. Luscombe, meanwhile.

By-and-by Mr. Wyndham and the boys returned; and then, as the sun had nearly set, a general move was made, and the party left the beach. The Wyndhams' way led past Mrs. Reed's cottage, at the gate of which goodbyes were exchanged and Ann arranged to meet her friends on the following morning.

Mrs. Reed, who was considerably tired, went straight indoors, but Ann lingered to watch the Wyndhams out of sight, and when she entered the cottage she found her grandmother had gone upstairs to remove her bonnet and cloak. The girl hung her hat on a peg in the passage, and turned into the comfortable little parlour, where, on the table in the centre of the room, she immediately caught sight of a letter addressed to herself; her look was one of surprise as she took it up, for, though the postmark was that of her native town, the handwriting on the envelope was unknown to her.

"Whom can it be from?" she murmured, as she went to the window in order to see better, for the daylight had almost gone. "Why, it's from Dr. Elizabeth!" she

exclaimed, as she opened the letter and glanced at the signature, "what can she have to say to me?" And she commenced to read:—

"MY DEAR ANN,"

"I am writing to tell you that poor Malvina Medland died this morning. She was so much worse

all last week and suffered so greatly that no one could wish her life to be prolonged. I am thankful

to say, however, that she was spared pain at the end, and passed away as quietly as if she had been

falling asleep. The night before last I was with her for some time, and she asked me to remind you

of a promise you once made her, she did not explain what it was; she said, 'Please tell Miss Ann

I rely upon her to keep her promise,' so I remind you now. No doubt you will understand what the

poor girl meant. You will be glad to hear that both Mrs. Medland and Lottie were with Malvina

at the time of her death; Mrs. Medland appears broken-hearted, for Malvina was her favourite child."

The letter dropped from Ann's hand, and she stood gazing with unseeing eyes out of the window. Malvina was dead. The brave, patient life was at an end. Never again, with aching back and weary arms, would she "mind babies" or do plain needlework or crochet; she was beyond all that in the presence of the Great Physician. Ann knew she had no need to be sorry for Malvina now, but the tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks as she recalled her last interview with the sick girl, and her tender heart was full of sympathy for the mother and sister in their desolation.

"I am glad I made Malvina that promise," she thought, "I believe it made her very

happy; but I don't know how I am going to keep it—perhaps God will show me when I get home."

She picked up Dr. Elizabeth's letter and finished reading it. By that time her grandmother had come downstairs and she had to account for her tears; and they talked of Malvina—whom old Mrs. Reed knew well by repute—till they were interrupted by the servant who brought in the lamp and the supper things.

The next morning when Ann, according to the arrangement she had made, joined the three Wyndham girls in a walk through some beautiful woods which adjoined Teymouth, Violet noticed at once that she was unusually subdued in her manner, and asked if anything was amiss. In a voice which faltered, in spite of the effort she made to keep it steady, Ann told her news.

"Malvina dead!" gasped Violet, with a rush of tears to her brown eyes; "oh, Ann! When did you hear that?" She looked, as she felt, much shocked.

"Last night, in a letter from Dr. Elizabeth, which arrived for me while we were on the beach," Ann rejoined; "she did not suffer at the last, so Dr. Elizabeth says, I felt so relieved to hear that. Do you remember, Violet, how she said that day when we went to say good-bye to her at the hospital 'He will be with me all the way?'"

Violet assented with a nod, she could not trust her voice to speak, and Madge asked:—

"What did she mean, Ann?"

"That Jesus would be with her. I am sure she was thinking of that verse in the twenty-third psalm, 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.'"

"Poor girl," murmured Ruth, who, like Madge, had heard all about Malvina from Violet; "did she die in the hospital?" she inquired.

"Yes," assented Ann, "but her mother and sister were with her when she died. Oh, I do feel so sorry for them!"

"So do I," said Ruth, "more especially for the sister. It must be so dreadful to know you have given trouble to one you love, and that you will never be able to make amends."

"The sister is a very naughty girl, isn't she, Ann?" questioned Madge.

"Yes, she is," Ann was obliged to admit. "I suppose Violet has been telling you about her?"

"Yes," Madge nodded; "and Violet says you promised to be a friend to her if Malvina died."

"So I did; and I mean, if possible, to keep my word."

"I suppose you have a great many friends," remarked Madge seriously, "you would, as your father is so well known and—"

"Madge!" interrupted Ruth, in an admonishing tone, fearful of what her young sister was about to say.

"I haven't said anything out of the way, have I?" inquired Madge, innocently.

"No, no," Ann assured her. "Father is well known, of course, because he has lived many years in Barford; we have a lot of friends there. I suppose you know a good many people at Streatham, don't you?"

"No," rejoined Madge; "we've always been too poor to know people, but it will be different now, I hope. There are some people I do not wish to know," she continued, glancing at Violet, who suddenly grew very red, "Agnes Hosking, for instance—"

"Oh, we will not talk of her!" broke in Ruth; "of course we should never be on terms of friendship with a girl who has treated Violet badly. Ann, I wonder if that tortoise-shell purse will ever be found; do you think it is at all likely it will?"

This was the first occasion on which Ruth had mentioned the matter of the loss of Agnes' purse to Ann. Ann shook her head dubiously in answer to Ruth's question; she was beginning to give up hope that the purse would ever be recovered now.

"It is very hard for Violet," Ruth whispered, as she and Ann fell behind the other two in

the narrow woodland path through which they were walking, "but she acted most foolishly and wrongly. She has told me everything. Her behaviour must have surprised and shocked you, yet you tried to protect her and stood her friend." There was deep gratitude in Ruth's tone.

"Why, of course I did," responded Ann, "I am sure you would have done the same."

"Yes, but she is my sister."

"And she is my friend."

Ruth smiled. She was right glad that Violet had such a friend as this girl to stand by her. Once she had feared that Ann might try to supplant her in Violet's affections; but then she had not known Ann, whom to know was to trust.

CHAPTER XXII

AT STREATHAM

ALL too swiftly the early autumn days slipped away for the holiday-keepers at Teymouth. The evenings were growing much shorter now, and a golden tinge was here and there noticeable on the woods which made a background for the little sea-side village; blackberries, too, were ripening fast, greatly to the satisfaction of the Wyndham boys, who rambled far and wide in search of them.

It had been arranged for the Wyndhams to return to London on the twelfth of September, and Mr. Wyndham had looked forward with the keenest pleasure to the company of Dr. Reed at Teymouth for a week or so before that date, but a few days before the one on which the doctor and his wife had planned to arrive Ann received a letter from home with the information that Mr. Luscombe, who had been away for his holiday, had returned far from well and was now laid up with pneumonia, so that it

would be quite impossible for her father to leave his practice at present; therefore, he and her mother had decided to defer their visit to Devonshire till the following month. Ann carried the news at once to her friends at the farm, who received it with many expressions of regret.

"Father says Mr. Luscombe is not seriously ill," she explained, "I am very glad of that; but it will be several weeks before he will be well enough to work again. I expect father is very disappointed that he cannot get away now, and mother, too. Oh, dear, I suppose I shall have to travel all the way home by myself, and it is such a long journey! Perhaps, though, Violet could meet me in London, if I remain with Granny till nearly the beginning of the term."

"Could you not return with us to London?" suggested Mr. Wyndham. "You might spend a few days at Streatham, and then you and Violet could go back to Buford together."

"Oh, that would be a capital plan!" cried Violet, "oh, do come, Ann!"

"I should much like to," Ann replied, her face brightening; "but would it be convenient?" she asked, as she fancied she saw a dubious expression on Mrs. Wyndham's face.

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Wyndham assured her hastily; "you would have to share Madge's room, but you would not mind that, perhaps?" she said inquiringly.

"Certainly not, if Madge does not—" Ann was commencing when Madge sprang impetuously to her side, and interrupted her by flinging her arms around her neck and giving her a friendly hug, exclaiming as she did so:—

"Oh, what fun it will be! I slept with Ruth for months and months, but when Violet came home I had to turn out for her. I do love having someone to talk to. Mine is a very little room, Ann, but you aren't very particular, are you?"

"No," replied Ann, smiling, "a very small space will do for me."

"I will write to your mother at once," said Mrs. Wyndham, "and we shall soon hear what she and your father think of our plan."

Dr. and Mrs. Reed thought the plan a most excellent one and immediately sent a reply to that effect. So it came to pass that when the Wyndhams left Teymouth they took Ann with them. Ann felt parting from her grandmother but the old lady, who had the visit of her son and daughter-in-law to look forward to and was in good spirits on that account, bade her a cheerful good-bye and spoke hopefully of their meeting next year.

Nevertheless, Ann could not help feeling a little depressed during the first part of the journey to London, for a year seemed a long time to look forward to, and she knew it was most unlikely that she would see her grandmother again before the expiration of that time. Long before Bristol was reached, however, which was about half the distance they had to travel, she was joining in the general conversation, apparently as merry and happy as her companions, who, rather to their own surprise, were eager now to get home.

"It was lovely at Teymouth, and it's very nice in a farm house in the summer," observed Madge, "but it must be very dull in the winter, I should think, when the weather is bad. I'm looking forward to see Barbara, and she'll be glad to see us, I know."

"I hope she will have everything comfortable for us," remarked Mrs. Wyndham, rather anxiously, "I wrote to her to get help to put the house in order, but poor Barbara has no head for management, and, with the best intentions in the world, she is a sad muddler."

Mr. Wyndham smiled on hearing this, and a humorous twinkle crept into his eyes.

"Well, don't begin to worry, my dear," he said kindly, "we all know what Barbara is, except Ann, and she will make allowances for her, I've no doubt."

The travellers, being eight in number, had a compartment to themselves, and the journey was made most comfortably. When Paddington was reached they all declared they were not in the least tired; but, by the

time they arrived at Streatham they told a different tale.

Ann was secretly very curious to see Violet's home, and she looked with considerable interest at the plain, freckled face of the girl who stood on the doorstep broadly smiling a welcome. Barbara, who had been sent to her home on board wages whilst the Wyndhams had been away on their holiday, had not been sorry to get to work again; she had done her best during the few days previous to the family's return to put the house in good order, with the assistance of a charwoman, and she was satisfied with the result of her labours.

Mrs. Wyndham was exceedingly pleased when she saw how nice everything was looking. Several of the rooms had been repapered and repainted, and, consequently, there was an air of freshness about the place which was as delightful as it was novel; and Barbara had a substantial high tea ready in the sitting-room, which the travellers were all ready to fully appreciate.

Ann spent several days with the Wyndhams. She noticed at once how much Mrs.

Wyndham relied upon her eldest daughter in every way, and what a busy life Ruth led, at the beck and call of everybody. It was always, "I want you, Ruth," or "Ruth knows about that," or "You must ask Ruth to help you," and so on; and Ruth never grumbled that it was so, or said that she had too much to do, but was always willing and cheerful.

"Things are much nicer and more comfortable in every way at home than they used to be," Violet informed Ann confidentially, on one occasion when they were alone together, "I really think it's all Ruth's doing. She makes the boys pick up their playthings and won't let them worry Barbara in the kitchen; she seems to superintend everything, doesn't she? And then she gives Barbara a hint when her cap goes crooked, and persuades her to take her time and not get 'in a rush!'" Ann smiled understandingly, as Violet went on, "Oh, dear me, what a to-do it used to be when Barbara was 'in a rush' She'd break the crockery in her hurry to try to get ahead of the work, and she never used to get ahead of it, she was always behind, and poor mother would cry when things went wrong and she couldn't set them right. I was surprised when

I came home to find things so different, just as though some good fairy had been at work. I think our good fairy is Ruth."

Ruth had certainly done her best to make her home more comfortable and orderly since she had left school, and her efforts, which her mother had been the first to appreciate and further, had met with more success than she had dared to hope would be the case; she was full of bright hopes for the future when her father would be in the position to allow more money for the household expenses, and there would not be such anxiety about meeting the bills.

The afternoon before Ann and Violet left Streatham for Buford they were returning from a walk with Ruth and Madge when Violet drew Ann's attention to a large, red brick house with bow windows, standing in its own grounds, and informed her that it was Agnes Hosking's home.

"That's the sort of house Violet admires," Ruth remarked, with a mischievous laugh, "it's quite ordinary on the outside, isn't it, but I believe the interior is something

extraordinary. Have you told Ann how it is furnished, Vi?"

"No," returned Violet, colouring, "I have not—it would not interest her at all; and I've changed my mind about wishing to live in a house like that, Ruth, I should not care to have furniture that's too fine to use and a drawing-room that's nothing but a showroom. By the way, I do hope we shall not run against Agnes; I wonder if she's at home."

The words were scarcely out of Violet's mouth when, looking ahead, she caught sight of a familiar figure coming towards them, and Madge exclaimed, with excitement in her voice:—

"Why, here she is! Oh, girls, it's Agnes herself!"

"We cannot avoid meeting her," said Ruth, with a nervous glance at Violet, whose bright colour had perceptibly lessened.

"Avoid meeting her?" echoed Ann, "why should you wish to do that? Ah, she recognises us, I see!"

Agnes was close up to them now. She was staring hard at Ann, as though she could scarcely believe she saw aright; a minute later she had stopped in front of her, and was holding out her hand.

"Ann! Ann Reed!" she cried, in accents of intense surprise; "is it really you?"

"Certainly," Ann replied, rather dryly, ignoring the outstretched hand, whilst her companions moved on a few steps and stood waiting for her.

"Fancy meeting you here! You must come to my house! Look, that is where I live!" Agnes appeared excited. "Are you staying with the Wyndhams?" she inquired in a lower tone.

"Yes; but I am going home to-morrow."

"Is Violet Wyndham to return to Barford with you?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you are leaving Streatham to-morrow you must certainly spare me a little while this afternoon," Agnes said eagerly.

"Do come in," she continued, nodding towards her home, "you can bring the Wyndhams with you if you like, I don't mind."

"No, thank you—" Ann was beginning when Agnes interrupted her by exclaiming:—

"Oh, you must come! Do come in all of you," she added pressingly, raising her voice and addressing the three Wyndham girls, who, however, showed not the least inclination to accept her invitation.

"No, thank you," Ruth said gravely, "we would rather not."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" cried Agnes, intent on gaining her own way. "I want you to come with me and have some tea—all of you. I haven't congratulated you yet on your father's new appointment," she went on, looking pointedly at Violet, "I heard nothing about it till I came home for the holidays. Let me congratulate you now. I hear it's a splendid rise for your father; I'm sure I'm very glad, for it must have been very disagreeable to have been so badly off, and

being poor makes people do things they'd never dream of doing if—"

"What do you mean?" broke in Violet, indignantly. "Are you trying to insult us—to insult me?"

"No, no," Agnes assured her hastily, "indeed I am not! I was only going to say that I wish bygones to be bygones, and that if you did take my purse I forgive you; I am not one to bear malice, so let us be friends."

"Agnes," said Violet, trying to speak calmly, "I don't understand why you should wish to be friends with a girl you consider a thief. I see now you really do believe that I robbed you, although you apologised to me—and—and—oh how can you believe it? I have never set eyes on your purse since I saw you put it in your muff the night you lost it."

"Surely you must see Violet is speaking the truth," said Ruth, her voice trembling with anger, her face set and stern; "how dare you suspect her of having taken your wretched purse?"

"It was not a wretched purse," Agnes retorted, "it was as handsome a purse as you ever saw in your life, and it contained one pound, seven shillings, and fivepence half-penny! But I've got over the loss of it now—I mean I really don't care now whether Violet took it or not, for father's given me a new one which I like just as well. Come, if I'm willing to be friends, why can't you meet me half-way? You won't? Well, I shan't bother about you any more, you Wyndhams always thought too much of yourselves even when you were as poor as church mice! And as for you, Ann Reed," she proceeded, her temper getting the better of her as she read aright the contemptuous expression of Ann's usually kind face, "who are you I should like to know—"

"I think you know very well who she is!" interrupted Madge, unable any longer to keep from joining in the conversation.

"Yes, miss Pert, I do," Agnes replied, in a voice which was shrill with rage. "I know she's the grand-daughter of an old woman who lives in a cottage, an old woman who was nothing but a domestic servant brought up to scrub and clean and do all sorts of

menial work. You cannot deny it, Ann Reed."

"Certainly I cannot, nor do I wish I could," rejoined Ann in a voice which, though low in tone, was expressive of intense scorn.

"No wonder Dr. Reed keeps his mother down in Devonshire!" sneered Agnes, "no wonder he's ashamed to have her to live at Barford! What would his friends think of her—"

"It cannot concern you what my father's friends would think of my grandmother," Ann interposed, with a light in her grey eyes which warned Agnes she had said enough, "my grandmother is—but I will not discuss her with you! I always knew you to be a mean-spirited girl, but I never realised before to-day that you were so hopelessly vulgar and—and contemptible. In one breath almost you admitted your belief that Violet stole your purse and asked her into your house; you think it may be worth while to keep in with her if her father is going to be a successful man, and on that account you are ready to overlook an act which, if she had committed it, would have put her on a par

with a common thief. Shame on you! I am beginning to understand you now, and I tell you plainly I wish to have nothing to do with you. I consider you are a girl to be avoided, and I am sure my friends agree with me."

Agnes winced perceptibly beneath the contempt with which Ann uttered these words, and, as soon as the latter had finished speaking, she quickly away, whilst the others, all very agitated, walked on for some distance in complete silence.

"You have made an enemy, Ann, I fear," said Violet at length.

"You fear?" echoed Ann; "why should you fear? I think Agnes Hosking is very like a nettle, she requires firm handling."

"She was abominably rude to you about your grandmother, Ann!" cried Ruth wrathfully, "and it is dreadful that she should still believe Vi stole her purse!"

"She judges Violet by her own standard," rejoined Ann, with a pitying glance at Violet's quivering face. "Perhaps I ought not to have said that," she went on, a moment

later, "I have no right to suggest that, in any circumstances, she would be a thief. Don't make a grief of this unfortunate encounter of ours with Agnes, though, Violet; you must not be unhappy on your last day at home."

"No, indeed," agreed Ruth, "that will never do. 'Truth will out,' you know, dear Vi."

"I wish I could think so, Ruthie," Violet responded, with a deep-drawn sigh. She was looking much upset, but she grew more cheerful before she reached home, consoled by the heartfelt sympathy of her sisters and her friend. "Don't tell mother we met Agnes and fell out with her," she whispered, as they entered the house, "it would only trouble her if she knew all that was said."

On that point they were all agreed, so Agnes Hosking's name was not mentioned when they spoke of their walk, and Mrs. Wyndham, not being very observant, failed to notice that something had gone wrong.

CHAPTER XXIII

UNHAPPY LOTTIE

"AND so you've had a thoroughly enjoyable time?" said Dr. Reed.

It was the night of Ann and Violet's return to Barford, a few hours after their arrival, between nine and ten o'clock, and Ann and her father were in the surgery, where the latter had been dispensing some medicine, a task which usually fell to the lot of his assistant. He held his daughter at arms' length as he spoke, and looked at her critically.

"Yes," assented Ann, "I don't know that I ever enjoyed holidays better. It was so nice having the Wyndhams at Teymouth; I like them all so much, father, and so does Granny. Dear old Granny! She joined us in our picnics on the beach, and the Wyndhams took tea with us on several occasions and were so delighted with her cottage. Mr.

Wyndham used to take the boys fishing, and sometimes we—that is the girls and I, you know—went with them, and then Mrs. Wyndham would stay with Granny—they became great friends."

The doctor smiled, well pleased. Ann had joined him in the surgery to ascertain if he was nearly ready to return with her to the drawing-room, where she had left Violet entertaining Mrs. Reed with an account of her holiday experiences.

"You are looking blooming, my darling," he remarked, in a tone of satisfaction, as, having surveyed his daughter at his leisure, he drew her towards him and kissed her; "you and Violet have both brought back some Devonshire roses on your cheeks, I am glad to see. By the way, was Violet much upset at parting with her people this morning?"

"She certainly felt saying good-bye to them, father, but she told me afterwards that she was much happier about them all now than she had been when she came to us last January."

"I can understand that, for she has left them in better circumstances. I am very glad you like the Wyndhams, Ann."

"They were so friendly and easy to get on with, and think they're a very affectionate family. I'm afraid the little mother wouldn't approve of the way things are managed in their house," Ann admitted with a smile, "but they all seemed very happy and made me feel quite at home. Mrs. Wyndham is exceedingly good-natured, and she lets the children—the boys especially—do as they like; but, for all that, I don't believe they'd willingly do anything to hurt or annoy her for the world."

"She is too indulgent, I fear," said the doctor, with a grave shake of his head, "it is to be hoped the young folks will not take advantage of that fact—"

"Oh, I don't think they will," Ann interposed eagerly, "they love her too well!"

"And what about Ruth?" asked Dr. Reed, smiling at his daughter's confident tone.

"Oh, father, she is the most unselfish girl I ever met! And, do you know, she draws and paints beautifully, she really does, and she can sketch from nature, too. She has given me a water-colour sketch of Granny's cottage, which I am sure you will consider very well done; I will show it to you to-morrow, I haven't unpacked my box yet. I believe one day Ruth will be a really first-rate artist, she means to be one if she can. Oh, yes, I like Ruth, we got on together capitally; she was a little stiff with me at first, but that soon wore off. I don't think she's in the least reserved really, but she's quieter and more thoughtful than Violet. She told me how for years she had grieved and worried because her father had not done better in his profession and how she had kept on hoping and praying that success might come to him; so you can guess how happy Mr. Wyndham's having obtained this really good appointment has made her."

"I can indeed."

"Mr. Wyndham was so disappointed that you could not join us at Teymouth, father."

"He could not have been more disappointed than I was myself. I wanted your mother to go without me, but she would not hear of doing that. However, Luscombe's making a speedy recovery, so I hope our holiday has only been postponed. Now, I've finished my work here for the night, so we'll join the others, and hear what they have to say."

As the doctor and his daughter entered the drawing-room a few minutes later Violet was speaking in a slightly raised voice, and they caught the words:—

"Ann had the best of it and the last word. Oh, Mrs. Reed, she's a hateful girl!"

"Of whom are you speaking, Violet?" asked Dr. Reed.

"Of Agnes Hosking," answered Violet; and, forthwith, she told him all that had occurred during the encounter with Agnes, at Streatham, on the previous day.

"I consider that she could not possibly have been more insulting to all of us, and I never will forgive her, never!" she declared emphatically, in conclusion.

"Never is a long day, my dear," Dr. Reed observed gravely; "Agnes Hosking has certainly insulted you, but don't say you'll never forgive her, for I hope you will."

"Pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you: that ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven," quoted Mrs. Reed, and there was something in her quiet voice which had the effect of cooling Violet's anger and making her regret having spoken so strongly.

"Have you seen anything of Mrs. Medland and Lottie lately, mother?" Ann inquired by-and-by.

"I have seen Mrs. Medland on several occasions since poor Malvina's death," Mrs. Reed replied, "but not Lottie; I fancy the girl purposely keeps out of my way, though I know no reason why she should. Her mother tells me she cannot understand her, for she has scarcely mentioned Malvina's name since the day of the funeral, and the sisters always seemed very greatly attached to each other."

"How did Lottie behave at the time of Malvina's death?" asked Violet. "I suppose she was dreadfully grieved, wasn't she?"

"Her mother says she appeared quite stunned; she never shed a tear."

"You will let me go and see her, won't you, mother?" said Ann eagerly. "I promised Malvina that if she died I would try to be a friend to Lottie, didn't I, Violet?"

Violet assented, whilst Mrs. Reed looked thoughtful, and glanced dubiously at her husband.

"I'm afraid Lottie's not at all a nice sort of girl, not a good girl, in fact," Mrs. Reed said, with marked hesitation in her tone; "I don't want to judge her harshly; but, according to Mrs. Medland's telling, Lottie has been behaving very badly indeed. One would have thought that her sister's death would have sobered her, but apparently it has had a contrary effect, for she spends her evenings gadding about the streets and leaves her poor mother grieving at home. I do not see, Ann, that you can possibly befriend a girl whose conduct is so heartless as that!"

"Only let me go and see her," pleaded Ann earnestly; "father, do ask mother to let me go and see her just once! Perhaps if I went early on Saturday afternoon I should find her at home, and I want to see poor Mrs. Medland, too. Violet would go with me, wouldn't you, Vi?"

"Yes," assented Violet, "of course I would." She did not imagine any good would result from visiting Lottie, but she could not withstand the look of appeal in her friend's grey eyes.

"What do you think, Andrew? Shall they go or not?" said Mrs. Reed undecidedly, addressing her husband.

"Let them go," he responded. "I don't care for them to be in the town on a Saturday afternoon as a rule, but this will be an exceptional occasion; they are not like young children, and I am sure they are to be trusted by themselves."

"Oh, yes," agreed Mrs. Reed, "I, too, am sure of that."

When, on the following Saturday afternoon, Ann, accompanied by Violet, knocked at the Medlands' door it was opened by Mrs. Medland, who invited them at once to come in. They followed her into the little kitchen, where Malvina's cherished fern still hung in the window, and sat down with her, scarcely knowing what to say at first. Both girls felt intense sympathy for the poor mother, who was looking very careworn and ill.

"Dr. Elizabeth wrote and told me of your great sorrow, Mrs. Medland," Ann said gently, "I was so grieved to hear of it—so grieved for you and Lottie, you know."

"I knew you would be sorry for us, miss," Mrs. Medland rejoined in a choked voice, the tears coursing down her pale, thin cheeks. "We've met with a terrible loss," she proceeded, "least-ways, I have, for Malvina was a good daughter to me. I can't wish her back again, though, for she suffered so much that death came as a blessed release at last, but often and often since the poor dear went I've wished that my life was ended, too."

"Oh, you mustn't say that," said Ann, "for you know you've Lottie—"

"Lottie!" broke in Mrs. Medland; "yes, I've Lottie, but, oh, Miss Ann, you don't understand how little Lottie cares for me! If she had a particle of affection for me, do you think she'd leave me evening after evening as she does, knowing how lonesome and sad I feel without Malvina, to go pleasure seeking? Oh, dear, oh dear! And it's so soon after her poor sister's death too! Oh, I can think of my dead daughter with far less sorrow than I can think of my living one, for I know Malvina's safe with Jesus, but Lottie's very far from the Kingdom of God."

"Those two girls of mine had the same bringing up, and yet how different they've always been! Lottie was always difficult to manage and would have her own way. She works hard, 'tis true, but how does she spend her money? I see very little of it, most of it goes in betting; and now she's crazy about the hobby-horses, they're here for a week in the Recreation Ground, and every night she's there watching them or having rides if she can get the money, with a lot of other factory hands—flighty young girls like herself, who care for nothing but amusing themselves. I wish those hobby-horses had never come to Barford."

"Hobby-horses?" said Violet, looking mystified, for she had never seen anything of the kind.

"Round-about some people call them, they go round and round for a certain time, worked by steam, and they're lit up at night by electric lights," explained Mrs. Medland. "This particular round-about comes here every now and again and carries away a lot of money from the place; I'm not saying I think there's any real harm in folks riding on it, but for Lottie whose sister hasn't been in her grave a month—oh, it does seem heartless of her and no mistake!" And the poor woman, overcome with grief, wept unrestrainedly.

It certainly did seem heartless, and neither Ann nor Violet could think of any words suitable for the occasion. Whilst Mrs. Medland was still in tears, the street door opened, and a minute later Lottie appeared on the threshold of the room. She paused at the sight of her mother's visitors, a look of consternation on her face; and then, without a word, she turned away and ran hurriedly upstairs.

"Is she not going to speak to us?" said Ann, in astonishment. "Why has she gone?"

"I don't know, miss," Mrs. Medland answered, with a troubled sigh, "I don't know what's taken to her."

"Perhaps she has only gone to take off her hat and jacket," suggested Violet; "no doubt she will be down presently."

But Lottie did not appear again. Certainly her behaviour was most incomprehensible, and seemed very rude.

"I must see her," said Ann, at length; "I have something to say to her. Will you please tell her so, Mrs. Medland, or may I go upstairs to her? I should much like to speak to her alone."

"It's very good of you to trouble about her I'm sure," Mrs. Medland replied, "I can't think why she's keeping away. If you will please go upstairs, miss, you'll find her in the room which was Malvina's; she used to sleep with me, but since Malvina died she's had her little room."

**"DON'T, PRAY DON'T!" LOTTIE
EXCLAIMED DISTRESSFULLY.**

Ann rose and went quietly upstairs. She found the bedroom door shut, and tapped upon it with her knuckles.

"Are they gone?" asked Lottie from within, evidently imagining it was her mother who had knocked.

"It is I, Lottie," Ann responded, "I want to speak to you, please."

Immediately the door was opened, and Ann stepped into the room. Lottie, who was crimson with confusion, mumbled something which sounded like an apology and stood with her eyes fixed on the floor. Ann took her hand and pressed it gently as she spoke a few sympathetic words in reference to Malvina's death.

"Don't, pray don't!" Lottie exclaimed distressfully; "you mean to be kind, I daresay, but I can't bear it! You don't know what I feel!"

"Not fully perhaps, but I know you loved Malvina dearly, and—"

"Loved her!" interrupted Lottie, in great excitement, "I treated her as though I loved her, didn't I? But there, you don't know—you don't know!"

"Yes, I believe I do," Ann said quietly; "I know that you caused her many a heartache, but still I am sure that you loved her; and you were very dear to her—I need not tell you that, for you know it well enough! Listen, Lottie, I want you to let me be your friend as I was hers—"

"You might have been hers, miss, for she was as good as gold and fit to be the friend of the likes of you, but I'm very different. I'm wicked—oh, you don't know how wicked! You can't be my friend! It's impossible!"

"I know that you bet, if you mean that; but I hope that you mean to give up that bad habit and—and spend more time at home with your mother, she looks very worn and sad, poor thing."

"I can't stay at home to hear mother for ever talking of Malvina, it nearly drives me mad to listen to her. That's one reason why I go out of an evening. I want to forget—everything!"

"But you don't want to forget your sister," said Ann, with a tinge of reproach in her voice. She glanced around the room as she spoke. "Do you still feed the sparrows as she used to do?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Lottie with a sob. She flung herself on the bed and burst into a flood of tears. "Oh," she wailed, "I'm a miserable, wicked girl, and I shall never be happy again—never, never! Oh, please go away and leave me to myself!"

"I will certainly go if you desire me to do so," Ann rejoined, alarmed at the violence of her companion's grief; "but remember, Lottie, that I wish to be your friend, for your

own sake as well as for Malvina's, and if ever I can do anything to help you in any way I will."

As Lottie made no response Ann turned to leave the room, but at the door she paused and spoke again:—

"I don't understand you quite," she said; "but I can see that you are very unhappy. Won't you tell God your trouble and ask His help?"

"I can't, I can't!" sobbed Lottie; "I'm not fit to pray! God wouldn't listen to me if I did! Don't you bother about me, Miss Ann—indeed I'd rather you wouldn't."

Deeply hurt, Ann left the room, closing the door behind her, and went downstairs. She realised that, in spite of her apparent heartlessness in many ways, Lottie's grief at the loss of her sister was very deep, and all the harder to bear, no doubt, because it was mingled with remorse; but she failed to understand the workings of the unhappy girl's mind, and was much pained that her well-meant offer of friendship had been so decidedly repulsed.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT VIOLET SAW IN A SHOP WINDOW

ANN and Violet had returned to Barford a week before the date on which it had been arranged for the pupils of Helmsford College to reassemble, and, as the weather continued fine, they spent most of the days out-of-doors, taking long walks in the surrounding country. It was on their way back from one of these pleasant excursions, in which Mrs. Reed had joined, that they were one afternoon overtaken by Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway near her own door. The lady doctor was delighted to see them, especially the girls, whom she had not met for nearly two months.

"Now you must come in and have tea with me," she said, as soon as greetings had been exchanged, "I am at leisure, or I wouldn't ask you. I never give invitations which I don't wish people to accept. You'll come?"

Yes. That's right. I want to hear how these young folks have spent their holidays."

She led the way into her house and into the sitting-room, where she took off her bonnet and cloak and handed them to the servant, who had appeared upon the scene attracted by the sound of the opening of the front door, and ordered tea to be brought at once.

"How is Mr. Luscombe?" she inquired, when her visitors were seated; "I was so sorry to hear of his illness; it upset your plans, did it not?"

"Yes," Mrs. Reed answered, "for we had intended paying a visit to my mother-in-law during Ann's holidays. Mr. Luscombe is much better, I am glad to say; he will be about again very soon, so now my husband and I hope to go to Devonshire at the end of next month."

"Have you had your holiday, yet, Dr. Elizabeth?" asked Violet. Then, as Dr. Elizabeth shook her head, she said: "But you'll take one, won't you? I am sure you must need a change."

"I don't know that I do, my dear," was the smiling response; "but I shall see. Ah, here comes tea!"

"And I for one am ready for it," confessed Mrs. Reed; "we have been for a very long walk, and I was feeling nearly done up when you overtook us. I am so glad to have a rest."

"We are making the most of the fine weather and the few remaining days of the holidays," explained Ann; "but I am afraid we are tiring mother out; we go on and on and forget that we have to walk back."

After having drunk a cup of tea Mrs. Reed declared herself to be greatly refreshed. She sat quietly listening whilst Ann and Violet talked to Dr. Elizabeth, telling her how they had spent their time at Teymouth. By-and-by the conversation took a more serious turn, and Ann spoke of poor Malvina Medland, and expressed her regret that Lottie continued to give her mother so much anxiety.

"Have you seen Lottie since you came home?" Dr. Elizabeth inquired.

"Yes," Ann replied; "Violet and I went to see her on Saturday. She was out when we arrived, but it was not long before she came in. As soon as she caught sight of us in the kitchen with her mother, she ran upstairs and shut herself into her room—Malvina's room, you know. I went up, afterwards, and had a short conversation with her, but she talked so wildly that she quite frightened me. She said she was wicked, and a miserable girl, and not fit to pray, and she seemed in a terrible state of grief. I did not know what to say to her, I can't understand her."

"Nor I," admitted Dr. Elizabeth thoughtfully; "I've only seen her once since her sister's death, on an occasion when I called in to see Mrs. Medland—I happened to be passing and thought I might be able to speak a comforting word to the poor woman. It struck me then that there was something weighing on Lottie's mind; she seemed so restless, and I noticed a furtive look in her eyes, a look I did not like at all. I tried to gain her confidence, but I failed. The more I think of her the more puzzled I become."

"Do you not think that the recollection that but for her bad behaviour Malvina would

have been much happier during her last illness weighs upon her mind?" suggested Mrs. Reed.

"Doubtless it does to a great extent," agreed Dr. Elizabeth; "but I do not fancy that alone is accountable for her strange conduct."

"I promised Malvina I would be a friend to Lottie if I could," Ann said in troubled tones.

"Yes," she went on, as she met Dr. Elizabeth's inquiring glance, "that was the promise which she mentioned to you. But how can I befriend a girl who evidently wants to have nothing to do with me?"

"At any rate you have tried to help her," said Violet; "you have done all you could."

Shortly after that Mrs. Reed and the two girls rose to leave, and Dr. Elizabeth accompanied them to the front door. As they lingered exchanging a few words on the doorstep, their ears caught the sound of music and many voices in the distance.

"There is a rabble in the Recreation Ground, I hear," observed Dr. Elizabeth, "A large

round-about has been there these last few days, and it always attracts a crowd."

"That must be the round-about Mrs. Medland mentioned," remarked Violet to her two companions when they had said good-bye to Dr. Elizabeth and were pursuing their way along the street; "don't you remember she said Lottie spent her evenings in the Recreation Ground now?"

"Yes," Ann assented; "Oh, how utterly heartless her behaviour seems!"

Dr. Elizabeth's house, as has been already stated, was situated in the heart of the town, so, on their homeward way, Mrs. Reed and the girls had to pass through the poor district in which was the Medland's home, where the shops were small and dingy, with goods of most inferior quality exhibited in the windows.

"See, mother," said Ann presently, "this is the pawnshop which we saw Lottie Medland go into with a friend; don't you recollect we told you about it?"

"Yes, certainly," Mrs. Reed answered.

"I suppose they must have been going to pawn something," said Violet; "I wonder if they had ever been there before, or if that was their first visit."

With one accord they paused and glanced curiously at the shop in question. The window was filled with a medley of second-hand articles—clothing, pictures, jewellery, and ornaments of every description. Mrs. Reed noticed amongst other things a large family Bible opened to exhibit a handsome print, a baby's coral with silver bells, and a dice-box lying close together, and, as she looked, her face saddened. She was turning away when Violet suddenly caught her by the hand, and in a voice which was shrill with excitement, cried:—

"Look, look! There, there! Oh Mrs. Reed, look at that purse—that tortoise-shell purse! Oh, I'm sure it's the one Agnes Hosking lost! Oh, Ann, look! Don't you recognise it? Oh, it must be the same! There couldn't be two so exactly alike!"

Violet's agitation was extreme. Her cheeks were crimson, and her face was twitching nervously. Following the direction her

pointing finger indicated, Mrs. Reed and Ann saw a tortoise-shell purse, a little open to reveal its red morocco lining.

"Can it be Agnes Hosking's, I wonder?" said Ann. "Oh, how strange if it is!"

"I am certain it is," declared Violet; "don't you see it has gold rims and a gold clasp? I recognised it the moment I set eyes on it. Surely, Ann, you must recognise it, too?"

"Yes, I do—at least I think so," replied Ann. She was the more cautious of the two girls and was fearful of making a mistake. "At any rate the purse is exactly like the one Agnes showed us," she added.

"There are not many purses so handsome as that one," Mrs. Reed remarked; "if it is real tortoise-shell and real gold it is valuable." She was feeling excited herself, and hopeful that Violet was right, that this was indeed the purse about which there had been so much trouble and fuss. "Perhaps someone picked it up in the street and sold it," she suggested, "at any rate now we shall most likely be able to find out. We will go home and tell your father about it, Ann, and leave

the matter in his hands. No doubt he will be able to ascertain from whom the pawnbroker obtained the purse. I wonder if Agnes Hosking would be able to identify it?"

"Oh, I should think there is no doubt about that!" exclaimed Violet. "Oh, Mrs. Reed, oh, Ann, if that is really Agnes' purse my character will be quite cleared, won't it? Oh, how thankful I am we looked in that window!"

Arrived at home it was most disappointing to find that Dr. Reed had driven into the country and had left a message to the effect that dinner was not to be kept waiting for him as he could not tell what time he might return, it might not be until late.

"Never mind, Vi," said Ann consolingly; "we will tell him about the purse at breakfast to-morrow, if we do not see him to-night."

"But someone may take a fancy to it and buy it before them," returned Violet, her bright face clouding over. Upon reflection, however, she came to the conclusion that that was very unlikely to be the case.

Neither of the girls had much appetite for dinner; they were too excited to eat, and Mrs. Reed being in the same condition, they did not linger over the meal. In the drawing-room afterwards the conversation was almost entirely about the tortoise-shell purse, and all three continually watched the clock and kept remarking that surely Dr. Reed would be at home soon. But it was ten o'clock before he, at length, returned.

He entered the house by the back door, having driven the gig, in which he generally did his country journeys, round to the stables himself, as he had dropped his groom in the town to execute an errand for him.

Ann was the first to hear her father's footsteps in the hall, and she would have rushed to meet him had not her mother stopped her.

"Don't be so impetuous, my dear," Mrs. Reed said quickly; "and don't be in too great a hurry to speak of the purse. I expect your father is tired and hungry; let him have a rest and something to eat, and afterwards tell him our news."

But Dr. Reed was neither tired nor hungry as it happened. He had dined at the country house where he had been to visit a patient—an old gentleman who was a chronic invalid.

"I should have been home half-an-hour earlier, but as I was passing the Recreation Ground I was stopped and told there had been an accident there," he explained, "so I got out of the gig and went to see if my services were required."

"And were they, Andrew?" asked his wife.

"No, my dear. Dr. Elizabeth Ridgeway had already been sent for and had arrived before me."

"I hope nobody was much hurt," said Ann; "what was the accident, father?"

"A girl fell off the round-about—I daresay you know there is one in the Recreation Ground. Well, it appears it was going at full speed when this poor girl, who was riding on one of the hobby-horses, somehow managed to fall off. She was picked up insensible. Her home, it seems, is near the Recreation Ground, and, under Dr. Elizabeth's

instructions, she has been taken there; she is one of Dr. Elizabeth's patients."

"You did not hear the poor girl's name, father, did you?" asked Ann eagerly.

"No, I did not," the doctor responded.

"Did you see her?" inquired Violet, glancing from Ann to Mrs. Reed whose interest had quickened on hearing that the injured girl was Dr. Elizabeth's patient.

"Yes, and helped to put her on the ambulance on which she was conveyed to her home. There's injury to the head, I fear. She's in good hands with Dr. Elizabeth. It's a sad case, though, for someone—a bystander—told me that she is the only child of a widowed mother who lost her other daughter only a month ago."

"Oh!" cried Ann distressfully, "Oh, I'm afraid it's Lottie Medland!"

"It really seems likely," said Mrs. Reed, in tones of deep concern. "Lottie is the sister of that poor deformed girl in whom we were all so much interested," she proceeded, as her

husband looked at her inquiringly, "I don't think you ever saw Lottie, but you have heard of her. Don't you remember."

"Oh, yes," answered Dr. Reed, "I remember. Lottie is the girl who bets."

"Was the poor girl who met with the accident in mourning?" questioned Mrs. Reed.

"Yes, I believe she was," was the reply, given after a minute's reflection.

"Then I am afraid it is Lottie," said Violet. "Oh, what a trouble this will be for Mrs. Medland!"

"Well, we will not make up our minds that it is Lottie," remarked Mrs. Reed; "whoever it is, though, it is very sad. Perhaps she was only stunned; at any rate let us hope she is not seriously hurt. Now, Violet, dear, you tell your news."

"I hope it is good news?" Dr. Reed said, with a smile at Violet.

She told him that she considered it was, and went on to explain how she had caught sight of the tortoise-shell purse in the pawnshop window, and that she believed it to be the one Agnes Hosking had lost.

"I will certainly see about it to-morrow," he said gravely, as soon as she had finished her tale, "I suppose most people would go to the police and let them take the matter in hand, but I feel I would rather deal with it myself. It is just possible the person who sold the purse—I have little doubt it has been sold—may have picked it up and not seen the bills I had posted about the town, and if that is the case I should not like to get that person into trouble. I must act cautiously; but rest assured upon one point, Violet, if it is Agnes Hosking's purse the rightful owner shall have it again."

"Thank you, Dr. Reed," Violet answered gratefully. "I know you will do what is right," she proceeded, "I am glad you do not mean to go to the police. Oh, I do feel so excited to think the purse is found! I never thought it would be! How glad they will be at home! And I wonder what Agnes Hosking will say when she knows!"

"I don't know what she will say, but I should think she will be utterly ashamed of herself!" cried Ann, hotly, "I know I should be in her place."

"I can't fancy you in her place," Violet said, with a tender inflection in her voice, which was not lost upon her listeners.

Dr. and Mrs. Reed exchanged a quick glance of satisfaction. It pleased them to see the affection which had sprung up between the two girls; and Mrs. Reed was glad that she had agreed to her husband's plan, on which she had looked somewhat dubiously at first, of taking one of the Wyndham girls into their home, for it seemed, on the whole, to be answering well.

CHAPTER XXV

LOTTIE'S CONFESSION

"MOTHER, Violet and I are very anxious to find out if it was really Lottie Medland who met with an accident in the Recreation Ground last night. May we go and inquire?" asked Ann, after breakfast, the following morning.

"Certainly," Mrs. Reed replied; "I would accompany you, but I have duties at home which I cannot very well put off. By the way, I'd rather you did not stop to look in the pawnshop window; your father will bring us news of the purse before the day is out."

"Very well, mother," acquiesced Ann.

"I shall only glance to see if the purse is there all right as we go by," said Violet.

And that was what she did. The one glance was sufficient to assure her that the purse had not been removed, and she was satisfied.

When the two girls arrived at the Medlands' home, Ann knocked gently upon the door, and her summons was answered more promptly than she had expected, not by Mrs. Medland, however, but by the little charwoman, Grace Jones.

"Oh, Miss Reed, is it you?" cried Grace, in a hushed voice; "I suppose you have heard about Lottie and have come to inquire for her. Please come inside."

"Then it was. Lottie," Violet whispered to Ann, as she followed her into the kitchen. Aloud she said: "Is Lottie much hurt?"

"Oh, yes, miss," Grace responded, "she's had a blow on her head and broken two ribs. Dr. Elizabeth says the ribs are the least of her injuries. She's been raving all night and Mrs. Medland's been up with her, but she's quieted down a bit now and seems more like herself. It did scare me to hear her going on like a mad thing, calling herself such dreadful names and saying as how she was a thief and would be sent to jail."

"Poor girl, she was delirious," said Ann; "I suppose her mother is with her now?"

"Yes, miss. I'll call Mrs. Medland, shall I?"

"No, no! You must not disturb her on our account. We only came to know if it was really Lottie who fell off the round-about last night—we had an idea it must have been—and, if so, to find out how she is. You think she is better this morning?"

"She is quieter, miss, so I suppose she is better."

"It must be dreadful to hear anyone raving in delirium," observed Violet, who was looking very grave and concerned.

"Oh, dreadful!" agreed the little charwoman. "If the police had really been after Lottie last night she couldn't have yelled louder," she proceeded; "and there was no sense in what she said—it was all about a purse she fancied she'd stolen. She'd keep on like this: 'It wasn't stealing—yes it was—she dropped it—nobody saw it but me—a tortoise-shell purse with money in it, lots of money!' She was just mazed, you know," she concluded, noticing that her graphic description of the sick girl's wandering talk was making a great impression upon her listeners. Violet and

Ann had both started violently, and now they were exchanging glances expressive of mingled bewilderment and dismay.

"Did she say a tortoise-shell purse?" asked Ann, in a shocked tone.

"Yes, miss, she kept on about it, and once she said 'a tortoise-shell purse with a golden clasp.' Oh, she was clean off her head! No one could make any sense of what she said, except to understand that she was in dreadful fear of being sent to jail. But here comes Mrs. Medland; she'll be able to tell you more about Lottie than I can."

"I recognised your voices," Mrs. Medland said, as she entered the room. "Grace, will you go and sit with Lottie for a while?" Then, as soon as the little charwoman had gone upstairs, she added: "I take it as very kind of you two young ladies to come to me in this fresh trouble."

"Please tell us how Lottie is," said Ann earnestly.

"She's very ill, miss, there's no doubt of that, but Dr. Elizabeth says there's no reason why

she shouldn't pull through if she's kept quiet. She's terribly bruised one side—the side on which she fell, you know she fell off the round-about—and two of her ribs are broken, and she's had a nasty blow on the head—that's what Dr. Elizabeth thinks most seriously of."

"Is she asleep now?" asked Violet.

"No, miss, but she's lying quiet—very different from what she was a few hours ago. She doesn't know you're here, I believe if she did she'd want to see you, Miss Ann, for in the night she kept on talking about you, begging me to send for you because there was something she wanted to tell you about before she died. She talked a lot of nonsense, but I could catch a grain of sense in it now and again. She said that you'd offered to be her friend—oh, miss, was that true? Yes, Then, perhaps the rest was true, too, but no, no, I can't believe it! Maybe you'll know. She kept on repeating that she was a thief—that she had stolen a purse—oh, Miss Ann, there isn't any truth in that, is there?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Ann, looking anxiously at Violet, who, with flushed cheeks and eyes gleaming with excitement, was listening with breathless interest; "I don't know how she could have done it, but—oh, Vi, don't you remember Lottie called at our house that evening Agnes lost her purse? Why, she was in the hall when Agnes left!"

"I remember! I thought of that just now!"

Violet answered, trying to speak quietly, but failing in the attempt; her voice sounded hoarse and unnatural.

"Did someone lose a purse then, really?" Mrs. Medland asked, glancing from one to the other of the girls, a piteous look on her startled face.

"Yes, a school-fellow of ours did," replied Ann.

"Was it a tortoise-shell purse, miss, with a golden clasp?" Mrs. Medland interrogated, her lips quivering as she put the question.

"It was," Violet answered eagerly, "do you think—"

She stopped abruptly, for the poor mother had quite broken down, and was weeping in a heart-broken fashion most painful to witness. A long silence followed, and, before Mrs. Medland had regained her composure, Grace Jones appeared upon the threshold of the room and addressed herself to Ann.

"Lottie wanted to know who was downstairs," she said, "and I told her you had come on purpose to inquire for her, miss; she wishes to see you if you'll be so kind as to come upstairs to her. She seems all right in her head now."

Mrs. Medland glanced doubtfully at Ann, who, however, rose directly, and declared her willingness to comply with Lottie's request; accordingly Mrs. Medland preceded her upstairs to Lottie's room.

The injured girl lay with her face turned towards the door, and, at the sight of Ann, a feverish light leaped into her blue eyes, and she cried excitedly:—

"I'm dying, Miss Ann, I know I'm dying!"

"Oh, I trust not, and indeed I don't think so," answered Ann, speaking calmly though her heart was beating unevenly and she was conscious of a sensation of alarm, for Lottie's countenance was ghastly in its pallor; "Dr. Elizabeth says you must keep quiet—"

"I can't keep quiet," Lottie interrupted; "my brain feels on fire! Miss Ann, there's something I must tell you before I die, something I haven't dared speak of to a soul! Mother, you listen, too!"

"Do you remember, one evening last March, when I called at your house, Miss Ann, with some work Malvina had done for Mrs. Reed, and I waited in the hall? Well," she continued as Ann nodded assent, "it was then it happened—what I am going to tell. You had a visitor, a stylishly dressed young lady, and whilst I was waiting, a lady, one of the governesses at Helmsford College—I know because I've seen her walking with some of the pupils—arrived to fetch her home. The young lady came downstairs with her muff under her arm. She was putting on

her gloves, and, as she reached the mat at the bottom of the stairs, I saw something fall out of her muff—it was a purse. No one noticed it but me, for it fell on the mat—a sheep's wool mat very thick and soft—and made no sound. I—I—when no one was looking—I picked it up and put it in my pocket, and—and I kept it. Yes, I kept it, although I saw the notices about it posted all over the town. I-I wanted money so much—oh, you don't know how much!"

"Oh, Lottie, Lottie!" wailed Mrs. Medland. She was confident that her daughter was telling the truth; there was no appearance of delirium about her now. "Oh, what could have possessed you to do it? Oh, how could you have been such a wicked, wicked girl? What have you done with the purse? Was there much money in it?" She was wringing her hands distractedly.

"I spent the money in betting," Lottie admitted, still addressing Ann, "it was more than a pound, but I didn't win anything by it. I didn't know what to do with the purse, but one day I showed it to a friend of mine and told her I'd found it, and she suggested that, as I was short of money, I might pawn it. I

was afraid the pawnbroker would ask me where I had got it, but he didn't. I said I would rather sell it than pawn it, so he bought it from me for half-a-crown."

There was a brief silence. Ann's face had become almost as pale as the one which rested on the pillow; she was so shocked that she could find no words to say.

"Now you know the sort of girl you offered your friendship to," Lottie proceeded presently, her voice sounding weaker; "it's no good my saying I'm sorry, but, oh, I've suffered terrible! I wanted money so badly, but I've never had a happy moment since I stole the purse. I never dared speak of it till now; if Malvina had known what I'd done 'twould have nigh broken her heart! But I couldn't die with it on my conscience, and I believe I shall die! Oh, Miss Ann, do you think God will forgive a bad girl like me?"

"Oh, yes, indeed He will," Ann rejoined earnestly; "if you are truly sorry for what you have done. God wants to forgive our sins. He sent His own Son to bear the punishment of them, that we might be forgiven if we repent. Tell God that you are

truly sorry, Lottie, and ask Him to forgive you for Jesus' sake. If we confess our sins, you know, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. Oh, poor Lottie, what you must have suffered!"

"You can speak to me like that—so gently and kindly—and me a thief? Why, I thought for certain you'd turn from me when you knew!" Lottie raised herself in bed in her excitement, then sank back again with a groan. "Oh, my head!" she moaned, "how it does ache! And I can scarcely breathe!"

"You must lie still and try not to worry," Ann said soothingly; "you have done very wrongly, but I am sure that you would act very differently now. I am glad you have told me about the purse; but you need not fear that you will be sent to jail for having stolen it; several people will have to be told that you took it, however. When you are better I will come to see you again, you are not fit to talk more at present. Try to keep quiet."

"Are you sure I shall not be arrested and sent to jail?" Lottie asked, feverishly, "I don't mind so much for myself, I feel I don't care

what happens to me now, but mother—" She broke off and turned her gaze upon the grief-stricken figure of poor Mrs. Medland.

"No one will wish you to be punished more than you have been," said Ann; "I think your remorse must have been a heavy punishment, indeed."

"Yes," admitted Lottie, and she burst into tears. The next instant her mother's arms were round her, and she was sobbing forth her grief and repentance upon her mother's breast.

Ann left her, still weeping, to Mrs. Medland's care, and went downstairs. She was feeling unnerved herself, and was longing to get home to tell her mother all that had occurred; so, after bidding good-bye to the little charwoman, she and Violet took their departure. They had left the poorer part of the town behind them before Ann was sufficiently composed to give her companion an account of her interview with Lottie, and when at last she did so, it brought an indignant flow of words in return.

It was but natural that Violet should experience a keen sense of resentment against the girl whose act of dishonesty had caused so much pain and humiliation to herself; but, before Laureston Square was reached, her just anger began to cool, and by-and-by she said:—

"I'm sorry if I've spoken too harshly about Lottie, Ann. I daresay, as you say, she was greatly tempted, and—and although I've never done anything actually dishonest, I've done many things I'm ashamed to remember—mean things which haven't been right or straight. Poor Lottie, she must have been in a terrible state of fear all these past weeks since she stole the purse; I daresay she'll be happier in her mind now she's confessed the truth. I do hope she'll get over her accident all right."

"If she does I believe she'll be a different sort of girl," Ann replied. "Your character must be cleared, Violet," she continued, "there will be no difficulty about doing that now; but I wish it could be done without Lottie's being branded as a thief," she added, and with this sentiment Violet cordially acquiesced.

Mrs. Reed was greatly amazed at the news the girls brought her; and, when the doctor returned from his morning round of visits, he was immediately informed of the real facts in connection with the loss of the purse. He listened attentively to all there was to tell, then put his hand into the breast pocket of his coat and drew forth the identical article in question, which he handed to Violet who examined it in silence before she passed it to Ann.

"Yes," said Ann, "I believe it is Agnes' purse, don't you, Violet?"

"Oh, Ann, I feel certain it is!" declared Violet, decidedly.

"I feel certain it is, too," agreed Dr. Reed, "for the pawnbroker was able to give me the name of the girl from whom he purchased it. It seems he asked her what she was called and she told him 'Charlotte Medland,' so you see if she had not confessed her sin it would have been brought home to her. The pawnbroker was very glad to let me have the purse for a few shillings; my opinion is that he suspected it had been stolen—he may very probably have seen the bills

announcing its loss after having bought it—and was grateful to me for having refrained from seeking police assistance."

"The matter shall be put straight now. I shall give the purse to Miss Orchardson, explain everything to her, and leave her to deal with Miss Agnes Hosking, who doubtless will be satisfied, if she obtains her purse again, to let the thief go Scot free, especially if she gets her money back, too. Yes, I shall certainly make good the money," he said, as his companions glanced at him inquiringly, "for the purse was lost in my house, and—well, I shall feel more satisfied to do so."

It proved that the doctor's surmise was right, for when, on the night of her return to Helmsford College, Miss Orchardson called Agnes Hosking into her private sitting-room, and explained to her that her purse had been found, and put it into her hand, she paid little heed to the headmistress' explanation that she had dropped it at the foot of the stairs at Dr. Reed's, and that it had been picked up by a poor factory girl who had been sent on an errand to the doctor's house, and she did not even inquire the thief's name.

"Why, here is the money too!" she exclaimed, in astonishment and delight, as she opened the purse and saw its contents.

"Yes," assented Miss Orchardson coldly, "so you have actually lost nothing. I trust now that you recognise how cruel and unjustifiable your suspicion of Violet Wyndham has been."

"I—I knew she was poor," stammered Agnes, "and I thought she might have been tempted to take it, and—and—" She paused, quailing beneath the severity of the headmistress' gaze for a minute, then she admitted in an abashed tone: "I have been wrong."

"Very wrong," agreed Miss Orchardson; and, forthwith, she gave Agnes such a talking to as that young person had never listened to in her life before, so that when the girl left her presence, it was as though a veil had been torn from her eyes, and, for the first time, she saw in its true light her past conduct towards the school-fellow she had maligned, and very ugly and mean-spirited it looked.

CHAPTER XXVI

"NO SENSE OF HONOUR WHATEVER"

LOTTIE MEDLAND'S recovery from the serious illness which followed her accident was a slow one, and it was fully a month before she was able to come downstairs again, so that it was well on in November when she at last returned to her work at the factory, looking a pale, fragile girl, whose blue eyes had lost their old furtive, restless expression, and were grave and sad. Her former acquaintances declared she had altered wonderfully, and they soon discovered that the alteration was not only in her outward appearance.

"Bless me, child, how like you are growing to Malvina," Mrs. Medland observed, as she glanced at Lottie across the tea-table one evening, at the conclusion of what had been for both a hard day's work. "I'm glad to see it," she proceeded, as a flush of gratification rose to her daughter's wan cheeks, "and I'm not the only one who's noticed it, for Miss

Ann remarked it to me the last time I saw her. I don't think it's so much that you're pale and thin, though may be that has something to do with it, for of course poor Malvina always looked more or less ill; no, I think, as Miss Ann said, that the likeness lies in the expression of your face—a certain look which one catches now and again."

"I am glad Miss Ann can see a likeness in me to Malvina," Lottie said softly. "Oh, mother, how good and considerate Miss Ann has been to me! I quite thought she'd turn from me in horror when she knew what a wicked girl I'd been, and, instead of doing that, she's been kinder than ever. And you, too, mother, you've never reproached me, never even scolded me—"

"Because I saw you were really repentant, Lottie," her mother interposed, "and you were so ill that I feared at one time I was to lose both my daughters. I thank God for sparing you to me, my dear child!"

"Oh, mother! And I have been such a trouble to you and such a disgrace! But I'll try to make amends, indeed I will! Please God I'll be a better daughter to you in the future, and

I'll try to show people their goodness to me hasn't been thrown away. Bad girl as I've been, I've had the best friends in the world—Dr. Elizabeth, and Mrs. Reed and Miss Ann, and that pretty Miss Violet who has always a pleasant word for me whenever we meet. I told Dr. Elizabeth once that I'd never bet again; I meant to keep my word, but—I soon broke it. I'm not going to make any promise now, but I shall pray—oh, so earnestly—that I may be helped to turn away from temptation."

There was silence between mother and daughter for a few minutes. At length Mrs. Medland wiped away the glad tears which had risen to her eyes, and said in a voice which faltered with emotion:—

"Oh, Lottie, how I wish Malvina had lived to see you turn over a new leaf! She used to worry about you so much, my dear!"

"I know, I know!" cried Lottie distressfully. "When I was upstairs ill, I was always thinking of Malvina," she continued in a tremulous tone, "how she used to lie there suffering—oh, much worse than I ever suffered—so patient and uncomplaining, and

I used to feel I never could be happy again; but one day I thought, maybe, where she has gone she may be able to look down on us here, and if so she knows that I have really and truly repented of my wickedness, and she will be glad. As Miss Ann says, we can't tell how much the dead know. I mean to try to be more like Malvina in future, and I hope I'll never willingly give you trouble again." The girl's voice was intensely sincere.

It was a hard task for Lottie to walk the straight path, for it was most difficult for her to turn her back on her former companions, who could not understand why her illness should have sobered her to such a marked extent, and the vice of gambling had taken such strong hold of her that it offered many temptations still; but she stood firm in her determination to lead a better life. She had had plenty of time for serious thought during her recent illness, and in that little room upstairs, where she had been obliged to spend long days alone whilst her mother had been at work, she had truly been brought to repentance, and had sought forgiveness of the Saviour in whom her sister had so completely trusted. It had therefore not been resting entirely on her own strength that she

had taken up her daily life again. In Malvina's Bible she had found a verse marked with a pencil line, and, during her sickness it had been continually in her mind:—

"Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings and not one of them is forgotten before God?"

"And if He watches over and cares for the sparrows," Lottie had thought, "then surely He will not fail to help me," and she had understood why her dead sister had loved the little brown birds, and a sense of sweet comfort had crept into her aching heart.

Ann Reed had paid Lottie several visits during her illness. She had told her that Dr. Reed had purchased the tortoise-shell purse from the pawnbroker and caused it to be returned to its rightful owner, and that he had made good the stolen money. Lottie had said very little on hearing this, though she had wept many tears and sobbed bitterly; in her heart of hearts she had been intensely grateful, but she had been quite incapable of putting her feelings into words.

By Violet's desire, Ann had not mentioned to either Lottie or Mrs. Medland that an innocent person had been suspected of the theft of the purse.

"I don't wish either of them to know I've had to suffer for Lottie's dishonesty," Violet had said decidedly; "they would feel so dreadful about meeting me again if they knew." And Ann had gladly held her peace on the point.

The news that Agnes Hosking's purse had been found had been received with much thankfulness by the Wyndham family; and when, towards the end of November, Dr. Reed and his wife stopped a few days in London on their way home from their holiday in Devonshire and spent an afternoon with the Wyndhams at Streatham, they were able to give the assurance, when questioned, that Violet was now quite happy at Helmsford College, and on the best of terms with most of her school-fellows.

"I hope you will let her remain with us until her education is completed, at any rate," Mrs. Reed said earnestly to Mrs. Wyndham; "for I do not know what Ann would do without her now. The two girls are

wonderfully good friends. One of these days you must let Ruth come and stay with us, will you?"

"Oh, what a treat that would be, and how I should enjoy it!" cried Ruth, before her mother had time to reply, her sensitive face flushing brightly at the anticipation of such an unlooked for pleasure. Then she remembered how, a year before, Dr. Reed had spoken of her visiting Barford and nothing had come of it. That, however, had not been the kind doctor's fault.

"I am sure we should be delighted for Ruth to have such a nice change," Mrs. Wyndham said with a smile. "But you must not keep her too long," she went on somewhat plaintively, "for things will be sure to go wrong if she is not here to look after them. My husband relies upon her as much as I do. She is our right hand, Mrs. Reed."

"So I have heard," rejoined Mrs. Reed. "I think it is very nice to know that one is of importance, especially in one's own home," she added, with a kind look at Ruth who blushed more rosily than ever.

Thus it came about that when Dr. and Mrs. Reed returned to Barford, they brought Violet the news that, if all went well, during the Christmas holidays she was to have a visit from her elder sister. Violet's delight was boundless on hearing this, as also was Ann's, and various were the plans the two girls discussed, during the following weeks, as to the way in which Ruth was to be entertained.

More than two-thirds of the winter term had now slipped by without either Ann or Violet having exchanged half a dozen words with Agnes Hosking; they avoided her all they possibly could, nevertheless they were brought more or less in contact with her every day from the fact of her being in the same class at school as themselves. Agnes was not a favourite with the teachers, for she was an indolent girl; she saw no reason why she should work hard as most of the other pupils were doing, for, as she had given everyone at Helmsford College to understand, there never would be any need for her to earn her living. So she idled away the precious hours until those in authority lost patience with her, and, as is generally the way in big schools, the governesses gave

their best attention to those more likely to benefit by their instructions.

"Really, Agnes Hosking shows quite a genius for idling," Clara Garret remarked to Violet Wyndham one afternoon subsequent to school hours.

The two girls were alone in one of the class rooms, Violet waiting for Ann Reed who was receiving a music lesson from a visiting master.

"Yes, hasn't she?" said Violet. "I wonder what sort of report she will have sent home at the end of the term; I should like to see it."

"You never speak to her, Violet, do you?"

Violet shook her head. "No," she replied; "once, at the beginning of the term, a day or so after she had regained her purse, she tried to enter into conversation with me, but I wouldn't have it. She began to mumble something about being sorry if she'd hurt my feelings in any way, but I simply turned my back on her, and she hasn't attempted to speak to me since."

"Ann Reed doesn't have anything to do with her either, does she?"

"No. Clara, you can't think how bitter I feel against Agnes still, even now my character has been fully cleared."

"It's only natural you should be resentful, I know I should be. I don't think Agnes has had a very happy time this term, she's had the cold shoulder shown her by several girls whose good opinion she valued."

"Serve her right!" cried Violet vindictively.

"Still the fact of her having money gives her a hold over some who would otherwise taboo her." Clara paused, and looked thoughtful; then, with some hesitation, proceeded to ask: "Violet, do you consider it very wrong to play cards for money?"

"Why, of course I do, don't you? It's gambling!" was the decisive answer.

Clara nodded. "I agree with you," she said; "if I tell you something will you promise to keep it to yourself—it's something I haven't told even to Cicely."

"Then why are you going to tell me?" Violet asked, rather surprised.

"Because I feel I must get the advice of someone, and I know you are to be trusted—so is Cicely, of course, but she isn't strong and she'd be worried and say I ought to confide in Miss Orchardson. The fact is I've found out—but you'll promise to keep this secret, won't you?"

"Yes," assented Violet, her curiosity now thoroughly aroused.

"Well," said Clara, "I've very good reason to believe that gambling goes on at Helmsford College."

"Clara!" Violet's voice was shrill with astonishment.

"Hush! Don't speak so loud as that. Listen, and I'll tell you what I've discovered. You know Cicely and I have a small room to ourselves? Well, Agnes Hosking sleeps in a big room next to ours with three other girls—the two Pelhams and Kitty Majendie—and they sit up late at night

playing cards—for money. Oh, no wonder you look incredulous, but it's true!"

"But I thought—surely I've heard you say that one of the governesses always makes a round of the bedrooms every night at ten o'clock in order to see that the girls are in bed and the lights out?"

"Oh, yes! Miss Wilcocks has charge of the rooms on our landing; some of the governesses occasionally pay surprise visits, but she never does. The other night, after she'd been round as usual, I had a most violent attack of toothache; it came on suddenly just as I was dropping off to sleep, and, as you may imagine, it made me wide awake in a minute. I lay still for some time hoping it would pass, but it didn't, and by-and-by I could stand it no longer and determined to go to Miss Wilcocks' room and ask her to give me something to ease the pain—I remembered having heard her say she had some toothache tincture which she had never known fail to effect a cure. Cicely was asleep, so I got up very quietly, put on my dressing-gown, and slipped out into the passage which was all in darkness."

"Well, as I was passing the door of the next room I thought I heard voices, and it occurred to me that one of the girls might have something for toothache, and that if so I need not disturb Miss Wilcocks, so I put my hand on the door handle and turned it, but the door wouldn't open. That surprised me, because there are no keys allowed in the bedroom doors here. I listened and still heard voices, then I gave a gentle knock with my knuckles, and suddenly the voices ceased."

"I waited to see what would happen, and presently I heard something—a box it sounded like—dragged from before the door, and the next minute Agnes Hosking, wrapped in a dressing-gown and shawl, opened the door to me. She was pale and trembling and looked very frightened, but as soon as she recognised me her expression changed; she seemed tremendously relieved and began to laugh in a silly, giggling fashion, and pulled me into the room and shut the door."

"Yes?" said Violet eagerly, as her companion paused to take breath—she had been speaking quickly and excitedly.

"Agnes asked me what I wanted, but I didn't answer at once for I was looking about the room. The three other girls were in bed, but when they saw who it was that had disturbed them they got out, and they were all in their dressing-gowns, too; and Kitty Majendie, who had a pack of cards in her hands, explained that they'd been having a game of Bridge and said that of course I wouldn't tell on them and they would trust to my sense of honour to hold my tongue. Then I inquired if they had any toothache tincture, but they hadn't, so I said good-night and went back to my own room; and, do you know, my toothache had actually gone—I believe the shock I had experienced had driven it away, for it really had been a shock to me to discover what was going on. The next day I asked Kitty Majendie if they played for money, and she admitted that they did, though not for high stakes."

"I should think not!" exclaimed Violet, "but whether they play for little or much the principle is the same—it is gambling. Oh, how dreadful it seems! The idea of gambling going on in a school like this! I wonder what would happen if Miss Orchardson found it out?"

Clara shook her head, she could not tell. "It seems that the Pelhams started this card playing," she said, "their people are rich, and they play cards for money at home, and they have a lot of pocket-money, they have won a good bit from Kitty Majendie and Agnes Hosking. Kitty is a silly, good-natured little creature, you know, who doesn't like to decline to play, and Agnes thinks it's rather a fine thing to do, she says all fashionable people play Bridge."

Violet smiled sarcastically. "Then you have spoken to her about it?" she said inquiringly.

"Yes. I thought I ought to remonstrate with all four of them, but I fear I did no good. The Pelhams and Agnes only laughed at me; Kitty, however, admitted that she couldn't play cards any longer because she had no money to stake. The question is, what ought I to do? If I tell Miss Orchardson I shall most probably get all four girls expelled."

"The Pelhams are leaving at Christmas, anyway," said Violet thoughtfully; "really I hardly know what to advise. I know! Threaten to tell Miss Orchardson unless they

promise you not to touch cards again whilst they are at school."

"Yes; I might do that certainly, and I will. I am glad I have taken you into my confidence, Violet; this business has been a real worry to me. Not a word about it to anyone, mind!"

"Not even to Ann?"

"Well, you may tell Ann if you like, but it must go no further. Hush, someone's coming!"

It was Agnes Hosking. She entered the room and began to turn over the books on the table, Clara watching her whilst Violet studiously looked another way.

"What are you searching for?" Clara inquired presently.

"Only my French exercise book," Agnes answered, "I've missed it. I have to rewrite an exercise for Mademoiselle. I wish you'd help me with it, Clara. Do! You understand all about irregular verbs, and I don't."

"Mademoiselle said no one was to help you," Clara reminded her.

"But she won't know!"

An indignant flush rose to Clara's pale cheeks, and she made no answer. Agnes glanced from her to Violet, and laughed uneasily; she had found her exercise book now, and stood with it in her hand, fluttering its pages.

As neither of her companions spoke, after a minute or so she turned to leave the room; on reaching the door she overheard Violet say: "She has no sense of honour whatever."

The remark had not been meant for her ears, so she took no notice of it, but it had made her wince.

CHAPTER XXVII

AGNES HOSKING IN TROUBLE

"WHAT is amiss with Agnes Hosking, I wonder?"

It was Ann Reed who spoke, one afternoon in mid December, as she and Violet Wyndham were on their way home from school. The girls were walking fast for the air was keen and frosty, and it was as much as they could do to keep warm in the face of the easterly wind. Violet, who had been absorbed in her own thoughts—very pleasant ones for they had been of Ruth's approaching visit—turned a surprised glance upon her companion as she said:—

"Is there anything amiss with her? I haven't noticed. What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's looking thin, and ill, and very unhappy. I've remarked it to myself for days past, and this morning she appeared so miserable that I asked her if she was not well—I had not spoken to her before this

term. She replied that she was quite well and appeared decidedly annoyed at my question, in fact she was rather rude to me, and said she hated to be watched. As though I had been watching her!" Ann concluded with a heightened colour.

"What an ill-mannered girl she is!" Violet cried contemptuously, "I wish you had not spoken to her, Ann," she continued, looking vexed, "why did you? It was too bad of her to snub you when I am sure you only meant to be kind."

"Yes, I only meant to be kind. I think my speaking to her took her by surprise and she answered as she did to prevent my questioning her further. I believe she is very unhappy about something; I should like to know what it is—not from curiosity, but because if I did I might be able to help her."

"But, Ann, I thought you had decided never to have anything more to do with her!" exclaimed Violet, in great astonishment.

"Yes, I had, but I've been thinking, with Christmas coming, Violet, the time of peace and good-will—" Ann broke off with an

appealing glance. Violet frowned. She considered Ann absurdly soft-hearted. Was it really a fact that Agnes was unhappy? she wondered. Well, it served her quite right if she was.

"I have been thinking a great deal of Agnes lately," Ann continued, after a long pause, "especially since you told me about her card playing. I suppose she has really given it up?"

"Oh, yes!" Violet answered, "Clara Garret insisted upon that. She took my advice and threatened to report her and the Pelhams and Kitty Majendie to Miss Orchardson if they did not solemnly promise never again to touch cards whilst they were at school. They all gave the promise, and even went so far as to burn the packs of cards, so I think that's all right. Clara tells me that she finds out the Pelhams have won all Kitty Majendie's money from her."

"What a shame!" cried Ann indignantly; "I believe Kitty's people are by no means rich."

"No, they are not, so she won't have any pocket-money for the rest of the term. It's a

good thing she lost instead of winning, for she says she's had enough of Bridge and she never means to gamble again; she was quite horrified when Clara told her playing cards for money was gambling, she hadn't looked upon it in that light, strange though it seems. She's a silly, frivolous, little butterfly who doesn't think deeply about anything, I really don't believe she meant to do wrong. It's fortunate for her that the Pelhams are leaving at the end of the term, for, without meaning it, they do her a great deal of harm," Violet concluded shrewdly.

"I know very little of the Pelhams," said Ann, rather surprised, "I always liked them very well, but, as they are older than I am, we have not clashed much."

"Clara says their mother is a very gay, fashionable woman whose doings are all reported in the ladies' papers, and she is considered a great beauty; but her girls scarcely know anything of her, and when they were little children they only saw her two or three times a week."

"Poor girls! I suppose, though, they will see more of her when they leave school?"

"Oh, yes! They will be presented at court by-and-by, and properly introduced into society, and their mother will not be satisfied till she finds them rich husbands—this is what they tell Clara Garret."

"What a way to talk! Do they really mean it?"

"Oh, I expect so. Agnes Hosking envies them, I believe; I heard her say once that she would like nothing better than to be in a high position and have nothing to do but to enjoy herself."

"But many people in high positions lead unselfish, hard-working lives, Violet. Mother has a friend, with whom she went to school, who married a rich man, a member of Parliament who is now a cabinet minister, of course she and her husband have to entertain a great deal and are regularly in society, but she doesn't give up her life to enjoyment, she is always busying herself for the welfare of others, and I am quite sure she doesn't neglect her children."

"Then she must be very different from Mrs. Pelham. I suppose some people would be

unselfish and care for their fellow creatures whatever their position. No, I don't think it's a question of position. But to revert to Agnes Hosking, Ann; what can there possibly be to trouble her? I thought she had everything heart could desire."

"Well, you take notice of her to-morrow, and, afterwards, tell me if you see any alteration in her appearance."

This Violet agreed to do. Accordingly, the following morning during school hours, she observed Agnes more closely than she had done for weeks past. Yes, Ann was right, Agnes was not looking well; she had become much thinner and there were dark rims beneath her eyes as though she had had sleepless nights, whilst her whole appearance was one of listlessness and dejection. Once she caught Violet's gaze fixed upon her and turned her head aside quickly, whilst a deep flush rose to her cheeks. Violet refrained from looking at her after that, remembering her remark to Ann that she hated to be watched.

"Well, did you take notice of Agnes Hosking as you said you would?" Ann asked Violet,

later. "Was I not right in thinking her changed?"

"Quite right," Violet agreed; "she is looking very miserable, but it's nothing to do with us if she is—I'm certainly not going to trouble about her."

But Violet thought about Agnes a great deal during the next few days, and one afternoon she was surprised into speaking to her.

It happened thus. She was waiting for Ann, who was having her music lesson, when Agnes appeared in the class-room, where Violet was alone looking over one of her lessons for the next day, and took a chair exactly opposite to her at the table where she was seated. At first Violet did not look up from her book, but by-and-by she stole a furtive peep at her companion and saw that she had opened an exercise book over which she was poring, but not writing, though she held a pen in her hand. Violet turned her attention to her own work after that one momentary glance; but presently she looked at Agnes again, and this time her gaze became rivetted on the other's downcast face which struck her as a picture of misery, so

full was it of unhappy thought; then, obeying a sudden impulse, born of curiosity, she asked:—

"Agnes, what is it? Are you in trouble?"

Agnes glanced up quickly, but she did not answer. Her eyes were full of tears, and one rolled down her cheek unheeded. Violet's face softened involuntarily, and she exclaimed:—

"Yes, I see you are! Can I help you? Oh, what is amiss?"

Still Agnes made no response; she simply covered her face with her hands and burst into a passion of sobs and tears. Violet watched her with a sensation of mingled astonishment and dismay till she had somewhat regained her composure, then continued:—

"I don't know the cause of your unhappiness, but I am really sorry—"

"Sorry?" interrupted Agnes, "do you mean it?" She uncovered her crimson, tear-stained countenance, and looked doubtfully at

Violet. "Are you indeed really sorry?" she asked.

"Yes, of course I am or I should not say so."

"I should have thought you would have been glad!"

Violet flushed and was silent for a minute, then she said candidly: "I am rather surprised myself that I am not. I have thought very hard things of you, Agnes."

"Not harder than I have deserved."

"Perhaps not; nevertheless, I am sorry for you now, for I see you are very unhappy, and if I can do anything to help you I will, gladly."

"You can't do anything, thank you, but I—I should like to tell you—I wonder you haven't heard—I should have thought Ruth would have written—hasn't she told you about my father?"

"No," Violet replied, shaking her head and wondering at the other's incoherent utterance. "Is he ill, Agnes?" she inquired.

"Oh, no! He's failed."

"Failed?" Violet echoed, not understanding.

"Yes. He's lost all his money, and everything he has will be sold—even our house and furniture."

"Oh, dear! How dreadful for him!"

"Yes, and dreadful for me, too! Oh, I hate the thought of being poor, I hate it! Think what it means for me, Violet! I didn't realise all it meant at first when father wrote and said he'd met with heavy financial losses and that he'd arranged with Miss Orchardson for me to leave here for good at the end of the term—I'm not coming back to Helmsford College again. But, since, I've heard from my grandmother, and she says father will have to begin the world afresh, and she cannot help him because he's borrowed a lot of money from her and lost it, but she is going to make a home for me. Oh, Violet, she's such a cross old thing! Think what a life I shall lead with her! And—and she says that after my education is finished—she's going to send me to a school at Bath—I shall have to earn my own living. Oh, dear!"

"Oh, I would not trouble about that if I were you," Violet said in a consolatory tone, "a great many girls have to earn their own livings; I, for one, shall have to do so, I expect."

"Yes, but it's different for you! You've always known it, and you haven't wasted your time at school as I have."

This was very true. Violet sat silently thinking, her heart full of pity as she looked at the dejected figure opposite her at the table.

"Oh, I am sorry for you!" she cried at length; "and for poor Mr. Hosking, too! I suppose you are very fond of your father, are you not?"

"Yes." Agnes' face quivered, and her tears flowed again. There was a soft spot in her heart for the father who had showed his affection for her by an over-indulgence which had done much to make her the selfish girl she was. "It must be very hard lines for him," she went on; "he said in his last letter that he was glad my mother had not lived to see him a ruined man—you

know mother died when I was quite a little girl, I hardly remember her at all. Poor father! I wish he wouldn't send me to grandmother; I'd so much rather be with him, but he says that's impossible now. I am afraid he's very, very poor! Fancy my father poor!"

"Yes, fancy!" Violet said dreamily. It was difficult to realise it indeed. How strange it was that she should be made Agnes' confidante, she who had suffered so much at her hands!

Perhaps Agnes guessed something of what was passing through her companion's mind, for by-and-by she said in a voice, the faltering accents of which expressed real regret:—

"I don't suppose that after school breaks up at Christmas you and I will ever meet again. Before we part I want to ask you to try to forgive me for—for having suspected that you took my purse; I want you to understand that I really am sorry—I tried to tell you so at the beginning of the term, but you would not listen. And I am sorry, too, for all the rude, unkind remarks I used to make to you

and your sisters when we were at Miss Minter's, and for the way I spoke to Ann Reed that day at Streatham. Do—do believe me."

The girl's tone was earnest and sincere, but Violet was too surprised to make an immediate reply.

"I have behaved abominably to you all along," Agnes continued, "I took a delight in making you feel your position, and now it is I who am poor, and I haven't a friend in the world—not one I can rely on. I've seen as much of the Pelhams and Kitty Majendie as I have of anyone, but they'll never give me a second thought, especially when they hear, as they are sure to do, that my father has lost his money. I was sent to Helmsford College to make friends and I haven't made one; I've been all wrong somehow—"

"I should have been all wrong, too, if it hadn't been for my coming to live with the Reeds," Violet interposed eagerly; "I came to Barford envious of those better off than myself, and, oh, so selfish, and—and, as you know, I was ashamed of my poor little home at Streatham. Then, as I grew to know Ann

Reed and to understand her simple, noble character, I began to see things in a different light, and—but, hush, she's coming! Yes, yes, I forgive you!" she added hastily, in response to Agnes' imploring look.

A minute later Ann entered the room. Her eyes rested first on Agnes' tear-stained countenance, then turned questioningly to Violet.

"What is wrong?" she inquired in a voice of concern.

"Shall I tell her, Agnes?" asked Violet, and, receiving a nod for assent, she proceeded to explain: "Agnes is in very great trouble, Ann, because her father has lost all his money."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Ann sympathetically. She laid a kindly hand on Agnes' arm. "I'm so sorry to hear this bad news, so very, very sorry," she said earnestly; "has he really lost all his money?"

"Yes," sighed Agnes, "but please don't mention it to the other girls."

"Most certainly not. This is indeed a great trouble for you."

"I could not well have a greater," was the despondent response.

"Oh, yes, you could. There are many greater troubles than the loss of money. You still have your father, remember."

Further talk of a private nature was impossible after that, for several of the boarders came into the room, and Agnes bent her head over her exercise book to hide her tear-blurred countenance from their view. Ten minutes later Violet and Ann were on their way home, conversing confidentially. Violet repeated, nearly word for word, all Agnes had said to her, whilst her companion listened with the deepest interest.

"I cannot help feeling sympathy for her," Violet remarked, at the conclusion of her tale, "no, I really cannot help it."

"But you do not want to help it, do you?" inquired Ann, with a smile.

"Well—no. Still it's astonishing that I should be sorry for Agnes Hosking; even this morning I should have said it was impossible, for there's no doubt about it I have borne malice against her. If anyone had told me of her father's misfortunes I should have been sorry for Mr. Hosking, but I know I should have been glad to think Agnes would have to experience what poverty means; but when I saw how miserable she was, my one thought was what to say to console her."

"Oh, Violet, I am so glad—glad that you felt like that, I mean!" cried Ann.

"Yes, so am I," Violet admitted; "I might have taken my revenge on Agnes by reminding her that she didn't deserve my sympathy or forgiveness, but I simply couldn't. Well I've forgiven her now, and I must try not to think bitterly of her again."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CONCLUSION

"OH, Ann, I do feel so excited!" The speaker was Violet Wyndham, and her pretty face, with its bright colour, smiling lips, and sparkling eyes, was witness to the truth of her statement. It was within a few days of Christmas, the school term having ended on the previous afternoon, and she and Ann had been putting the finishing touches to the room which had been prepared for the visitor who was expected to arrive on the morrow.

"Oh, how delightful it will be to see dear old Ruthie," she continued; "I expect her box is packed by this time. I wonder how they will manage without her at home!"

"It is very good of your mother to spare her to us," said Mrs. Reed, entering the room at that instant; "we must try to make her visit a happy one."

"Oh, I am sure it will be that!" Violet cried sanguinely, her brown eyes softening with gratitude as she turned them upon Mrs. Reed who was glancing around to see that everything was as it should be. "You are so very, very kind," she proceeded, "it was so like you to give this invitation to Ruthie, and I can't express how glad I am that she could accept it. It seems so wonderful that we should have such friends! As for me—I shall never be able to repay you for your goodness to me as long as I live! I know I must have worried you a great deal at first, I was so untidy and careless, but I've really improved in that way of late, haven't I?" she questioned anxiously.

"Yes," assented Mrs. Reed, with a smile; "you most certainly have. The room looks very nice, girls, I don't think there is anything more to be done to it."

"We must be in good time to meet Ruth at the station to-morrow," remarked Ann; "I hope her train will not be overcrowded. She has never travelled alone before, has she, Violet?"

"Never," Violet answered. "I wonder how Agnes Hosking is feeling," she observed reflectively, a moment later, a sudden gravity overshadowing her countenance; "she must be a good way on her journey by this time—she will have a very long journey, as she has to go right through London and on to Bath."

"I am afraid she will have a miserable Christmas," said Ann; "I think I never saw anyone more depressed and unhappy than she was when we said good-bye to her yesterday. 'I shall never see you again,' she said, 'and you will have only unpleasant memories of me.' We did not know what to say to her, as you may imagine, mother, for of course we could not contradict her."

"I have the greatest difficulty in realising that she is poor, it seems incredible," said Violet; "I used to think she was to be envied because she always had plenty of money to spend and we had so little, and Ruthie used to get so vexed with me. Well, I certainly have no cause to be envious of Agnes now, for she is more wretched than anyone I ever knew."

"She is intensely selfish and pities herself extremely," said Ann; "I believe she is rather inclined to blame her father for losing his money; she said she thought he must have been foolish and reckless, and yet I am positive she loves him."

"Poor girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Reed. "Perhaps poverty will teach her a great deal she has never learnt yet," she proceeded thoughtfully, "and to be kinder and more considerate to other people; she will be called upon to make sacrifices now, and that may be the very discipline she wants."

"I hope she will never gamble again," said Ann gravely, "I spoke to her about it and remarked what dreadful things it often led people to do, but she did not seem in the least impressed until I told her all about Lottie Medland—of course I did not mention Lottie by name, only as the girl who stole her purse."

"And you say she was impressed then?" Mrs. Reed inquired.

"Yes. She tried, at first, to argue that betting and gambling were different matters

altogether, but by-and-by she admitted that the principle of each was the same—the desire to gain money at another's expense. Then she reminded me that people in good society gambled, and I said that I didn't think any society could be truthfully called 'good' in which such a wicked practice was tolerated, and that if people in high positions would only taboo it those in the lower classes of society would follow their example—I heard father say that the other day. Oh, we had quite a warm argument, I can tell you."

"Yes, indeed," nodded Violet, "and in the end she was obliged to allow there was a great deal in all Ann had said, and she promised to bear it in mind."

"I hope she will," Mrs. Reed said gravely; "I trust there will be no playing cards for money at Helmsford College next term, if so it ought certainly to be brought to the knowledge of Miss Orchardson. It is a good thing those Pelhams have left, girls like those do a great deal of harm in a school and always exercise a bad influence over their companions."

"Now, my dears," she continued in a brisker tone, "I'm going to tell you something which I know will give you pleasure—it is about Lottie Medland. I met Dr. Elizabeth when I was in the town doing my shopping this morning, and she spoke of Lottie to me, said how greatly the girl had changed for the better in every way since her illness, and that she believed she would keep steady now and live to be a real comfort to her mother. Of course I was very, very glad to hear this, especially as it came from Dr. Elizabeth; for she has so many acquaintances among the factory hands that she would be sure to find out the truth about Lottie. Then she went on to tell me that Lottie is beginning to save money and is putting by something every week, sometimes only a few coppers, sometimes more; and why do you think she is doing this?"

"I don't know," Violet replied, "to buy something she fancies, I suppose?"

"To have a nest egg against a rainy day?" suggested Ann.

"No," smiled Mrs. Reed, "she is doing it in hope of being able to repay the money she stole—"

"But, mother, she knows that Agnes has had the money repaid to her," broke in Ann, "I told her that father had made it good."

"She intends to return the money to your father, Ann; she has talked the matter over with Dr. Elizabeth, who has consented to keep her savings for her till she has the full amount. I was very glad to hear this of Lottie, for it shows that she is grateful to your father and feels her indebtedness to him. I shall certainly advise him to accept the money; it will take her some time to save it, though, poor girl!"

"Yes, indeed it will," agreed Violet.

"I can realise how she feels," said Ann; "I am sure she will be happier in her mind if she can make the money good. I know father hasn't given a second thought to the money itself and never expects it to be repaid. How surprised he will be when he gets it back! We must go and see the Medlands before Christmas, Violet."

"You shall take a Christmas pudding with you as a gift from me to Mrs. Medland," said Mrs. Reed.

"Let us wait till after to-morrow, then Ruthie will be able to go with us!" cried Violet; "I want her to see the old part of the town."

"We must show her all we can whilst she is with us," Ann replied; "it shall not be our fault if she does not have a thoroughly good time."

And it was a thoroughly good time Ruth enjoyed during those Christmas holidays, a time to be subsequently remembered with keenest gratitude and pleasure; for, as she remarked to her sister on the evening of her arrival at Barford, there was nothing in the background to worry her, and she had left those at home well, and in the best of spirits.

It was a new experience for Ruth to be made the first consideration, and she thoroughly appreciated the novelty of the situation. The weather, though cold, was remarkably fine for the season, and thus there were favourable opportunities for taking her to various places in the neighbourhood. She

had some delightful drives with the doctor in his gig; and old Mrs. Garret, hearing that a sister of Violet's was visiting at the Reeds', wrote and gave the three girls an invitation to spend a long day with her grand-daughters, an invitation which was promptly accepted. Ruth had never before seen such a picturesque home as Mrs. Garret's fine old country house standing, as it did, in the midst of scenery which, in spite of the season being winter, impressed her with its beauty; and she was charmed with the sweet-faced, white-haired old lady, who welcomed her so cordially, and the two gentle-mannered girls, upon whom she looked with especial favour because she knew they had been kind and loyal to the sister she loved so well.

"I think I never enjoyed Christmas holidays so much before," remarked Ann in a tone of satisfaction, one evening early in January, when Dr. and Mrs. Reed had gone out to dine with friends, and she and the sisters were passing the time in chatting whilst they sat by the drawing-room fire; "as a rule they have rather dragged—when mother's been out of the way, you know, and I've had no one to talk to. It's so nice to have

companions of one's own age. I hope you don't begrudge Violet to me now, Ruth; I had rather an idea in the summer, at Teymouth, that you did."

"I don't know that I ever actually begrudged her to you," Ruth answered, colouring as she spoke; "but I was rather afraid that you might wean her from us—not intentionally, though."

"Oh, Ruthie!" cried Violet, whilst Ann looked her surprise; "certainly Ann and I have become great friends, but I love you and all of them at home as much as I ever did—more, I believe."

"Yes, but it might have been otherwise," Ruth reminded her; "I thought you might learn to despise your home. You see I didn't know Mrs. Reed and Ann when you left home, Vi. You are so different from what I had pictured you, Ann."

"Now I do wonder what you and Violet thought I should be like," said Ann, looking puzzled; "I wish you would tell me, for I have so often been curious upon the point and wanted to know. Both of you have told

me the same, that I am different from what you had pictured me."

"Shall I tell her, Ruth?" asked Violet, laughing mischievously. Then, as her sister nodded assent, she continued: "Well, one day, after Dr. Reed had been to see us at Streatham, we were speaking of you, and mother called you Prosperity's child—"

"Prosperity's child!" broke in Ann, opening her grey eyes very wide in her surprise. "Prosperity's child?" she echoed, inquiringly.

"Yes," nodded Violet, "I'd been wondering what you were like, and I said, I remember, that I expected you had everything heart could desire. Oh, I was in a horrid, grumbling mood! and mother said that doubtless you had all that father and she would give me if they could, and she reminded me that I was a poor man's daughter and that you were—Prosperity's child. You see we knew that your father had got on well in the world, and we thought—I'm speaking of Ruth and myself now, I don't know what mother's ideas were—that you wouldn't understand anything about the pinches and privations some people get.

That's why I was shy about talking of our home to you at first; you see I'd often heard father say that prosperity spoilt people—"

"Some people," corrected Ruth hastily, "he said prosperity had not spoilt Dr. Reed."

"But we didn't know the effect it might have had on you, you know, Ann," Violet went on; "I thought you would be proud and—and selfish very likely, and want to have everything all your own way, and I believe I half feared you might look down on me—Oh, I know you never did! You have all along showed me more consideration than I deserved." She paused a moment, then continued:—

"When I came here first I was surprised at a great many things; I saw that Mrs. Reed managed the house carefully that she might have more to give away, and—and it astonished me that you should take so much interest in people I should never have thought of having anything to do with myself—people like the Medlands, for instance. And I had actually been afraid that you might be a girl like Agnes Hosking, Ann!"

"Poor Agnes!" exclaimed Ann. Her face was growing less puzzled. She had been looking grave and a little hurt, but now a faint, amused smile hovered around her lips. "Poor Agnes," she repeated in pitying accents, "I wonder if we shall ever hear of her again?"

"Not very likely," replied Violet; "Ruth says all Mr. Hosking's belongings at Streatham were sold, and no one seems to know what has become of him."

"People do not interest themselves much about their neighbours in London," said Ruth; "I believe Mr. Hosking used to entertain a good bit, but I expect his friends have turned cold shoulders on him now."

"Then they could not have been real friends," declared Ann. "Oh, I do feel sorry for him and for Agnes too—she has no real friends either, poor girl! I am sure she is heartily ashamed now of the way she treated you over the loss of her purse, Violet."

"So she ought to be," asserted Violet; "there is only one thing to be said for her, that she really did believe I had taken her purse."

Well, it's an old story now, and I've forgiven her, so we'll talk of something pleasanter."

"Have you really forgiven her, Vi?" Ruth asked eagerly.

"Yes," nodded Violet, "I thought I never could, but I have. I've often wondered of late whether, if I'd been brought up in the same way as Agnes, I might not have been rather like her; for when I came to Barford a year ago I set great store on wealth and social position, but I've grown to see since then that it's a good thing to be rich only if you help others with your money and don't spend it all on yourself, otherwise you're better without it. So many rich folks are selfish and do nothing but please themselves, they are not like Dr. Elizabeth—I'm so glad you know Dr. Elizabeth, Ruth."

"So am I," Ruth answered. She had spent an evening with her sister and Ann at the lady doctor's house, on an occasion when the latter had entertained a party of factory girls, and had enjoyed herself very much.

"She is the most unselfish person I know," said Ann; "for if she had liked she might

have lived at ease all her days; instead, see what a busy, hard-working life hers has been and always will be, I expect. She said to me once that God had given her great opportunities of working for Him and that she must try to make the most of them."

"God gives very few people great opportunities," Ruth remarked. "But we can all do our best with those we have," she added thoughtfully.

"Yes," agreed Ann; "we must believe God gives us just what is best for us, and do all the good we can."

"It sounds very simple," commented Violet, "but it's not very easy to carry it out. I suppose to do good one must be good. Ann, do you remember that verse Dr. Elizabeth quoted to us? I've so often thought of it since:—"

"Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,

Do noble things, not dream them, all day long;

And so make Life, Death, and that vast "Forever"

One grand sweet song."

"I like that," declared Ruth heartily, "Of course goodness ought to come first. It is not given to us all to be clever, I am not in the least clever myself—"

"Why I am sure you have a great talent for painting," interrupted Ann, "you cannot think how much that sketch you did of Granny's cottage has been admired! So many people have noticed it, haven't they, Violet?"

Violet assented, and Ruth naturally looked very pleased. The conversation then turned to Teymouth and the probability of the families of Reed and Wyndham meeting there in August, and, by-and-by, as it was growing late and they were not to sit up till the return of Dr. and Mrs. Reed, the trio went to bed.

On the following morning Ann received a letter with the Bath postmark, which proved to be a few lines from Agnes Hosking saying that her father had decided to emigrate to

New Zealand, to join a brother of his who was settled there as a sheep farmer and had offered to give him a helping hand, and that she was to accompany him.

"I could remain with my grandmother if I liked," she wrote; "but I prefer to go with father. You seemed to care about what was to become of me, so that is why I am letting you know. Perhaps, some day, I may write again, and if I do I will give you my address. You and Violet Wyndham have no cause to think of me kindly, yet I know you both wish me well, and I am grateful for that. If you think I'm worth a second thought you might pray for me—I know you believe in prayer, and I don't think anyone ever prayed for me yet."

"Poor girl," said Mrs. Reed, when her daughter read this letter aloud to her and the two Wyndham girls; "it may be this is the turning point in her career. I am glad she is going with her father. We must all of us remember her in our prayers."

"Fancy her saying no one ever prayed for her yet!" exclaimed Violet; "how sad that seems!" And her bright eyes grew dim with

sympathetic tears, whilst the last lingering trace of resentment in her heart against her erstwhile enemy died out altogether.

At the end of another week Ruth's visit came to an end. She parted from her sister very cheerfully, content in the knowledge that, strange though it seemed, Violet had actually drawn nearer to her in heart and soul during their separation. That this was owing to Ann's influence Ruth knew very well, and her heart was full to overflowing with love and gratitude towards this true friend—Prosperity's Child.

