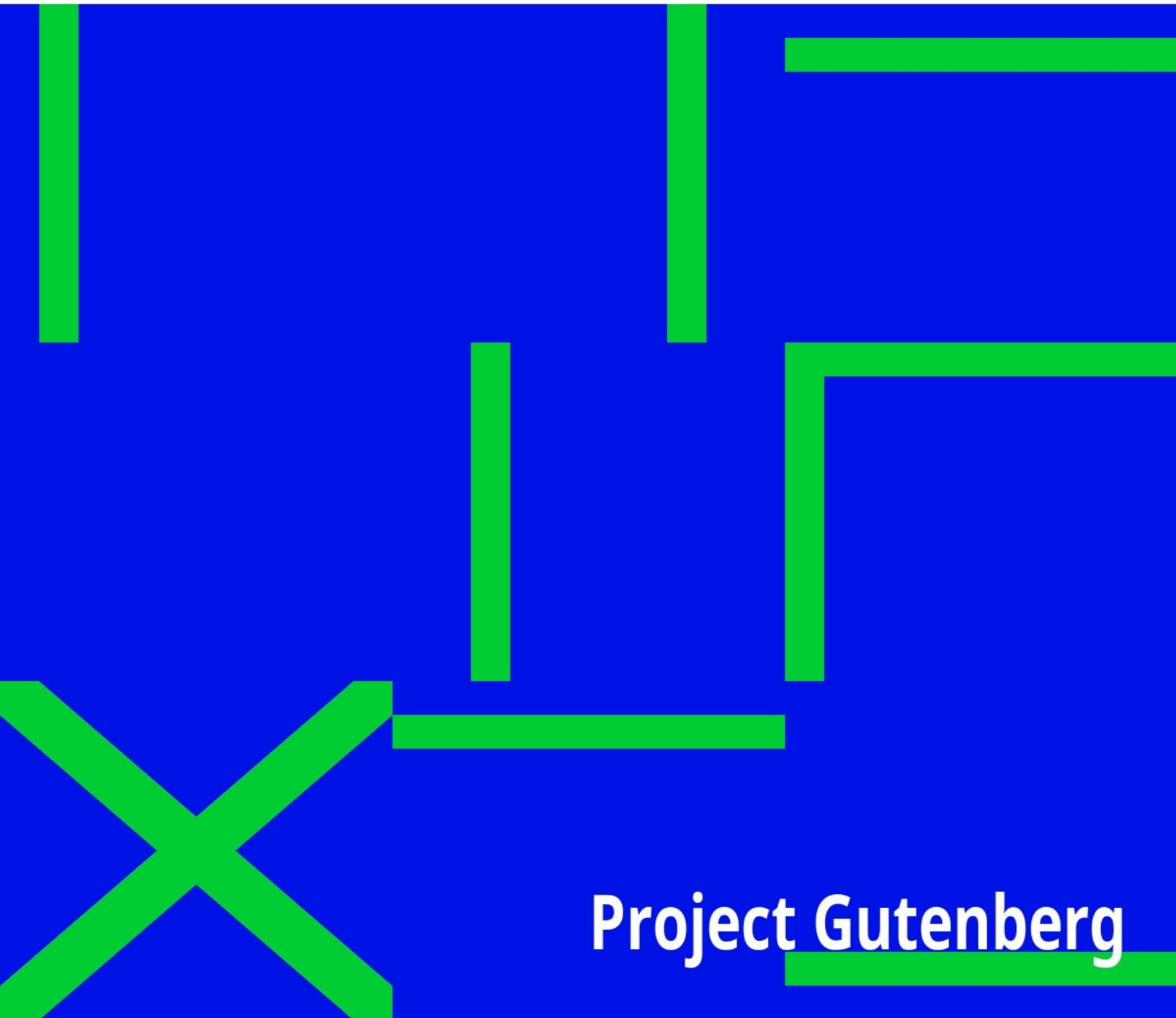
The Governess

Julie M. Lippmann



Title: The Governess

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Illustrator: Charles R. Chickering

Release Date: December 9, 2007 [EBook #23778]

Language: English

Produced by Al Haines

There she stood

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THE GOVERNESS

BY

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"MAMMA-BY-THE-DAY," etc.

Illustrated by
CHARLES R. CHICKERING

McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart
Publishers ——— Toronto
1916

The Governess

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The Governess

CHAPTER I

NAN

"Hello, Nan!"

"Heyo, Ruthie!"

"Where are you going?"

"Over to Reid's lot."

"Take me?"

"No, Ruthie, can't."

The little child's lip began to tremble. "I think you're real mean, Nan Cutler," she complained.

Nan shook her head. "Can't help it if you do," she returned, stoutly, and took a step on.

"Nannie," cried the child eagerly, starting after her and clutching her by the skirt, "I didn't mean that! Truly, I didn't. I think you're just as nice as you can be. Do please let me go with you. Won't you?"

Nan compressed her lips. "Now, Ruth, look here," she said after a moment, in which she stood considering, "I'd take you in a minute if I could but the truth is —oh, you're too little."

"I ain't too little!"

"Well, then, your mother doesn't like you to be with me, so there!" cried Nan,

in a burst of reckless frankness.

Ruth hung her head. She could not deny it but at sight of her companion turning to leave her she again started forward, piping shrilly, "Nannie! Nannie! She won't care this time. Honest, she won't."

Nan stalked on without turning her head.

The hurrying little feet followed on close behind.

"Nannie! Nannie!"

"See here, Ruth," exclaimed the girl, veering suddenly about and speaking with decision. "You can't come, and that's all there is about it. Your mother doesn't like me, and you ought not to disobey her. Now run back home like a good little girl."

The delicate, small face upturned to hers grew hardened and set, but the child did not move.

Nan gave her a friendly shove on the shoulder and turned on her way again. Immediately she heard the tap of hurrying little feet behind, like the echoing sound of her own hasty footsteps. She stopped and swung about abruptly.

"Are you going to be a good little girl and go back this minute?" she demanded sternly, calling to her assistance all the dignity of her fourteen years, and turning on the poor infant a severe, unrelenting eye.

The child gazed up at her reproachfully, but did not reply.

Nan felt herself fast losing patience. "Of all the provoking little witches!" she exclaimed, in an underbreath of irritation.

Ruth's rebuking eyes surveyed her calmly, but she made no response.

"Now be good and trot along back," cajoled Nan, changing her tactics and stroking the child's soft hair caressingly.

There was a visible pursing of the obstinate little lips, but no further sign of acknowledgment.

Nan dropped her voice to a tone of honey-sweetness. "See here, Ruthie, if you'll go home this minute I'll give you five cents. You can buy anything you like with it at Sam's, on the way back." She plunged her hand into her pocket and drew forth a bright new nickel, and held it alluringly aloft.

The azure eyes gazed at it appreciatively, but the hand was not outstretched to receive it. For a second Nan reviewed the situation in silence. Then she flung about with a movement of exasperation, and marched on stolidly, and the smaller feet hastened after her, keeping pace with difficulty, and often breaking into a little run that they might not be outstripped.

A chill autumn wind was sweeping up heavily from the northeast, and the air was cold and raw. Nan shuddered as she walked, and wished Ruth were safe and sound in her own warm home, which she never should have been permitted to leave this blustering day. A score of plans for ridding herself of her troublesome little follower crowded Nan's brain. She might run and leave the youngster behind. But then Ruth would cry, and Nan could not bear to inflict pain on a little child. She might take her up in her arms and carry her bodily back to her own door. Well, and what then? Why, simply, she would get the credit of abusing the little girl. There seemed no way out of it. She stalked on grimly, and when she came to Reid's lot she promptly and dexterously climbed its fence and continued her way in silence. But the fence proved an insurmountable obstacle to Ruth. She stood outside and wailed dismally. The sound smote Nan, and made her turn around.

"Ruth Newton, you deserve to be spanked!" she announced, severely.

The child uttered another wail of entreaty. Nan sprang up to the cross-bar of the palings, gathered her skirts about her knees, and leaped down.

"Here, let me boost you, since you will get over," she said sharply.

After they were both safely on the other side Ruth's spirit rose, and she capered about in the freedom of the open space as wildly as a young colt. Nan had come for chestnuts. She announced the same presently to Ruth. Ruth shouted gleefully.

"I'm going to climb the tree. You can stand underneath and pick up what I shake, only mind you don't get the burr-prickles in your fingers, for they hurt like sixty," warned Nan.

The child nodded her head and pranced over the brown, stubbly ground with dancing feet, her cheeks aglow and her eyes flashing with satisfaction.

She watched Nan with the liveliest interest, and when the older girl was once comfortably ensconced in the lofty branches, she executed a sort of war-dance underneath, and spread her tiny skirt to catch the rain of nuts that Nan shook down upon her from above. But presently this began to pall.

"I want to come up where you are, Nannie," she called, coaxingly.

"You'll have to want then," retorted Nan, carelessly munching nuts like a squirrel.

"I could climb's good as anything if only I had a boost," drawled the child ruefully.

Nan sprinkled a handful of shucks on her head.

"I'm going to try," ventured Ruth.

Nan laughed.

Ruth looked around, trying to discover some means by which she might accomplish her purpose. Nan felt so sure that the child could not do what she threatened that she made no effort to dissuade her. She, herself, passed from bough to bough as nimbly as a boy, in spite of her skirts, and in a very short time was almost out of sight among the upper spreading branches. She sat astride one of these, swinging to and fro and luxuriating in her sense of freedom and adventure. Peering down occasionally she saw Ruth standing beneath her and sent repeated showers of nuts spinning through the boughs to keep the child busy. But presently Ruth disappeared. She had spied an old piece of board and she immediately flew to get it, her silly little head filled with the idea of making it serve her as a ladder. She tugged it laboriously across the stubbly field, and her short, panting breaths did not reach Nan's ear, full of the near rustle of leaves and the hum of the scudding wind.

"Ahoy! below there!" she shouted nautically from above.

Ruth was too busy to respond. The board was heavy, and it took all the strength of her slight arms to get it in position.

"Shipmate ahoy!" repeated Nan.

By this time the board had been tilted against the tree and Ruth was scrambling up the unsteady inclined plane, too absorbed and scared in her adventure to reply. She actually managed to reach the top and to stand there tiptoeing the edge uncertainly, her small fingers clasping the tree-trunk convulsively and her arms trying to grapple with it for a surer hold. But suddenly she gave a piercing scream, and Nan, peering down through the branches in instant alarm, saw Ruth lying at the foot of the tree in a pitiful little motionless heap, and knew in a moment that she had tried to do what she had threatened and had failed.

It did not take Nan a minute to reach the ground. Her heart seemed to stand still with fear. She flung herself from bough to bough with reckless haste and dropped to the ground all in one breathless instant.

"Ruth," she cried, bending over the little prostrate figure in an agony. "Ruth, open your eyes! Get up! Oh, please get up!"

There was no answer. Nan wrung her hands in despair. The cold wind blew over the field in chilling gusts. It made her shudder, and instinctively she took a step toward her warm coat, which she had stripped off and cast aside before climbing the tree. At sight of it a new thought struck her. Ruth lying there on the frosty ground would surely take cold—perhaps die from it! In a twinkling the soft, woolly garment was wrapped securely about the child and Nan had her two stout arms around her and was half dragging, half carrying her in the direction of the distant fence. But they had not covered a dozen yards before she felt her strength begin to fail. She was lifting a dead weight, and it seemed to drag more heavily upon her every moment. Her arms pulled in their sockets and her breath came in painful gasps, and she knew that if she tried to keep on as she was it would be at the cost of increasing misery. Still she did not give up, and at last, after what seemed to her hours of agony and suspense, she actually reached the limit of the field. She laid Ruth gently upon the ground and straightened herself up to ease her aching back and regain her lost breath before taking up her burden again. But as she lifted her head her eyes fell on the high pickets before her, which seemed to confront her with as grim defiance as if they had been bayonets. How could she get Ruth over? The gate, which was at another end of the lot, was always kept padlocked, and even if she had remembered this at first and had carried the child there, she could not have undone the bolt. This was the

last straw! She felt frustrated and defeated, and a low sob of complete discouragement broke from her. It was useless to dream of getting Ruth over alone. The only way that remained was to secure help, that was plain. She looked about wildly, but not a soul was in sight, and she knew in her heart that the chances were against her. The street at this point was near the city limits, and it had not been built up as yet. There would be nothing to call any one here unless it might be some boy who, like herself, had come out for chestnuts, and what use would a mere boy be? If only John Gardiner were here! John was tall and strong, and would lend a hand in a jiffy. But John also was miles away. Ruth's eyes opened for a second and then closed sleepily again. Nan's heart leaped up with new hope.

"Ruth! Ruth!" she called eagerly bending over her and stroking her cheek tenderly. But her hope was short-lived. The eyelids remained shut, and the child only breathed deeper than before. Nan's own heart seemed to stop in her anxiety for Ruth. Suddenly she sprang to her feet. Surely she had heard the rattle of wheels! Ever so far and indistinct to be sure, but still unmistakably wheels, clattering over some distant cobbles. She raised her voice and shouted; then held her breath to listen. The clatter grew more distinct; it drew nearer and nearer. She clambered up the fence and stood there waving her arms and shouting as madly as if she had been a shipwrecked mariner sighting a sail. She paused a moment to listen. The rattling wheels came nearer. She shouted again and then waited, listening intently. The rattling stopped. She set up a wild howl of dismay and kept it up till her ears seemed on the point of splitting. But now the clatter of wheels had begun again and she could see a milk cart rounding the corner of the street. She gave a long, shrill whistle and leaped down and ran frantically out into the road, straight for the horse's head.

It was a second or two before the astonished driver could be made to understand, but when he did, he bounded out of his cart willingly enough, vaulted over the fence and then bade Nan "stand hard" while he lifted Ruth into her arms. Her weight was nothing to the brawny fellow, and he had her safely stowed away on the seat of his cart, with Nan crouching on the floor beside her and himself clinging to the step outside, in less time than it takes to tell it.

Nan gave him the street and number in a trembling gasp of gratitude. He eyed her narrowly, and then seemed to sum up his conclusion in a low, keen whistle. Her hat was hanging by its elastic on her shoulders; her hair was blown out of all order by the wind; her dress was torn and her hands were bruised and none too

clean. She had no coat on, and her cheeks were flaming with cold and excitement. She was an astonishing spectacle.

"Guess you're a sort of high-flyer, ain't you?" said he at last without a sign of ill-nature.

Nan set her jaws and did not reply.

"Oh, well, I don't want to hurt your feelings. Only you look sorter wild-like, you know, and as if your mother didn't know you was out."

Nan's teeth snapped. "I haven't got any mother," she returned curtly. "She's dead."

The milkman looked uncomfortable. He shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other and muttered something about being sorry. Then for some time there was silence.

"That's the house," announced Nan at length, jumping to the step and hanging to the rail above the dashboard. "That third one from the corner, on this side. Please let me out first. I want to run ahead and tell."

Almost before he could rein in his horse she was out on the pavement. She flew to the area gate and pressed the bell with all her might. She kept her finger on it, and the cook came flying to the door, looking flushed and angry at the continuous ringing.

"Well, I might o' known," she said, eying Nan with unconcealed disfavor. "Do you think a body's deaf that you ring like that?"

Nan flung back her head resentfully.

"Never mind what I think," she returned sharply. "Open the gate! Ruth is sick! She got hurt! Some one's bringing her in. Quick!"

The gate was flung open with a bang, and the woman rushed out, clutching Ruth from the milkman's arms and carrying her into the house, muttering mingled caresses and abuse all the while; the caresses for Ruth and the abuse for Nan.

The milkman turned on his heel and went his way unthanked, but by the time he got to the outer gate Nan had recollected herself, and had rushed after him, calling:

"Oh, please! I want to tell you—thank you ever so much!"

She was glad she had done it when she saw the gratified look on his face. When she got back to the area gate it was shut. Mary the chambermaid stood just inside it. She made no attempt to admit Nan. She simply stood there and looked her over from head to toe.

"Well, you're a pretty piece!" she remarked.

"None of your business if I am," retorted Nan. "Let me in. I want to see Mrs. Newton."

The maid took her hand from the knob and put it on her hip.

"Mrs. Newton don't want to see you, though, I guess," she returned. "By this time Bridget's told her all she wants to know."

"But I must see her! I must tell her!" Nan insisted, stamping her foot. "Bridget don't know anything about it. No one does but me. Let me in, I say!"

The girl laughed.

"Well, I'll go upstairs and tell Mrs. Newton. Then, if she wants to see you, she can," and she went inside and closed the door, leaving Nan to stand shuddering in the cold outside. Presently she came back, carrying the coat in her hands.

"Mrs. Newton says she hasn't time to see you now. She says she'll attend to you later. She says she can guess how it happened, and that if Ruth dies it'll be your fault. There, now, you know what's thought of you, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it, you great, rough tomboy!"

The gate was thrust open a little way, the coat was flung out, and the door slammed to again, and once more Nan found herself in the area way alone. Burning tears of fury sprung to her eyes. She caught up her despised coat and dashed wildly out of the gate in a perfect tempest of anger and resentment.

CHAPTER II

NAN'S VISITOR

She knew what was coming when the bell rang. She had been expecting it all the afternoon. But in spite of that her heart beat fast and her breath came hard as she heard the familiar sound. Not that she was afraid. She had nothing to be afraid of, she assured herself defiantly, and besides, fear was one of the things she despised. Whatever else she was, she was certainly not a coward. Still she sat in her room and waited in a state of mind that was not precisely what one would call tranquil.

She heard Delia mount the basement stairs and then she heard her ask the new-comer into the parlor. A moment later there was a tap upon Nan's bedroom door.

"Come in," she said carelessly, and pretended to be searching for some article lost in the confusion of her upper drawer.

"You're wanted in the parlor, Nan," began Delia at once. "It's a lady who says she lives on the block and she wouldn't give her name, but I think she's the one moved into Leffingwell's old house last spring—has that little girl with the long curls, you know the one I mean. Shall I help you put on another dress and braid your hair over? It's fearful mussy-lookin'. Or will I just go and say you'll be down in a minute while you do it yourself?"

Nan cast a glance at her torn dress and towzled head in the mirror. "No, Delia, I'll go as I am, and if the lady doesn't like it she can—oh, well, I'll go down as I am."

Delia pressed her lips together, as though trying to hold back the words of advice on the tip of her tongue. She knew it was worse than useless to try to argue with the girl. She had not lived in the house since Nan was born without learning better than to try to reason with her when she had once declared her mind. She stood beside the door, and allowed Nan to pass through it before her,

without saying a word. Then she followed her quietly down stairs. At the parlor door Nan paused a moment, and Delia, who thought she was about to speak, paused too, but the girl only turned sharply into the room, pulling the door shut behind her. Once across the threshold she halted and stood irresolute. Whatever the result of this meeting might prove, depended not so much on Nan as on her visitor.

Nan, though standing in awkward silence, as stiff and as straight as a soldier on parade, was ready to be influenced by whatever course her caller chose to pursue; a kind word spoken at the start would melt her at once, where a harsh one would raise in her every sort of sullen hostility and obstinate resistance. She was, as Delia often said to herself, "as hard to manage as a kicking colt." Sometimes she was wonderfully docile, but her moods were variable, and oftenest she was headstrong and wilful, with a fierce repugnance to curb, or what she considered unwarrantable interference.

But it would have been difficult to convince the stranger at that moment that Nan could ever be won, or, in fact, that she had any tenderness to be appealed to. There she stood, looking as erect and impassive as a young Indian. Her brown hair was in a state of thorough disorder, and gave a sort of savage look to her sun-browned face. Her gray eyes were anything but soft at this moment; her mouth was set, and her whole attitude seemed to be one of imperturbable indifference. In reality, the girl was apprehensive and embarrassed. She set her lips to keep them from trembling. Her first impulse would have been to make a clean breast of everything, frankly and truthfully, but—something in her nature held her back. Was it obstinacy, or was it reticence?

Her visitor did not wait to discover. She decided the result of the interview in the first words she spoke.

"Is your name Nan Cutler?" she asked in a voice of stern authority.

"Yes, it is!" acknowledged the girl, instantly on the defensive.

"Then it is you who are accountable for the accident to Ruth Newton? You urged her to go with you, and when she fell—oh, you are a coward! It was detestable!"

Nan made no reply, but stood the picture of inflexibility, facing her accuser squarely.

"I have come to see you, not because you can undo the mischief you have done to my child, and not because I think I can affect you in the least, or make you sorry or ashamed, but simply to tell you that I intend to see that you are punished, as you deserve. I have put up with annoyance you caused me long enough. Your influence is bad. All the neighbors complain of you. You are noisy and careless, and rough and rude. When any one reprimands you, you give a pert retort, or else pretend not to hear—which is impudent. Unless we wish our children to be utterly ruined we must see that they are put beyond your influence at once. You do things that are absolutely vulgar and unbefitting a girl of your age; you must be fourteen, at least, you look older, you are certainly old enough to know better. You are not a proper playmate for our children. You are boisterous and unladylike. You—you—are a perfect hoyden!"

The stranger paused for breath, while Nan surveyed her with a look of calm indifference; an air of unconcern in anything she might say or think that seemed as insolent as it was exasperating.

"You are a perfect hoyden!" repeated the stern voice in rising anger. "Whatever you do is done in such a loud, violent fashion that it becomes perfectly unbearable. You play ball with boys. You climb fences and trees. You are continually flying up and down the street on your detestable roller-skates and shouting until the neighborhood seems like Bedlam, and you don't appear to have the vaguest idea that people's rights need not be infringed on in such a manner; that they have the right to peace and quiet in their own homes. Even if you would content yourself with your own disorderliness! But you are not satisfied with doing what you know must annoy others; you seem to take a malicious delight in bringing the little children under your influence and making them long to follow your example. You cannot have the first shadow of generosity or bravery in your nature, or you would not urge them to do what you know their parents would disapprove of. You teach them to disobey. My daughter never told an untruth in her life until the other day. I have no reason to doubt that you taught her to tell that untruth!"

Nan's cheeks suddenly became white, but she did not open her lips.

"If you cannot be restrained by your own people at home you shall be by some other means. They say your own people are respectable; how can you disgrace them so?"

Nan deigned no reply, but her lip curled contemptuously.

"They say your mother is dead."

Again no answer.

"Where is your father?"

"My father is in India. He is in Bombay," announced Nan, deliberately.

"Who has control of you in his absence?"

"No one!" declared the girl with decision.

Mrs. Newton surveyed the lank, overgrown, girlish figure with unconcealed scorn.

"Do you know," she said with bitter distinctness, "that you are the most shameless, unfeeling girl I have ever beheld? Any one else would show some remorse for what she had done, but you—young as you are, you are the hardest creature I have ever known. Hard, cruel, and cold. How can you stand there and look me in the face when you know how you have injured me? Tell me, does it not touch you at all that Ruth is hurt? Do you know or care that such a fall as she has had is enough to cripple a child for life? Many children have been hopelessly crippled through far less."

The mother's voice broke, and she set her lips to keep down a sob.

"How much is she hurt?" whispered Nan after a moment. She was trembling all over and cold and hot by turns, and she could not command her voice. It was almost more than she could do to keep from bursting into a violent fit of sobbing from her sense of injury and shame and indignation. But she simply would not permit herself to break down. No one should be allowed to think they intimidated her. But she could not hide her anxiety about Ruth.

"Is she much hurt?" she repeated.

There was a shade of softening in her visitor's face. "We can't tell yet. She has had a severe fall, and the chill coming after it may have very serious consequences, but we can tell nothing yet. However, I did not come here to

inform you of her condition," the voice growing stern and the face severe again. "I came to tell you that if Ruth is injured I will hold you responsible. And not only that, but I warn you that I mean to take matters into my own hands now and see that you are permitted to do no further mischief. You shall be controlled. Who has charge of your father's affairs? Who has any sort of authority over you in his absence? He must have left you in somebody's care. He can't have gone away leaving you with no one to look after you. Who is your guardian? Tell me? If you don't I shall find out for myself, you may depend."

"I'm perfectly willing to tell you," declared Nan, with what seemed to be complete coolness. "It's Mr. Turner. He gives Delia the money to get me things and to keep the house. He comes here every once in a while to see me. My father has him for his lawyer. He's a friend of his. When Delia writes to him for money for me she sends the letter to 101 Blank Street. That's his office. I don't remember where his house is. Delia never writes to his house. He doesn't attend to me—that is, he isn't my guardian, but I guess he would do if you want to see some one."

Nan delivered herself of this information as casually as though it had been a report of the weather. As a matter of fact she was inwardly quivering, and every moment found it more and more difficult to control herself. Never in all her life before had she been so relentlessly, harshly accused. In trying to conceal her emotion she only gave herself the appearance of rigid inflexibility.

Her visitor regarded her stonily for a moment and then abruptly brushed past her toward the door. Nan made no attempt to intercept her, but suddenly the hard lines about her mouth relaxed, her eyes softened, and she held out her hands with an imploring gesture.

"Won't you please tell me where Ruth is hurt?" she cried. "Won't you let me do something for her? Let me—please let me! If you'll only listen a minute I'll tell you—"

But it was too late now. She was given no reply; permitted no chance to vindicate herself. Her visitor's hard lips quivered, but she uttered no syllable. In a moment she was gone.

After the door had closed upon her and it was quite certain that she would not come back, Nan turned and rushed headlong, like a young savage, upstairs and

into her own room. What took place there it would have been impossible to discover, for the shades were jerked fiercely down, the door sharply shut and locked, and Delia, coming up some time later, could not make out a sound within nor get a reply to her requests to be admitted, though she stood outside and pleaded for an hour.

At twilight the door was opened and Nan came out quite composed, but bearing on her face the unmistakable traces of tears which, however, Delia was wise enough to let pass unremarked.

"Time for dinner?" asked the girl, curtly.

"No, not yet. It ain't but just six," replied the woman. "Are you hungry? I'll get you something if you are."

"No, I'm not hungry. But I feel kind of queer, somehow. There's an empty feeling I have that makes me uncomfortable. But I'm not hungry. O Delia!" she burst out, vehemently, "I wish—I wish—I had my mother. A girl needs—her mother—sometimes—"

"Always," declared Delia, with conviction.

For a little time there was silence between them. Then Nan said, "Look here, Delia—I want to tell you something. I feel just horribly. I never felt so unhappy in all my life. That lady who was here this afternoon is Ruth Newton's mother. She came to see me because this morning Ruth fell from the tree in Reid's lot and hurt herself, and Mrs. Newton thinks I made her do it. I didn't. Honestly, I didn't. I had climbed the tree myself, and it was fun and I liked it. Ruth would come. I tried to make her stay away, but she wouldn't, and when she teased to climb the tree too, I told her not to. She's so little and young, and her mother doesn't think it's ladylike, and I said if she wouldn't come with me in the first place I'd give her five cents. But she would tag on, and later she tried to climb the tree in spite of everything. She put a board up against the trunk and got on it and then scrambled up a little way, but she didn't get far, for the board slipped, or something, and down she went—smash! I guess she must have hit herself on the edge or somewhere, for when I dropped down she was lying on the ground, and she had her eyes closed and wouldn't speak. Then I didn't know what to do. I wanted to lift her, but it was awful work. There was no one in sight. At last I managed to tug her to the fence, but, of course, I hadn't the strength to get her

over that alone. I couldn't leave her and run for help, and for a long time I did nothing but scream, in the hope that some one would come along and hear. And by and by I heard wheels. It was a milk cart, and I got the man to help me get her home. I went right to the Newton's as fast as I could, but when Bridget opened the door and saw who it was she was simply furious. They wouldn't let me in, and Mrs. Newton sent down word she wouldn't see me, but she'd attend to me later, and this afternoon when she called she just called me names and things, and I couldn't explain to her, I felt so choked. She talked to me so, I couldn't say a word. You don't know. When people say such things to me something gets in my throat, and I feel like strangling and doing all sorts of things. I seem to shut right up when they go at me like that. I can't speak. I just feel like—well, you don't know what I feel like. Mrs. Newton asked me where father is, and I told her, and then she asked about Mr. Turner, for she wants to have things done to me, and I told her about him. I wouldn't have her think I wanted to get out of it. She called me names and she thinks I taught Ruth to tell untruths; she said so. She says if Ruth doesn't get well it will be my fault. O Delia! I didn't do it. Honestly I wasn't to blame. But if Ruth is going to be sick and they think I did it —I want my mother! How can I bear it without my mother?"

Delia gently patted the dark head that had flung itself into her lap. Her heart ached for the girl, but her simple mind was not equal to the task of consolation in a case like this. She could not cope with its difficulties. She knew Nan was to blame for much, but she thought in her heart that Mrs. Newton had no right to vent her wrath upon the girl without first having heard her side of the story. She could not console Nan, she thought, without seeming to convict Mrs. Newton, and if she "stood up for" Mrs. Newton, Nan would think her lacking in sympathy for herself. But in the midst of her wondering, up bobbed the head from under her hand.

"Mrs. Newton says I teach the children to do wrong. She says I'm a hoyden. She says I left Ruth in the cold and that I was a coward. She didn't give me time to tell her about how I tried to get Ruth home myself, and that when I couldn't, how I just howled for help. At least she didn't want to listen when I got so I could speak. She says everybody thinks I'm bad, and they want to have me attended to. She thinks I taught Ruth to tell lies. Think, Delia, lies! When she said that it was like knives! O Delia? I know you've been awfully good to me always, and taken care of me since mamma died and all, but if it is so dreadful to play ball and skate and do things like that, why did you let me in the first place? I hate to sew and do worsted work and be prim, but perhaps, if you had brought

me up that way I might have got so I could stand it. Don't you think if you had begun when I was a baby I might have? I don't want to have people hate me—honestly, I don't. When they talk to me, and say I'm rowdyish because I walk fences and play ball with the boys and climb trees, I try not to show it, but it hurts me way deep down. I try to say something back so they'll think I don't care, and sometimes, if it hurts too much, I pretend not to hear, and that makes them madder than ever. They don't know how, when it's like that, I can't speak. Perhaps if you'd brought me up so, I might have liked dolls and thought it was fun to sit still and sew on baby clothes. But I don't like to, and I can't help it. Mrs. Newton thinks because I whistle and make a noise that I'm just mean and hateful and everything else. She thinks I don't care. Why, Delia! if anything happened to Ruth I'd feel exactly as if I didn't want to live another day. I—I—O Delia!"

For the first time she gave way, and, hiding her head in her arms, sobbed heavily.

By this time Delia had risen to a point of burning anger against her child's detractor. Her heart beat loyally for Nan, and she could scarcely restrain the words of resentment that rose to her lips, and that it would have been such unwisdom to have uttered.

"Never mind, Nannie lamb!" she said. "It'll be all right in the morning. The child will be all well in the morning. You'll see she ain't so bad as they think. And to-morrow I'll go and tell them all about it. And perhaps they'll see then it's better to be slow accusin' where the guilt ain't proved. Come, come! Don't cry so! Why, Nannie, child, you haven't cried like this since you were—I can't tell how little. You never cry, Nan. You're always so brave, and never give way. You'll have a headache if you don't stop. Dry your tears, and to-morrow it'll be all right."

So, little by little, she soothed the girl, and by and by Nan ate her dinner, and then, when it was later, she went to bed. But when everything was hushed and still a dark figure crept noiselessly down stairs and on into the outer darkness. Down the street it stole until it had reached a house, which, alone in all the row of darkened barrack-like dwellings, showed a dimly lit window to the night. There it halted. And there it stood, like a faithful sentinel, only deserting its post when the gray light of early morning rose slowly over the world and the city was astir once more.

CHAPTER III

MR. TURNER'S PLAN

"I am deeply sorry," said Mr. Turner, "and can only apologize in my friend's name for any annoyance his daughter may have caused you. Of course I cannot agree with you that she annoys you purposely. A child of William Cutler could not well be other than large-hearted and generous. She may be a little undisciplined perhaps, but it shall be attended to, Madam! I assure you the matter shall be attended to."

Mrs. Newton rose. She had called upon Mr. Turner to state her complaint against Nan Cutler. Now that was accomplished she would go; only she made a mental vow that if the lawyer were not as good as his word, if he did not take immediate steps toward rectifying the matter, she would follow it up herself and see that she was relieved of what, in her anger, she called "that common nuisance."

Meantime Nan herself was going about with a dead load of misery on her heart. Delia had gone to the Newton's house early in the morning to inquire after the sick child's condition and to repeat Nan's story to her mother, but that lady was "not at home," and Delia understood that to mean that Mrs. Newton declined to receive either her or her explanation. She went home angry and disappointed.

"I guess the little girl ain't much hurt," she announced to Nan. "She's in bed to be sure, but I guess that's more on account of her cold than anything else. She isn't going to be crippled, Nan, now don't you fret. She'll be all right. Now you see if she ain't."

Nan's own flushed cheeks and brilliant eyes, the result of her yesterday's chilly adventures, worried the good woman not a little. If she had dared she would have liked to "coddle her child," but Nan was not one of the coddling kind, and would have scorned being made a baby of. She went about the house in one of her unhappy moods, restless and wretched and unable to amuse herself, and finding the hours never-endingly long.

When the bell rang she welcomed the sound as a grateful diversion and ran to the balusters and hung over the railing to see who might be the new-comer. She was glad of any break in the monotony of such a miserable day.

When Delia opened the door and admitted Mr. Turner, Nan's heart gave a big leap. Visions of what might be in store for her, the result of Mrs. Newton's action against her, thronged her brain and made her shudder with apprehension. What if Mr. Turner had come to say that she was to be sent to the House of Correction, or some horrid boarding-school where one don't get enough to eat and where one couldn't poke one's nose outside the door. A set expression settled on the girl's face that did not augur well for her reception of whatever plan the lawyer might have to propose.

When Delia came to call her, she sighed. She saw plainly enough that Nan's "contrary fit" was on, and she wondered how much the lawyer would accomplish by his visit under the circumstances.

Nan went down to him sullenly determined to stand by her guns and absolutely refuse to be committed to either a reformatory or any other establishment of a similar character.

"How do you do, my dear?" was Mr. Turner's kindly greeting as the girl entered the room.

Nan replied, "Very well, sir," thinking, at the same time, that she would not be disarmed by kindness nor permit herself to be cajoled into doing anything she did not wish to do. No one really had the right to order her about, and she would resolutely oppose any one who assumed such a right.

But presently she found herself telling her father's friend the story of yesterday's disaster, quite simply and with entire willingness.

"So," Mr. Turner said at the conclusion, "I thought that the good lady must have made a mistake. I felt pretty sure your father's daughter would never be guilty of cowardice nor of deliberately planning to destroy the peace of any one. I knew you could not be the girl Mrs. Newton described. She seemed to think you were—why, my dear, she gave me to understand that you were quite wild and lawless; that you were a bad influence in the neighborhood, and that you were so with full consciousness of what you were doing. We must explain to Mrs. Newton! We must explain!"

"I don't lie!" declared Nan. "And I'm not a coward, and I don't try to make her mad or hurt her children, but I do climb trees and I do race and do figures on roller-skates, and I do do the rest of the things she says I do and that she doesn't like."

"And your school?" ventured the lawyer.

"I don't go any more," announced Nan. "I had a fight with one of the teachers, and so I left."

Mr. Turner gazed suddenly upon the floor.

"And this 'fight' with the teacher? Do you remember the cause of the disturbance?" he asked, looking up after a moment.

"She struck me with her ruler. I had a rubber baby doll, it was the weeniest thing you ever saw, and she wore false puffs, Miss Fowler did, and one day, when I was at the blackboard and she was looking the other way, I just dropped the baby doll into one of the puffs that the hair-pin had come out of, and that was standing up on end, and it looked so funny on her head, the puff with the baby doll standing in it, that all the girls laughed, and then she asked me what I had done, and I told her, and she struck me. I wouldn't have said anything if she had just punished me. I knew it was wrong to pop that doll on her head, but I just couldn't help it—it looked too funny. But when she struck me! Well, I won't be struck by any one—and so I left."

The lawyer meditated in silence for a moment. Then he said:

"Well, my dear, I think I understand the condition of things here. Without doubt it is high time something were done. Your father, when he went away, gave me full authority to make such arrangements for you as I might feel were necessary, but until now I have rather avoided taking upon myself any responsibility. Possibly I have neglected my duty toward you. But now all that shall be changed. Don't you think if I were to send you—"

Nan's eyes blazed. So it was as she had felt sure it would be! She was to be sent away! She did not wait for the sentence to be finished.

"Send me to the House of Correction? I won't go, sir! I'll run away first! Or a horrid boarding-school, neither. I guess my father didn't mean me to be made

unhappy, Mr. Turner; I guess he didn't mean any one to have authority to send me to awful places just because Mrs. Newton says so, away from Delia and things. You needn't send me anywhere, for I'll run away as sure as you do."

"I'll run away first!"

"Slowly—slowly!" cautioned Mr. Turner. "You go too fast! If you had waited for me to finish my sentence you would have discovered that I meant to send you neither to the House of Correction," here his eyes twinkled with amusement, "nor to a 'horrid boarding-school.' What I was about to say was that I propose to send you a lady who will teach you here at home, who will be a friend and companion to you and whom you will be sure to love. It is rather a curious coincidence that just the other day I was talking to a lady who is anxious to procure just such a position as this with you, and I am rather inclined to think that she would be willing to come here and undertake it. At all events, I have written to her asking her to consider the plan and in a day or so I shall know her decision. If she concludes to come—if I can induce her to come—I shall feel that you are very fortunate. You will forgive me if I say that while I disagree with Mrs. Newton in most respects regarding you, I feel with her that you are somewhat—well, somewhat ungoverned and in need of just the sort of discipline that I am sure Miss—the lady I speak of can maintain."

He paused a moment, but when he saw that Nan made no comment or objection he continued placidly:

"You will hear from me in the course of a day or so, as soon as I receive word from the lady herself. As I said, you will be very fortunate if I can secure her services for you—more fortunate than she will be, I fear," he said to himself, catching a glimpse of Nan's set mouth and flashing eyes as he made his way to the door. Later, when he recalled her expression, he was almost inclined to hope that the lady would decide to refuse the office. He thought her acceptance of it might involve her in rather more serious difficulties than he had foreseen when he wrote to her in the first place.

As a matter of fact, Nan was in a rage at the thought of a stranger coming into the house to interfere with her and Delia, to teach her what she did not want to learn, and to govern her when her sole idea of happiness was to be free and untrammeled. Even Delia resented the new-comer's intrusion. Had she managed the house for fourteen years now, ever since Mrs. Cutler's death, only to be set aside and ruled over by the first stranger who chose to imagine her position of governess to Nan gave her the right to interfere in household affairs? For of course she would interfere. Nan had drawn a vivid mental picture of the

governess, which through her persistence in repetition, had begun to seem an actual description to herself and Delia.

"She's tall and thin and lanky and old!" declared the girl whenever the governess, who had accepted the appointment, was mentioned. "She has horrid sharp eyes that spy out everything, and she wears glasses. She'll never laugh because she'll say 'giggling is frivolous,' that's what Miss Fowler used to say, and she'll talk arithmetic and grammar and geography the whole blessed time. She'll snoop in your closets, Delia, and into my bureau drawers, and she'll find out everything we don't want her to know. Her hair is black and shiny, and I guess she parts it in the middle and makes it come to the back of her head in a little hard knot. Oh! I know just how she looks! I can see her every time I shut my eyes—the horrid thing! Just like Miss Fowler at school! And how I'll hate her! I'll hate her just as much as I did Miss Fowler. I'll hate her more, because I can never get rid of her: she'll always be here. Don't you fix up her room a single bit, Delia. Make it look as awful as you can. Then perhaps she won't like it and'll leave. I guess after a little while she won't think it agrees with her to live here. Then we two'll be alone again, and I tell you, won't we be glad, Delia?"

In her heart Delia thought they would. She did not follow Nan's advice to make the governess' room look "as awful as she could." She swept and dusted it thoroughly, and set all the furniture in place, as she had been accustomed to do for the last fourteen years, and when she had finished the place was as uninviting as even Nan could have desired. In fact, there was nothing attractive in the whole house. The furniture was all good and substantial, but Delia had a way of ranging it against the walls in a manner that made it seem stiff and uncompromising. When a piece needed repairing, and with Nan about, many a piece needed repairing often, it was stowed out of sight in the trunk-room, or the cellar, and the carpets, which had been rich and fashionable in their day, were allowed to lie now long after they had become threadbare and faded. Delia kept the handsome paintings veiled in tarlatan winter and summer, and she never removed the slip-covers from the parlor sofas and chairs, whatever the season might be. Nan did not care, because she knew nothing different, and there was no loving, artful hand to make the best of the things and turn the house into a home.

Mrs. Newton had shivered as she entered the place; it seemed dark and cold and forbidding to her, and she felt the mother-want at every turn, but this had not made her any more lenient with Nan. Perhaps the governess would make no

allowances either. Delia made up her mind that if things really came to the pass where Nan was being abused, she in person would "just step in and say her say, if it lost her her place." She often talked of things losing her her place when the fact was that she herself was the place: if it had not been for her the house must have been closed, and Nan sent to boarding-school. Mr. Cutler would never have trusted the care of his girl to a strange servant.

"Yes, Ma'am," Delia said to herself, as she pushed the governess' bed flat up against the wall. "Yes, Ma'am! if I see her going for to abuse Nan, I'll set to and give her a piece of my mind such as she ain't likely to have got in one while, I tell you that," and she gave the bureau a vicious tweak and pulled down the shade with a resentful jerk.

When Nan saw the room she was disgusted.

"Why, Delia Connor! you haven't done a single thing I told you to," she cried out angrily.

"I've swept and dusted it and that's all there was to do," retorted Delia.

"It looks perfectly lovely," resumed Nan, stamping her foot. "Do you s'pose I want her to think we're glad to have her, and that we've prepared for her? Well, I guess not! If she once gets into as good a room as this she'll never go—she'll just hang on and on, and nothing in the world will make her budge."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Delia with irritation.

Nan looked at her scornfully for a moment. "Do? Why, what I told you to do! Make the room look awful—perfectly hideous. Make it so she can't help but see we don't want her here. Make it a hint—and a strong one too."

Delia folded her arms deliberately. "Well, whatever you want to act like, Nan," she said, "I can tell you I ain't going to do anything unladylike, so there!" and she stalked out of the room with dignity.

Nan surveyed the place in silence. What was to be done? If she removed all the furniture but the bed and the bureau and left the governess nothing to sit down on, it would only reflect discreditably upon the family's supply of household goods. If she carefully sifted back the dust Delia had just removed, it would merely prove that the people in this house were of a slovenly and careless

habit, and that they were sadly in need of some one to oversee their work. Moreover, would a person as dull of feeling as this governess must be, appreciate the hint conveyed in so delicate and indirect a manner? No. She would be sure to lose the point. Nan felt it would never do to take any risk of her misunderstanding. Whatever she did must be unmistakable and absolutely direct.

She racked her brain to discover just the right thing, but she was rewarded by no brilliant idea, and she felt crosser than ever by the time noon had arrived. But suddenly, at the luncheon table, she gave a wild leap from her chair and clapped her hands frantically, while Delia almost let a dish fall in her surprise at this sudden and unexpected demonstration.

"For the land's sake, what is it now?" she demanded, while Nan caught her around the waist and whirled her about the room, vegetable dish and all.

"I've got it! I've got it!" screamed the girl, convulsed with inward laughter. "I've got the best scheme in the world. Delia, you old duck! Oh, won't it settle her though! Won't it settle her?" But she would not reveal who was to be settled, nor how, though Delia pleaded earnestly to be enlightened and even offered to help her make caramels as a bribe.

"No, thank you, Ma'am! I wouldn't have time to boil 'em. I'm going to be as busy as a beaver all the afternoon, so no matter what happens don't you disturb me," continued Nan, importantly.

Delia shrewdly suspected that the scheme afoot had something to do with the governess, but she did not dare suggest it.

"Oh, well, what I don't know I can't cry over," she said to herself, "and when Nan's like this, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't stop her, so I might as well hold my tongue. But I'll say this much, I don't envy that governess her job, whoever she may be."

Meanwhile Nan had gone to her own room and shut and locked the door. Her next move was to take her night-dress from its hook and slip it over her head.

"Now I'm going to rehearse," she announced to her reflection in the glass. "First I must get my eyes to seem kind of wide and starey. No! not this way. They must look like licorice-drops in milk. There! that's better! All expressionless, and that kind of thing. I s'pose I might shut 'em, some

somnabulists do; but then I'd be sure to trip over the furniture and stub my toes, and give the whole business away. No, I must keep my eyes open; that's certain. Then I must glide when I walk. My step must be light and ghostly and noiseless. I must be sure to have it ghostly and noiseless. Now—eyes staring—one, two, three—step ghostly and noiseless—Oh, bother! What business had that footstool in my way? If I knock things over like that I'll wake the house, and Delia would know in a minute what I was up to. There! get into the corner, you old thing! Now again! Eyes staring—step ghostly—and noiseless—voice low and mournful, but I must manage to make her understand every word. Now once more—voice low and mournful—

"Alas! alas! why did she come?—why did she come? (No, I can't say that! It sounds too much like 'Why did he die! Why did he die?' But the alas is good! That sounds real creepy and weird.) Now then—Alas! alas! This is the worst thing that ever happened to me in all my life! My dear, old home! To think that anybody who isn't wanted should come and push herself like this into my dear, old home! O father! father! come home from Bombay, and save me from this awful woman. Turn her out of the house! Make her go back where she came from! Her hated form haunts me in my sleep, and I dream all night of her as I see her in the daytime—tall—and thin—and lanky—with her hair all dragged into that ugly little knob behind at the back of her head! O father! father! her eyes are like needles! They prick me when she looks. Save me!—save me! My heart will break if some one doesn't come and rescue me from this terrible person. Take her away—take her away! Ah—I see her! I see her! Get away—get away! You awful creature! Don't you know you are causing an innocent girl to perish in her youth? Alas, she won't go! Then listen, reckless woman! and remember this warning—'the way of intruders is hard!'

"There! that ends it off with a sort of threatening dreadfulness that ought to scare her stiff. After I've said that in a whisper to freeze her blood, I'll turn silently from her bedside and glide noiselessly from the room, wringing my hair and tearing my hands; no, I mean just the other way, and if that doesn't fix her, why—I'll have to go over it all again, of course, so I won't forget. Perhaps it would be a good idea to write it down and learn it off by heart."

The idea in fact recommended itself so thoroughly to her that she followed her own suggestion without further delay and wrote off the entire harangue at once, making it, if possible, even more eloquent and harrowing than it had been in the original. It seemed a very long, wearisome task, to commit it all to

memory, but she did not grudge the trouble. She had never attempted anything that looked like study with so much willingness. The afternoon slipped away like a dream, and as soon as dinner was over she set to work again, and by bed-time had the thing pretty well under control. Whenever she halted or stumbled she went over it all again with the most patient perseverance.

"I suppose if I had stuck to things at school like this I'd have been at the head of the class," she said to herself with a whimsical sense of her own perversity.

Delia was completely nonplused. She could not imagine what "that child was up to." There were no evidences anywhere of the means she was going to employ in the governess' initiation. Her room was in perfect order, and in Nan's own chamber nothing was unusually amiss. She got no satisfaction from the girl herself, who kept her lips tightly closed, except when she was mumbling over her harangue. It was terribly perplexing—and ominous.

"Good land!" thought Delia in real anxiety, "I only hope she ain't going to do anything too dreadful. I declare, if it weren't that I'm so soft where Nannie is concerned I'd say I'd be glad that some one's coming who may be up to managin' her. I'm free to confess I ain't. If only her mother had lived! Or, if only my dear Miss Belle hadn't gone off to the ends of the earth—! Miss Belle could have managed her! No one could resist Miss Belle, bless her! Ah, dear me, dear me! It's fifteen years, and to think, I'll never see her face again!"

CHAPTER IV

THE GOVERNESS

The morning of the expected governess' arrival dawned cold and dreary. Rain fell in torrents, and the streets were drenched and slippery with slush. All day Nan moped in unhappy expectation of her anticipated thralldom. At every sound of rumbling wheels before the door she would fly to the window, torturing herself with the belief that this was the hack which was conveying the tyrant-governess to the victim-pupil, and she felt a curious sort of disappointment when no such vehicle appeared and no such personage arrived, for always the

rumbling wheels belonged to some grocer's cart or butcher's wagon, and by evening the invader had still not appeared. Then Nan plucked up courage.

"I shouldn't wonder if she had been switched off the road," she said to Delia, inclining to be quite jolly at the mere thought of such a grateful possibility. And she pictured to herself an accommodating engine whizzing the unwelcome guest off into some remote region from which she would never see the desirability of returning. Nan wished her no ill, but she did not wish herself ill either. She ate her dinner quite contentedly, and was just going to settle down comfortably to some thrilling tale of adventure when Br—r—r! went the bell, and she knew her fate had descended upon her.

She flew to the parlor and hid behind the folding-door. She heard Delia ascend the basement stairs. She heard her come along the hall, and then—it was very strange, but Nan really thought she heard her give a smothered exclamation that was instantly followed by the word of warning, "Hush!"—but she must have been mistaken, for it was only Mr. Turner who was speaking. He was asking for Nan herself. She slipped from behind the door with the hope at her heart that even now, at the last minute, the governess had "backed out." Certainly it looked as if she had, since she saw only the lawyer standing by the hat-stand. She held out her hand to him with a real smile of greeting when—he stepped aside and there stood the governess.

At first Nan thought it must be some little girl, so small and slender looked the figure beside that of the tall man. The eyes beneath the rain-soaked brim of the governess' hat were soft and dark; her hair was brown, and the damp wind had blown it into innumerable little curls and tendrils about her temples, where it took on a ruddy sheen in the gas light. Her nose was delicate and short; her mouth, which was not small, was fascinating from the fact that the parting lips disclosed two rows of perfect teeth. She had two dimples that came and went as she smiled, and in her chin was a small cleft that was quivering a little, Nan noticed. She thought the governess looked as if she were going to cry. Her eyes seemed somewhat "teary round the lashes," and there was no doubt about it—her chin was quivering.

"Pooh!" thought Nan. "I might have saved myself all that worry. She's as afraid as she can be. I guess I'll be able to manage her as easy as pie."

But now Mr. Turner was addressing her.

"Nan," he was saying, "this is Miss Blake. Can't you welcome her to her new home, my dear?"

Nan hung back in awkward silence, but the new governess did not give her the opportunity to make the moment an embarrassing one. She stepped forward, and, taking the girl's hand in her own, said softly:

"Mr. Turner has told me all about you. I hope we shall be very happy together."

She did not attempt to kiss her.

Nan murmured an indistinct "Yes'm," and shrank back against the wall. Delia stood beside the new governess with a very curious expression on her face. For a moment there was silence, and then Mr. Turner broke in upon it with:

"I think it would be well if Miss Blake were to be shown to her room at once. She is drenched with the rain and must be cold and hungry. Will you be good enough, Delia, to get her something to eat while Nan takes her upstairs?"

Nan started forward quickly at the note of rebuke in the lawyer's voice.

"Oh, won't you come to your room?" she asked.

She vaguely wondered what made Delia look so strange and act in such a dazed, uncertain fashion. She thought she must be a sad "'fraid-cat" to be overawed by such a little personage as the new governess.

"Now I will say good-night," said Mr. Turner to Miss Blake, as she started to follow Nan above. "I hope," he added in an undertone, taking her hand, "that you will be happy. Don't become discouraged. Send for me whenever you need me. I am always at your service."

She silently bowed her thanks. Somehow she found it difficult to speak just then. She had been tired and cold before she entered the house, but it seemed to her she had not known weariness or chill until now. She felt herself shiver as she turned away from the lawyer and heard the door close behind him. He seemed to be leaving her alone with an enemy.

Nan certainly looked anything but amicable.

"Here's your room," she announced, as they reached the upper landing. She flung open a door, and the new governess found herself stepping forth into utter darkness, where Nan herself was groping about for matches. The air of the place was cold and damp. It had the feel of a room that was unused. It was barren and cheerless. But in the second preceding Nan's discovery of the matches Miss Blake hoped that when the gas was lit it would seem more inviting. But it did not. It was bare and undecorated, and presented anything but an attractive appearance.

The stranger drew two long pins from her hat without saying a word. Nan turned on her heel and made to leave the room.

"Will you please tell me where I can find some warm water?" inquired Miss Blake.

"Washstand in that little dressing-room. Left-hand faucet," announced Nan, curtly, and marched away.

The governess gently closed the door.

Perhaps if Nan had remained there to see she would have wondered if Miss Blake were quite in her right mind. Her behavior was certainly extraordinary. The tears rained down her cheeks, and she did not try to stop them. She just stood in the middle of the floor and gazed about at the awkwardly-placed furniture, the faded carpet, the bare walls, and the ugly mantel-piece as if she could not take her eyes from them. She turned slowly from one thing to another, and presently, in a sort of timid, hungry way, she stretched out her hand and touched each separate object with her caressing fingers, crying very hard the while and murmuring to herself in so low a voice that no one could have overheard.

Even Nan must have softened to her as she stood there crying softly and smiling through her tears at this bare and unfamiliar room. Even Nan must have been moved to wonder what Miss Blake had suffered that she was so glad to get into such an uninviting shelter as this.

But Nan was down stairs in the basement watching Delia prepare a dainty supper for the governess, and scowling at her as she saw to what trouble she went to make it appetizing and delicate.

"There, Delia Connor!" she burst out resentfully, "you're the worst turn-coat I ever saw in my life! This very afternoon you looked black as thunder when you thought she had come, and now you are just dancing attendance on her, as if she was the best friend you ever had!"

"Perhaps she is," responded Delia, placing sprigs of parsley neatly about the sliced chicken and setting the coffee-pot on the range.

Nan tossed her head scornfully. "Well, I like that! I should think you'd be ashamed! A perfect stranger like her!"

Delia did not answer. She was crushing ice for the olives, and as Nan spoke she bent her face over the table and pounded away in silence. But when she had finished, she lifted her head and said, amiably:

"Oh, you can't tell. By the looks of her I should think she is a good-natured little body. She has the true eyes. When you see eyes like that you can mostly be sure they've an honest soul behind 'em. I shouldn't wonder if she'd be a good friend to any one who'd let her."

"Huh!" sneered Nan, wrathfully, "that means, I s'pose, that you intend to let her. Never talk to me of turn-coats any more, Delia Connor!"

Delia caught up a coal-hod and strode deliberately off toward the cellar stairs. When she came back she was laden down with kindlings and coal.

"What you going to do with those?" demanded Nan, imperatively.

"Build a fire in the library. I guess a spark'll look good to the poor little soul —coming in out of the cold and wet."

This was the last straw. Nan's eyes flashed, and she tore after Delia upstairs, scolding as fast as the words would come.

"The idea! The idea! A fire! 'Poor little soul!' And many's the time I've come in out of the cold and you haven't even as much as lit the gas! Oh, no; never mind me! I can come in out of the cold till every tooth in my head chatters, and you wouldn't care a straw. Why, Delia Connor, we never have that fire lit. You just know we don't! There hasn't been a fire in that grate since daddy went away! You know very well there hasn't, and now the first thing you do is to light it for

that horrid governess-woman that's going to boss you 'round like anything, and make me do all sorts of hateful things. I tell you what it is, Delia Connor, you don't care a single thing about me. I know just how 'twill be. You'll help her to do anything she wants to, and you'll never stand up for me a bit. It's mean of you, Delia! It's downright mean of you. And it's just because she's got those dimples and things, and smiles at you as if you were her best friend. But she needn't think she can manage me. I'm not going to be ordered about by her, if she has got a soft voice and shiny eyes!"

Nan and the fire sputtered and blazed as though they were trying to see which could outdo the other, and Delia stood by looking first at this one and then at that with a good deal less fear of the sparks from the grate than of those from Nan's eyes.

She knew better than to try to pacify the girl when her temper was at such a white-heat, and she inwardly wondered what would happen if the governess should come down while it was yet at its worst. As if in answer to her question they heard the sound of an opening door above, and immediately after Miss Blake's light steps upon the stairs. Nan bit a word off square in the middle and set her lips tightly together. Delia removed the "blower" from the grate and the dancing flames leaped high up the chimney and sent a ruddy glow about the room. The only sounds to be heard were the comfortable ticking of the tall clock in the corner and the low purring of the fire behind its bars. Miss Blake came down the hall and paused on the library threshold.

"Oh, how jolly!" she cried, clapping her hands like a delighted child and running forward eagerly to the hearth. "How perfectly jolly! Don't you think an open fire is the most comfortable thing in the world? And I always loved this one particularly—I mean this kind," she corrected herself quickly.

Nan made no response. She sat in her father's study-chair as stiff and stolid as a lay-figure in a shop window, with her lips drawn primly over her teeth.

Miss Blake was, or pretended to be, unconscious of her attitude, however, and went on talking as easily as though she had the most appreciative of listeners.

"When I was a little girl I used to love to cuddle down here on the hearth-rug —I mean I used to love to cuddle down on the hearth-rug and look into the

burning coals. I used to see all sorts of wonderful things in the flames. They used to tell me I'd 'singe my curly pow a-biggin' castles in the air,' but I didn't mind, did I—I mean I didn't mind," she caught herself up quickly.

Delia coughed behind her hand and hurriedly left the room in order to get Miss Blake's supper, which she meant to serve upstairs for the occasion.

As soon as she was gone the new governess turned toward Nan in a strange apologetic sort of way and said:

"I think, if you'll excuse me, I'll just cuddle down on the rug as I used to do when—when I was a little girl. It seems so good to get back—to an open fire that it makes me quite homesick. You won't mind, will you?"

Nan gave a grunt that was meant for "No," and the new governess plumped down upon the floor with her chin in her palms and her elbows on her knees, looking so much like a little girl that for a second Nan had a wild impulse to plump down beside her and inquire, by way of opening the acquaintance—

"Say, does your hair curl like that naturally—or does your mother put it up at night?" or something equally introductory and to the point. But of course she did no such thing, and when Delia reappeared she found them regarding the fire in perfect silence.

At the sound of her step Miss Blake lifted her head and gave Nan a bewildering smile.

"How stupid I have been! Do forgive me!" she said. "We have been having what the Germans call 'an English conversation,' haven't we? I was thinking so hard I quite forgot you—and myself. Ah, what a pretty supper! But I put you to so much trouble," and she turned on Delia two very grateful eyes, while she jumped to her feet with the lightest possible ease.

Delia beamed down upon her beatifically and gave an extra touch to the dainty tray. Nan from her chair scowled darkly upon the whole performance. Delia had deserted her cause; had gone over bodily to the enemy—that was plain. But she needn't flaunt her defection in Nan's very face. Why, it was positively disgraceful the way Delia fetched and carried for this person already, and looked, all the while, as if she could hardly keep from dancing for very joy at the privilege. Well, this governess needn't think that Nan was the kind to be

won over by a few smiles and some flickering dimples. When Nan said a thing she meant it and she stuck to it, too. She wasn't a turn-coat like some folks she knew.

"'Alas, alas! my dear old home—! To think that anybody who isn't wanted should come and push herself like this into my dear old home! Oh, father, her eyes are like—' Good gracious! all that description part would have to be changed!" Nan pulled herself together with a visible jerk. How could she speak of "needly eyes" when those of the governess were so deep and soft and gray that they made you feel like—no, they didn't either; but they weren't needly all the same. No! That whole description part would have to be changed. Bother! Well, if it came to that she guessed she could do it! "Her hated form haunts me in my sleep, and I dream of her all night as I see her in the daytime—little and dear, with her hair all shimmery and soft and her eyes kind of kissing you softly all the time, and—" Goodness! that would never do! Why it would be crazy to call on one's father to rescue one from a person like that. Well, she'd leave out the description altogether, that's what she'd do. She—

"Did you speak?" asked the governess, in her musical voice, turning toward Nan inquiringly, and then the girl suddenly realized that she had been mumbling her thoughts aloud.

"No, I didn't," she responded, with irritation. "It was too bad," she declared to herself it was, "that after all the trouble she had taken to learn the thing by heart, she should be pestered to death by having to make changes in it this way—at the last minute, too. Why wasn't Miss Blake tall and lanky and needly-eyed and a fright, she'd like to know? It was just like her, though! So contrary! To change about and upset all Nan's plans. Well, as long as there was so much fuss about the thing, she s'posed she'd give it up."

"She's so little, it'll be easy enough to manage her. I guess it isn't worth while. I can just say, to-morrow or next day, 'Miss Blake, I've come to the conclusion you don't suit,' and she'll go right off. She may cry a little, but I won't mind that; and if she begs to stay, I'll say, 'Now there's no use teasing! When I once say a thing I mean it!' and that will settle her once for all."

Delia was pressing the governess to take more supper when Nan again waked to what was going on about her.

"Why, you don't eat any more than you used—I mean than a bird. Do take a little more chicken, do! And a cup of coffee, nice and hot, that's a good—lady!"

It was really too humiliating! It was more than Nan could bear. She sprang to her feet and without a word—with nothing but a glance of withering scorn at Delia—swept out of the room and upstairs to bed.

Miss Blake looked after her with strange, wondering eyes, but made no attempt to follow her. She just turned to Delia and stretched out her hands.

"O Delia! Delia!" she faltered, brokenly.

The woman came to her and took both the little hands in hers. "Bless you, dearie!" she cried. "That I ever lived to see the day! There, there, lamb, don't cry so, Allanah! See, I'm not crying, am I now?" sobbed she, kneeling beside the stranger and hugging her knees wildly. "Oh, but it's glad I am to see your dear face again! Now tell me all about it—how you came to know we need you so bad?"

CHAPTER V

GETTING ACQUAINTED

Nan, in spite of the fact that she assured herself her heart was broken, fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. She slept heavily customarily but to-night her rest was fitful and troubled. She kept dreaming strange dreams that caused her to twitch in her sleep and give queer little cries of distress and moans of fretfulness. Sometimes she seemed to be trying to overtake something that was constantly eluding her. First it was a long, lank creature with piercing eyes and a knob at the back of its head which it seemed to be Nan's duty, not to say pleasure, to shoot off with a paper of needles. Then it was something she must recollect or be put to death for forgetting; some awful harangue that she had been doomed to deliver before Delia and a vast crowd of other people, all of whom were staring at her regretfully and murmuring to one another that it was a shame such a hoyden should be allowed to live; and again it was some dainty

little creature with tender eyes and shining hair that Nan longed to follow but could not because of something inside her breast that held her back and would not let her call.

Miss Blake did not go to her room until very late. She and Delia kept up a steady stream of conversation until long after midnight, and even then the governess would not have paused if Delia had not been struck with sudden compunction.

"Dear heart alive!" she cried, scrambling to her feet hastily as the clock chimed twelve. "Here you've been wore out with tiredness and excitement and I keep you up till all hours pressin' you with questions that you ain't fit to answer, just as if we wouldn't have time an' to spare together for the rest of our lives, please Heaven! Now go to bed, dearie, so you'll be all rested and fresh in the morning."

Miss Blake shook her head. "No, not all the rest of our lives together, Delia," she cried, hurriedly; "it can only be for a year at most. You said it would be a year, didn't you? Well, then, you know I could not stay after that."

"Go to bed, dearie," was Delia's sole response. "And may you sleep easy and have no dreams."

She took her upstairs herself, just as if the governess had been a little girl; and was not satisfied until she had brushed out the masses of shining hair and woven them into a long, ruddy braid behind. Then she smoothed the pillow lovingly and with another hearty "sleep well" went down stairs to "do up" her dishes and get the house closed for the night.

When she finally stole up to her own room through the pitchy halls she was glad to see that there was no light in the governess' room and that all was darkness and silence within.

"Good! She's asleep by this time, the dear!" murmured the faithful soul, and was soon snoring peacefully herself, quite worn out with the excitement of the evening.

But Miss Blake was not asleep. Her eyes stared widely into the darkness and her brain was spinning with all sorts of teasing thoughts. She listened to the ticking of her watch beneath her pillow—to the muffled chime of the tall clock

in the room below—to the gentle rattle of plaster inside the walls where some hidden mouse was scuttling in search of a stolen supper, and tried to soothe herself into a doze but failed and tried and failed again.

Suddenly she sat bolt upright in bed. The sound she heard now was a new one, and one that caused her flesh to tingle. It was the sound of a stealthy hand upon her door. The knob turned noiselessly, the hinges gave a faint whine, and there on the threshold stood a white-robed figure, ghastly and spectral in the pallid light that fell upon it from the cloud-freed moon outside. Miss Blake did not utter a sound and the apparition glided forward with slow, measured steps until it stood beside her bed. Its eyes were staring and wide and fixed.

"It's Nan!" thought Miss Blake, not daring to speak aloud.

The apparition did not remove its gaze. Presently it sighed. Then it raised its head and spoke and its voice was weirdly low and mournful.

"Alas, alas!" it wailed. "This is the worst thing that ever happened to me in all my life. My dear old home! To think that anybody who isn't wanted should come and push herself like this into my dear old home! What does she know of the way I feel? I can never tell her how I hate to have her here, for that would be unladylike. But oh, how I hate it! No, I must keep my lips closed and bear her persecution in silence."

Two white hands were raised and wrung in a way that was truly tragic.

"O father, father!" groaned the ghost, making wild grabs at its hair, "come home from Bombay and save me from this awful woman. Turn her out of the house. Make her go back where she came from. Her hated form haunts me in my sleep and I dream all night of her as I see her in the daytime."

Miss Blake caught her breath in a struggling gasp of dread as to what would come next.

"Tall and thin and lanky, with hair all dragged into that ugly little hard knob at the back of her head!"

The ghost paused, and its uneasy hands clasped each other convulsively while it showed plainly that it was confused in its mind and struggling to grasp a thought it could not express.

Miss Blake breathed a deep sigh of relief. She had really begun to suspect that it was a vision of herself that was haunting Nan in her nightmare. Of course now she knew better. For surely she was not "tall and lanky," and her hair was certainly not "dragged into an ugly little knob at the back of her head." How grateful she was it had not proved to be herself.

"O father! her eyes are like needles."

Miss Blake could have shouted for joy. But who could this awful bugbear be?

"They prick me when she looks! Save me! Save me! my heart will break if some one doesn't come and rescue me from this terrible person. Take her away! She's coming at me with her needly eyes! Daddy! Daddy!"

The uneasy spirit rocked backward and forward in the intensity of its emotion. It stretched out its arms and wagged a threatening forefinger, while it mumbled some unintelligible warning in a voice that faltered and wavered, and then frayed off to a mere wheeze that sounded suspiciously like a snore.

Miss Blake would have risen if she had dared, but she dreaded the effect even the slightest shock might have upon Nan, in what she never doubted was a somnambulistic trance. But when the white-robed figure turned slowly about and retraced its steps to the threshold, she started up and noiselessly followed after to make sure that the girl arrived safely in her own bed and showed no sign of further wandering that night.

Never was a passage from room to room made more deliberately, and when the bed was reached the phantom scrambled into it, dragged the blankets closely about her shoulders and with a sigh of satisfaction settled herself to slumber.

The governess crept back to her own room, thoroughly chilled and shivering with nervousness. It was an hour or more before she felt herself growing drowsy, but at last she dropped asleep and slept heavily until long past the usual rising hour.

Nan waked at her accustomed time, feeling tired and irritable. She found Delia in the kitchen, preparing a tempting breakfast with more than her habitual care.

"Huh!" grunted the girl. "We have hot muffins every morning, don't we? And

griddle-cakes! and eggs, and scallops, and fried potatoes, too! Oh, no! we're not making any fuss for the governess. Oh, no! none at all! If I were you I'd be ashamed of myself, Delia Connor!"

Delia pursed her lips together and made no retort.

It did not improve Nan's temper to have to wait for her breakfast until Miss Blake should appear. But Delia made no attempt to serve her, and she was too proud to ask. Happily the delay was not too serious, and the governess appeared at the dining-room door just in time to prevent the muffins from falling and Nan's temper from rising.

"Good morning!" said the cheery voice.

"—morning!" snapped Nan.

"I overslept," continued the governess apologetically; "and I am thoroughly ashamed of myself. I beg your pardon. But I was very tired. I did not sleep over-well the first part of the night."

"You're not late—or—or anything," said Nan. "I never get up till I feel like it."

Miss Blake made no comment.

"And how did you sleep?" she asked after a moment, her eyes laughing mischievously as though in spite of her, while her face remained quite sober.

"All right," responded Nan, uncommunicatively.

"No dreams?"

The girl shook her head non-committally.

"Now, I wonder whether I could tell you your dream," ventured the governess, the light fading a little in her eyes.

Nan did not encourage her to try.

"You were being pursued by some awful creature—oh, quite a gorgon, I

should say!"

The girl lifted her head.

"This relentless creature was deaf to all your appeals, though you appealed to her touchingly, something after this style: Alas, Alas! this is the worst thing that ever happened to me in all my—"

"Stop!" cried Nan, suddenly, with blazing eyes, "I didn't! I didn't! Delia listened. She told on me. You're making fun of me, and you're both of you just as mean as you can be, so there!"

She started up from her chair, which she thrust behind her so roughly that it fell to the ground with a bang, and rushed toward the door in a fury of anger and mortification.

Miss Blake sprang from her place and tried to detain her, crying:

"Nan, Nan! What do you mean? I was only in sport! Come back, dear, and let me tell you all about it." But the girl fled past her, flinging her hand passionately away and spurning her attempt at explanation. A moment later the street door flung to with a loud slam.

The quick tears sprang to the governess' eyes, but she crushed them back.

"Don't mind her, dearie," said Delia, consolingly, but with an effort and a sigh. "She ain't always like this. She's sorter upset just now. She don't mean any harm, and she'll be sorry enough for what she's done come lunchtime. Now, you see."

"But I don't understand," Miss Blake cried. "She said you listened and that you told me, and that we were both making fun of her. She thinks we are in league against her. What can she mean? Why, I was only repeating some nonsense she said in her sleep last night, and I thought she would be amused to hear an account of it. She came into my room and orated in the most tragic fashion. What does she mean by saying you listened and told me?"

Delia shook her head. What she privately thought on the subject she would not have told Miss Blake for worlds.

"If you take my advice," she ventured, "you won't mind what Nan says. She's quick as a flash, but she's got a good, big heart of her own, and it's in the right place, too. Just let her be."

"Let her be?" interrupted Miss Blake, hastily, "not if this is the way she is going to be. That is not what I am here for. I am here to educate her, Delia, and I intend to do it."

Delia could see that she meant what she said. There was a determined expression about her mouth that would have surprised Nan if she had seen it. But at noon, when she returned, the governess' face was as placid as ever. She and Delia were discussing the price of butter in the most intimate fashion possible, and Nan snorted audibly as she heard them agree that it was ruinously high.

Delia had played a poor enough part before, "kow-towing" to the enemy the first thing, but now she had deliberately betrayed her—Nan. Had "gone back on her" in the most flagrant fashion. It was the meanest thing she had ever heard of and she'd pay Delia back, you see if she wouldn't! To listen at key-holes and then go and tell-tale!

"Have you had a pleasant morning?" Miss Blake asked, affably, as Nan entered the room.

She got a grudging affirmative, but nothing daunted she continued: "It is so cold now there ought to be good skating. Perhaps you and I can take a spin some day. Do you skate?"

Again Nan answered "Yes," but this time there was a gleam of interest in her tone.

"When my trunk comes I must show you my skates. I think them particularly fine: altogether too fine for one who skates as indifferently well as I do. I am sure you will prove a much better skater than I am. Somehow I fancy you are very proficient."

"I like to skate, and I guess I can do it pretty well. My father taught me—to do figures and things. I don't know any one who can skate as well as my father!" said Nan, with pardonable pride.

"I used to skate a great deal when I lived in Holland," Miss Blake observed.

"There every one is so expert that I used to feel like a great bungler. Seeing others do so beautifully made me feel as though I were particularly awkward, and I really did keep in the background because I was so ashamed of my clumsy performances. Perhaps though, that was only an excuse for my not being able to do better, and one ought not to offer excuses, ought one? Is there any pond near here on which we might skate?"

Nan's eyes gleamed.

"Why, yes," she said. "We could go to the Park, or if you didn't want to go there, there's a sort of a pond they call the 'Steamer,' quite near here. Lots of people skate on it, and it's lovely fun. And there's a place the other side of the Boulevard, where you can coast beautifully. It's a jolly hill. We take our bobs there, and—the boys and me—and—"

"I," suggested Miss Blake, casually—"the boys and I."

Nan blinked her eyes. The correction, however, passed by unresented.

"The folks here think it isn't nice for me to bob, and—and things. They think it's rough!"

"Perhaps," ventured Miss Blake, "that may be because they have seen it done in a rough way, or by rough persons. You know a great deal depends upon how you do a thing."

Again Nan blinked her eyes. She was thinking as she had the night before:

"Pooh! I can manage her," while Miss Blake, quite unconscious of what was going on in her pupil's mind, continued: "I think if the weather holds, we may have some very good sport, you and I. Don't you think so? And now run upstairs and smooth your hair and wash your hands, for Delia will have luncheon ready very shortly, and one must make one's self tidy for meals, you know."

And then a very singular thing occurred. Nan found herself on the stairs in obedience to the governess' command almost before she was aware, and she proceeded to make herself tidy, with no thought of refusal at all.

But at luncheon came the first tug-of-war.

Nan was about to repeat her performance of the morning, namely, to push her chair aside when she had finished eating and unceremoniously leave the table.

"Oh, pardon me!" interposed Miss Blake, quickly. "Please remain at the table! You were excused at breakfast, but I am sure there is no necessity for your running away again. We must pay each other the respect to remain seated until we have both finished eating. You see, I am still drinking my tea, and you must allow me another of Delia's delicious cookies."

It was all said very gently, but Nan recognized beneath all the kind suggestion an unmistakable tone of command.

She thrust her chair back still further.

"I don't want to wait!" she answered, dryly. "I hate sitting at the table after I'm through. You can eat all the cookies you like, only I don't want to wait."

"Ah, but, my dear, I want you to wait," Miss Blake said. "I demand of you no more than I myself am willing to do. We must be courteous to each other, and if you had not finished eating I should most certainly remain until you had. I expect you to do no less for me."

"Well, I can't help it! I don't want to stay and I—I won't!" declared Nan, with a sudden burst of defiance.

"Very well," returned Miss Blake, calmly. "Of course, you are too old to be forced to act in a ladylike manner if you do not desire to do so. But, equally, I am too old to be treated with discourtesy and disrespect. If you are willing to behave in a rude manner and bear the reproach that you will deserve, why, well and good—or, rather, ill and bad! But I cannot sit at table with any but gentle mannered people. Unless you wish to behave as becomes a lady, we must take our meals apart."

There was no smile now on the governess' face. Nan suddenly got the impression that perhaps it would not be quite "as easy as pie" to "manage" Miss Blake. It seemed to the girl that for the first time in her life she had encountered determination outside of her own. It challenged her from every line in the governess' little figure. For a moment she hesitated before it. Then, gathering herself together and summoning her dumb demon, she gave her shoulders a sullen shrug and left the room without a word.

Miss Blake finished her luncheon as though nothing had happened. Then she rose, and, going into the kitchen, said a few words to Delia—words that caused the good woman to blink hard for a second and then exclaimed:

"Yes'm. I will. It hurts me to cross the child, but I s'pose it is best. You have a brave spirit to set yourself against Nan. I wouldn't have the stren'th, let alone the will. But I s'pose you know what you can do."

"Oh, yes, Delia," replied the governess, with conviction. "I know very well what I can do, but I shouldn't know if I did not have you to help me. We're both conspiring for Nan's good, and we have to work together."

The rest of the afternoon Miss Blake spent in unpacking her trunk and in disposing of its contents. Beside the trunk there was a cumbersome case, a hamper, and a large crate such as is used for the shipment of bicycles. Delia gazed at it in wonderment. Did the governess use a wheel? If so, what would Mrs. Newton say? Delia trembled at the thought, and eyed the box with especial interest as it was being carried down stairs and deposited in the basement hall closet.

Nan wandered in about twilight and found the house cheerfully lighted and warm and comfortable. There was a fire in the library grate, and she threw herself into a chair before it and lounged there luxuriously, while above her head the new governess was tripping to and fro, "putting her room to rights," Nan suspected. She wondered about that room. She would have liked to go up there and see if those skates had arrived, but of course she could not do that. The governess must not think she cared to see her when she wasn't forced to. No, indeed!

Later Miss Blake came down stairs, and drawing her chair nearer the lamp, commenced to sew. Presently up came Delia.

"Miss Blake," she said, with an emphasis Nan noticed and did not like, "your dinner is served."

Nan jumped up with an exaggerated yawn. Her hair was rough and disordered, her frock was rumpled and untidy, her hands were obviously soiled. Miss Blake remarked on none of these things. She laid her bit of needle-work upon the table and quietly passed down stairs before Nan.

The table was set for one, and the governess seated herself before the solitary place.

Nan stood at the side of the table in stiff and silent amazement.

"Where's my place, Delia?" she called, ignoring Miss Blake, except for an angry flash of her eyes.

But Miss Blake was not to be ignored.

"I thought you had decided to dine alone," she said. "At least, that was the impression you conveyed to me at luncheon. If you have changed your mind, Delia can easily set your place. Shall she do so?"

The question was simple, but Nan knew what it involved. She was speechless with rage. Her face alternately flushed and paled, while her lips twitched spasmodically.

"I—I—hate you!" she cried at last, with breathless vehemence. "You've no right here. When my father comes he'll send you right away. You see if he don't!"

She flung herself in a paroxysm of anger out of the room.

Miss Blake ate her dinner, it is true, but perhaps it was scarcely strange that her relish of it was not great. Every mouthful seemed to choke her. Delia saw her hand tremble as she raised her tumbler of water to her lips.

"This'll make you sick, dearie, this striving with Nan. She'll never give in! Her will is that strong."

But the governess shook her head.

Nan ate no dinner that night, and the next day she slept late; that is, she remained in bed late. Lying there cross and unhappy, she heard sounds of voices in Miss Blake's room. Occasionally there were other sounds as well; sounds of hammering and the moving of furniture across the floor.

When Nan was "good and ready" she rose and strolled down stairs with an air of nonchalance that was for Miss Blake's benefit, should she chance to see.

She found the dining-room in perfect order and the kitchen deserted. No breakfast, hot and tempting, awaited her as of old. Delia was evidently upstairs, and Nan was too stubborn to call her down. She prowled about the closets and cupboards until she discovered some cold oatmeal, a bit of meat also cold, and a slice of bread. These, with a cup of chilling milk, she gulped down hastily and with a thorough disrelish.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed, "how I hate it—and her!"

It was a cheerless morning. The temperature had risen and a thick rain was falling. There was nothing to do out-of-doors so Nan remained within. It was Friday, and one of Delia's sweeping days. She was shut up in the draughty parlor with a mob-cap on her head "cleaning for dear life," as she expressed it. After a brief experience of the cold and discomfort of open windows and clouds of dust, Nan gave up trying to talk to Delia and wandered out of the parlor as disconsolately as she had wandered into it. By and by she heard Miss Blake's door open and close and saw the governess come forth, leave the house, and walk rapidly down the street. She turned in at the Newton's gate and disappeared behind the vestibule door. Nan had flown to the window to gaze after her.

"Whatever can she want there," wondered the girl.

The question bothered her. She had not been able to get direct news of Ruth's condition because she had not dared inquire again after the way she had been treated, but in a round-about manner she had heard that the child had a fever.

"What fever?" she wondered. "Do people die of fever? If she dies will that be because I left her on the ground while I ran to get that milkman to help carry her home?"

Miss Blake was not gone long, but it was luncheon-time when she returned.

"Ah, good morning!" she said, pleasantly, to Nan, who happened to be in the hall. "I have pleasant news for you. Your little friend Ruth Newton is better, and her mamma says she would be grateful to you and me if we would come in once in a while and help her to amuse the poor child. Will you go with me to-morrow? Mrs. Newton said particularly that she hoped you would."

A curious expression flitted across Nan's face.

"Mrs. Newton hates me," she announced. "She doesn't want me to see Ruth."

Miss Blake drew off her gloves carefully.

"I have explained certain matters to Mrs. Newton, Nan," she said, "and she is quite satisfied that she was partly mistaken in her judgment of you the other day. She says that she is willing to apologize for some of her accusations, and she has written you a little note. Now, come, and we will both go down to luncheon. I see Delia is here to tell us it is served."

"She takes it for granted I'll go," thought Nan, and indeed she went quite willingly, and what was more, remained respectfully seated in her place until Miss Blake gave her permission to depart by rising herself.

CHAPTER VI

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

"I think, Delia," said the governess, as Nan was about to go upstairs, "if you have an ax, or something of the sort, I'll try to unbox my bicycle."

Nan came to an abrupt halt. Bicycle! The word went through her with an electric thrill, and sent her blood tingling. Then she dragged herself unwillingly away. What had she to do with the bicycle of a woman she hated.

"O Nan!" Miss Blake exclaimed, before the girl's lagging footsteps had carried her halfway up the staircase, "I'm sure your strong young arms can help us with this big elephant. Will you lend a hand?"

Now could the governess have suspected that that was precisely what Nan had been longing to do? But she could not have lingered unless she had been given the excuse by Miss Blake herself. Had the request been made to serve as that excuse?

Nan did not stop to question. She came flinging down stairs, two steps at a

time, and Miss Blake and Delia smiled above her head as she bent down, wrenching and tugging with her main strength at the boards and stubborn nails, too excited to know that half the force she used would have served her better.

"There! that's my bicycle!" announced Miss Blake, displaying the beautiful machine with the pride of a possessor, when the last stay had been unscrewed, and the slender wheel stood revealed in all the glory of its spotless nickel-plate and rubber tires.

Nan gazed at it in speechless admiration. It had been the dream of her life to own such a machine, but she had pleaded for one in vain. Mr. Turner had explained to her that what money he held in trust for her was no more than served to pay for her running expenses.

"You know your father is not a rich man," he had said, "and lately he has met with losses. He wishes you to be brought up under home influences rather than at a boarding-school among strangers. He desires you to be well educated, and naturally all this costs. Your father is willing to make many sacrifices that you may be well provided for, but he is not able to indulge you in a matter like this of the bicycle. I wish I did not have to refuse you, but I think with him, that your most important need should be supplied first, and if after that little remains for mere indulgence, you must be satisfied. By and by you will see that his course is best, if you do not see it already."

But Nan had never been able to feel that it was best that she should not have a bicycle. Now that the new governess had come and had proved so "horrid," she felt it still less. "Half the money she gets would buy me a first-rate safety," she had thought often and often and often, as she groaned over her father's perversity.

But here was one of the wonderful affairs actually in the house, and if it did not belong to her, what of that? What was it the governess was just saying?

"I am quite sure you could use this wheel if we should shift the saddle up a bit, that is, if you care to ride. As soon as the ground is clear I will teach you if you like."

Nan's face was radiant. "Oh, I know how," she said. "I've practiced lots on—on—a person's I know. Only it wasn't a—a—girl's wheel. But I can ride."

Miss Blake was rubbing down the slender spokes with a piece of chamois skin.

"You are welcome to use mine, then," she said simply.

Nan choked out a meagre "Thank you." It was not a gracious acknowledgment, but the governess accepted it, and really felt a glow of satisfaction in having called out even so much as an acceptance of her favor from her arbitrary young charge.

"Small favors thankfully received," she thought with a smile at her own humility.

Nan stood leaning against the wall with her hands behind her, watching the manoeuvres of the leathern rag as it flashed up and down the nickel spokes and around and about the hubs, guided by the dexterous hand of the little governess.

"Yes, I think we can pass many a jolly hour on this machine," resumed Miss Blake, "after the ground is clear of snow, and after we are clear of our lessons. We'll begin our studies on Monday, Nan. That will be commencing with the new week, and we must be very conscientious about our work before we indulge in any play."

"There!" thought Nan, with a rush of antagonism, "I might have known she'd make some kind of a fuss before she'd let me use it. I guess she's sorry she promised in the first place, and wants to kind of back out of it. Oh, well, I might have known. Now she'll pile on lessons and things till there's no time for anything else. That's her way of getting out of it."

But she made no comment. She stood kicking her heel against the surbase, silently watching the sparkling machine. Presently she turned and stalked upstairs without a word.

Delia gave Miss Blake an apologetic glance, but the governess composedly rose, and, stowing her property safely away against the closet wall, closed the door upon it and with a kind word to the woman beside her went upstairs as though nothing had happened.

She knew what was in Nan's mind. She could read it as distinctly as if the sudden wrinkles on her forehead and the quick set of her obstinate jaw had been

printed text.

"Poor child!" thought the governess, "how she hates study and—me. How she rebels against restraint. So she thinks I am trying to take back my word. No wonder that makes her furious."

She went into her room and closed the door, but after a moment she came back and opened it again.

"Nan might feel shut out," she said to herself, and so she left it standing invitingly ajar that in case the girl cared to come in she would not have to knock. She smiled to herself as she did it. She knew well enough Nan would not care to come in. "Still there might be a chance!"—she left the door open on the chance.

The more Nan thought of Delia's baseness the more she inwardly raged against it. She sat in her own room with her feet over the register and munched caramels and nursed her grievance all the afternoon. Delia was miserable. She had tried by every means in her power to win at least a look from the girl, but all her attempts were repelled and she was treated with an overbearance that cut her to the quick. At last she could stand it no longer. She left her work and went upstairs "to have it out with Nan" and be done with it.

She knocked repeatedly at her bedroom door, but the girl obstinately refused to utter the word of admittance. Delia was not to be daunted, however, by this, and at last, turning the knob, she walked boldly in and confronted Nan squarely.

"See here, Nan," she began without waiting, "I want to know what's the matter with you that you treat me so? Me that has waited on you hand and foot and tended you night and day since you was a little baby?"

The girl did not deign to raise her eyes from her book—or else they were so rapidly filling with tears that she did not dare to do so.

Delia gulped. "Can't you answer a civil question?" she faltered, trying to be firm and failing utterly.

Nan cast her book to the floor and sprang up to face the woman with blazing cheeks and eyes that flashed angry fire.

"You'd better ask me what's the matter, Delia Connor!" she burst out in a

trembling voice. "As if you didn't know! Do you s'pose I'll bear everything? It's bad enough—your being such an awful turn-coat! You went over to her side the first thing, and every time she bosses me you just stand there and let her do it and never say a word. You let her order me about like everything and never stand up for me a bit. Her—a perfect stranger! Somebody you never saw in all your life before! But that isn't the worst of it! Do you s'pose I'm going to stand your coming to my door and listening at the key-hole when I was rehearsing and then going and telling on me—telling her all I was going to do to her, I'd like to know? You just wanted to get on the right side of her, and it was the meanest thing I ever heard of in all my life. You came and peeked at me when I was rehearsing and then went and told her, and I s'pose you both laughed and had a fine time over it. You thought you were very smart, didn't you? But you got there too soon, Delia Connor, for I had made up my mind I wouldn't do it, so there! But now you've both been so mean, I don't care who knows what I was going to do. I hope you told her that I don't want her here. I hope you told her every bit of that thing I learned by heart on purpose to recite to her. I hope you repeated every word of it. It's true and I hope she knows it. I hope—"

"For the land's sake, Nan, do be still," broke out Delia at last after a dozen futile attempts to stem the tide of the girl's anger. "I didn't listen nor peek nor anything, and you scream so loud she'll hear every word you say. You—now be quiet and let me speak—you walked in your sleep last night. You went into her room and said off a whole lot of balderdash to her—enough to set her against you for the rest of her life—if she ever finds out you really meant it."

Nan gave Delia an imploring, frightened look.

"Delia," she gasped, breathlessly, "do you—do you think she heard?"

Delia shook her head.

"Couldn't say for the life of me," she replied. "Her door may have been open when I came up; I didn't notice."

Nan looked the picture of dismay. "Wait a minute!—I'll go see!" she whispered earnestly, and tip-toed noiselessly into the hall. A second later she returned, radiant with reassurance.

"Her door is tight shut, and she's making so much noise inside her room she couldn't possibly have heard. Sounds as if she was dragging trunks around or

something."

"Perhaps she's packing to go 'way," suggested Delia, with a grain of malice.

Nan fairly jumped with—well, if it wasn't joy it was something equally as moving in its way. "Oh, no, no!" she cried, in a sudden fever of excitement. "I don't want her to leave—like that. Just think how awful it would be to have her leave—like that! Can't you go to her and say I'm—you're good friends with her. Delia, won't you please go and tell her I didn't really mean to say off that speech at her. I learned it before she came, and I meant to recite it, but when I found that she was different—so little and kind of—different, I thought it would be mean to do it, and I gave it up. Do go and tell her, Delia, please, and oh, won't you hurry?"

"Now see here, Nan," interposed the woman. "Our best plan is to wait and see what she is going to do. If she hasn't heard, it's all right, and telling her would only put the fat in the fire. On the other hand, if she has heard and is packing up to go 'way, why, it wouldn't do much good, I'm afraid, to try to stop her. With all being such a lady and so gentle in her ways, she's got a mind of her own—I can see that—and you won't be like to get her to change it. But she'll tell you good-bye before she leaves, she's too much of a lady not to, no matter how she feels, and then you can say your say, and I promise you faithful I'll back you up."

Nan saw the wisdom of Delia's counsel, and tried to content herself to wait. But the suspense of every minute was awful, and she felt herself growing frenzied under the strain. After a time the commotion in the next room ceased, and all was quiet as the grave. "She's getting on her hat now," gasped Nan. "She'll go away and think I'm a heathen and all sorts of horrid things. And she hasn't got any friends or folks of her own, and no house to go to but this. And I s'pose she's awfully poor, because she wouldn't be a governess if she wasn't, and oh, dear! I don't want to have any one be a beggar, and turned out of the only roof they've got over their heads on my account. That's what makes me feel so bad, Delia. That's the only thing. If she will go on her own account I'll—I'll be glad, but—oh, she mustn't go this way!"

Delia turned away her face to hide a smile.

"There's nothing to do but wait," she insisted. "If I go in there and tell her, and she hasn't heard, why it would only give you away; don't you see?"

Nan let herself down in her rocking-chair with a dismal drop. "O dear!" she cried, "I never saw anything like it! The way things go wrong in this house! It's just perfectly horrid! I wish I was with my father, I do so! I guess it's nicer in India than it is here, anyway; and I'm sick and tired of living cooped up in this old stuffy place. So there!"

Delia dusted some imaginary dust off the table with the corner of her apron, and went down stairs to finish up her work.

In the street below the huckster was yelling "Chestnuts! Fresh-roasted chestnuts!" The little charcoal oven in his push-cart sent out a shrill, continuous whistle, and Nan had an impulse to throw something at him. What business had he to come here and make such a racket that she couldn't hear what was going on in the next room. He passed slowly down the street, his call and the whistle of his oven growing fainter and fainter, and finally fading quite away as he disappeared in the distance. Nan pricked up her ears. Surely the sounds she heard were those of moving feet in the next room. Back and forth they went, now nearer, that was to the closet, now further away again, that must be to the bureau. What could the governess be doing? The lid of her trunk was dropped, and Nan could distinctly hear the click of the catches as they fell in place. There was no further doubt about it! Miss Blake was going. A moment later, and before Nan could collect her wits, the door of the next room was briskly opened and closed, and the governess, hatted and cloaked, sped quickly from the house.

Nan flew to the balusters with a hasty cry upon her lips, but was just in time to see the door swing heavily to; and that was all. She flung herself down stairs two steps at a time.

"There now, Delia Connor," she cried, bursting into the kitchen with such vehemence that the very tins rattled on their shelves. "There, now! What did I tell you? She's gone—Miss Blake's gone. Trunks packed—! Everything's packed! She'll send men to get them. She's gone clean off. I told you what it would be, and you wouldn't go and speak to her. And now my father will be disgraced, and Mr. Turner will blame me, and—it's all your fault, and I'll tell my father; so there!"

Delia's face paled suddenly. She set her lips together tight.

"It's well you have some one to lay the blame on, child!" she said shortly, and

went upstairs without another word. Nan did not care to follow her into the governess' room, but stood outside and waited to hear her verdict when she should have examined the premises.

"Well?" asked the girl, eagerly, as soon as she came out.

"Her trunk's shut and locked, that's certain!"

"Then she's gone for good!"

"She's gone. There ain't a doubt about that!"

"You said she would surely say good-bye, Delia Connor, you know you did. You said no matter how she felt, she was such a lady she'd be certain to say good-bye!"

"Well, and I really thought so. I believe now she'd have said good-bye, if—"

"If I hadn't been such a—brat? Say it right out, Delia! You mean it and you might as well say what you think," broke in the girl bitterly.

Delia turned on her heel and stalked grimly down stairs. A second later she heard a rush of flying feet behind her, and the next moment two arms were locked about her neck.

"Poor old Delia," cried Nan, in one of her sudden bursts of remorse. "I'm the horridest girl that ever lived! I know it as well as you do, and if you weren't the patientest thing in the world you wouldn't stand it for a minute. But don't you go away from me too, Delia! Please don't! Honest Injun, I'll try to behave! Cross my heart I will. And I tell you this much, I feel just awfully about Miss Blake. I shouldn't wonder a bit but it would snow tonight, and she hasn't a place to go and no money, and—O dear! I feel like a person that ought to be in jail!"

Delia extricated herself gently from the clinging arms. "What makes you think Miss Blake's as poverty-stricken as that?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," responded the girl. "But I just feel she is. And she is so little too. She looked so glad to get into this house that I guess she never had much of a place to stay before."

"She don't dress like a person that's next-door to a beggar," mused Delia.

"No, she doesn't. She has really pretty things, hasn't she? But I guess they're made over and cast-off, or something. Maybe the lady she lived with last gave them to her?" speculated Nan.

"Maybe she did," said Delia.

The two made their way slowly down to the kitchen. It was beginning to grow dark and the dinner must be prepared.

"I never in all my life saw such little hands and feet," the girl pursued. "And she's dreadfully particular about them. There's never a speck on her fingers that she doesn't run right up and scrub them, and she wears the cunningest slippers I ever saw."

"I guess she comes of nice folks," said Delia, as she began to peel the potatoes.

"Wonder why she doesn't stay with them then?" put in Nan.

"Perhaps they're dead."

Nan pondered. Her own motherless life had given her a very tender sympathy for those whose "folks" were dead. For the first time she felt sorry for Miss Blake. She was uneasy and distressed. It made her shift about uncomfortably in her chair.

"Goodness me!" she ejaculated impatiently at last, and then one of her wild impulses took possession of her and she ran frantically up into her own room and flung on her coat and hat.

"The whole thing's as plain as preaching. Why didn't I think of it before?" she said to herself, with a shake of impatience. "Mr. Turner told Miss Blake if she was worried or anything to go to him. She hasn't any money, and she's left here, so of course that's where she is. I'll go and bring her back."

The front door opened and shut with a bang, and Nan was out in the street alone. As she scudded down the pavement the electric lights suddenly gleamed out pale and vivid from their lofty globes, and sent wavering shadows flashing across her path.

"It's pretty late and it'll be dark as a pocket in a little while," thought she; but that did not detain her, and she raced on, putting block after block between her and home in her ardor to make reparation and to lighten her heart of its weight of compunction.

CHAPTER VII

OPEN CONFESSION

Nan knew the way to Mr. Turner's house perfectly, though she had not been able to give Mrs. Newton the street and number. She was observing and clear-headed, and could have been trusted to find her way about the entire city alone, but her father had often cautioned Delia and the girl herself against putting her power to the test, and so it happened that until now she had never been any considerable distance away from home after twilight without a companion. The way was perfectly familiar to her—but it had never seemed so interminably long. She could have taken a car, but in her haste to get off she had forgotten her pocketbook. She saw the "trolleys" fly past her in quick succession, and it seemed to her they whizzed jeeringly at her as they sped. She was by nature so fearless that even if the street had not been thronged she would not have been afraid. As it was she was only alarmed lest she would get to Mr. Turner's and find Miss Blake gone.

She hurried on breathlessly, fairly skipping with impatience and wondering what explanation she could give the lawyer in case the governess had not told him the real reason of her departure. Somehow it flashed into Nan's mind that Miss Blake would not expose her. She was busied with this reflection as she turned off the broad, well-lighted thoroughfare into the dimmer side-street upon which Mr. Turner lived, and she ran up the steps of his house with the question still unsettled. It was not a moment before the door was opened to her and she was admitted to the warm, luxuriously furnished drawing-room. It was Nan's ideal of a house: "all full of curtains and soft carpets and beautiful things." She seated herself before the burning log-fire with a sensation of deep well-being—only it was a little over-shadowed by her worry about the governess.

"Well, my little lady, and what brings you here at this time of day?" was Mr. Turner's greeting, as he strode across the room to meet her.

"O Mr. Turner!" began Nan, bluntly, "I came to see you about Miss Blake. I want to know—I wonder if you—"

"Indeed! And how is that charming lady? You must tell her I had hoped to see her before this, but I have been unusually busy, and every moment has been taken up. Now tell me, isn't it as I said? Hasn't she completely won your heart? Aha! I see she has! I see she has!"

Nan flushed and stammered, and did not reply. Inwardly, she was in a turmoil. Either Miss Blake had not come here at all or the lawyer was trying to

baffle her. And if Miss Blake had not come here, then where was she? A sort of dumb terror took hold of the girl and shook her from head to foot.

"You see I was right," pursued the lawyer, cheerfully. "I knew you would surrender to her the first thing. Every one does. I think I never knew any one who was more universally loved. Now, how can I help you, my dear? Give you some extra pin-money to buy Miss Blake a Christmas present, eh? Is that it?"

Nan caught at the suggestion eagerly as being a way out of her difficulty, and nodded a gulping assent.

"Well, you needn't have traveled all this distance for such a simple matter, my dear," he assured her genially. "And after dark, too! A note would have served, you know; a note would have served. But I'm glad you like her so well, and you shall have the money at once. Your father would be delighted I am sure."

It was only after Nan had been gone some time that Mr. Turner remembered with a start that she was alone and that it was night. It was too late then to overtake her, so he had to resign himself with the thought that the girl was admirably self-reliant, and that her way lay almost entirely along well-lit and busy avenues.

The thought of danger did not occupy Nan for a moment. Her only fear now was for the governess. If she wasn't at Mr. Turner's, then where was she? She asked herself this question over and over again. The girl blushed as she thought of the untruth she had been guilty of in implying that the lawyer's suggestion had been her motive in coming to him. She sharpened her pace, as if to outstrip the memory of her misdeed, but it, with her other worry, seemed to pursue her, and presently her imagination so quickened at the thought that she actually fancied she heard some one behind keeping step with her. She broke into a brisk run. Clap! clap! came the sound of hastening feet behind her. With a sort of tortured courage she slackened her pace. Whatever was following her also took a slower gait. She cast a furtive look over her shoulder and gave a horrified gasp as her eyes squarely encountered two other eyes, which were fixed upon her own in an insulting leer from beneath the rim of a rakish felt hat which was worn tilted on the side of a very unprepossessing head. The eyes, bad as they were, proved the best feature in a thoroughly vicious face, and for the first time in her life Nan felt frightened—chokingly frightened. She would have rushed on, but a stealthy hand held her back.

"Don't try to run away from me, little lady!" said an unsteady voice in her ear in a tone that was intended to seem engaging. "Don't try to run away from me, if you please. I wouldn't hurt you for the world, no, indeed."

Nan shook herself free from the disgusting touch and hurried on without a word. Her hateful shadow kept abreast with her.

"You ain't afraid of me, are you?" he asked reproachfully.

Nan made no response. Her feet seemed to cling to the pavement. Every time she lifted one it was with an effort.

"Oh, come now," whined the voice in her ear, "don't go on like this. I ain't going to hurt you. I'm only a poor man who would be grateful for a penny or two. By the way, where's your pocket-book?"

Nan leaped suddenly aside, and as she did so she missed her footing, and a cry of pain burst from her lips. A sharp pang shot from her ankle to her knee, and when she tried to take another step she found the darting agony returned. But stop she could not. Her face grew gray and lined with misery as she dragged forward, saving her injured ankle as much as she could, but always having to torture it intolerably with every onward limp. Her persecutor caught up with her promptly, and she cast beseeching looks for deliverance on every side, which the hurrying, preoccupied crowd was too intent on its own affairs to see. If only she could see a policeman! She knew what she would do. She would make believe she was going past him and then suddenly veer about and say, "Officer, this man is annoying me!" and before he had time to realize what she had done the rowdy would be arrested. But no policeman was in sight, and her fine scheme could not be carried out. Suddenly in the midst of her agony of mind and body her heart gave a wild bound of unspeakable relief.

"Miss Blake! Miss Blake!" she almost shrieked.

"Nan!"

The little governess was beside her in a flash, her own face almost as white and seamed as the girl's.

The little governess was beside her.

The little governess was beside her.

"O Miss Blake! this man—make him go away; make some one send him away. He's annoying me—and my foot!"

The governess grew if possible a shade paler. "What man?" she demanded sharply, "Where?"

Nan could not speak. She indicated with a mute gesture. Miss Blake looked behind her, but if there had actually been such a man as the girl described he must certainly have taken to his heels. They were standing alone in the midst of the hurrying crowd.

"O Nan!" cried the governess, not stopping to argue the question, "where have you been? Delia and I have been frantic with worry. She is out now hunting for you. She went one way and I another."

Nan could not reply. The torture in her ankle grew fiercer with every movement. She shook her head silently and limped on.

"You are hurt! You are in pain!" cried Miss Blake, now for the first time really realizing her condition.

Nan nodded dumbly.

"Take my arm; no, lean on my shoulder! There, that's better! Bear down as hard as you can and use me as your crutch! I'm strong. I won't give out."

And a right good support she proved. Happily they were but a stone's throw from home, and it was not long before Nan was comfortably settled on the library lounge, luxuriously surrounded by all sorts of downy cushions and having her injured ankle bound in soothing cloths by the tenderest of hands. Delia, full of sympathy and the desire to help, was bustling about nervously, tripping over bandages and upsetting bottles of liniment, but meaning so well all the while that one could not discourage her.

"It is only a strain. You have turned your ankle badly and the muscles have been wrenched, but I don't think it is an actual sprain," said Miss Blake, consolingly. "However, if the pain is still bad to-morrow, we'll have a doctor in to look at it. Do you still have Dr. Milbank, Delia?"

Nan sat bolt upright with surprise.

"How funny!" she cried. "However in the world did you know Dr. Milbank was our doctor? Why, we've had him for years and years. Ever since I was born and before, too. But how could you know?"

Delia hurried out of the room muttering something about the dinner, and Miss Blake bent her head over the bandage she was rolling.

"He lives so near," she replied haltingly.

"I've seen his sign often as I passed and—and—perhaps that is why I thought he might be your physician. He's so convenient—within call. It is hard to tell what makes one jump at conclusions sometimes."

Nan sank back among her cushions not half satisfied. "Dr. Pardee lives near, too. Just as near as Dr. Milbank does," she persisted.

The governess made no response, and just then Delia came staggering in under the weight of a huge brass tray which she bore in her arms.

Miss Blake jumped to her feet. "We're going to have a dinner-party up here to-night, Nan," she said. "Won't it be fun?" and she set to work unfolding a strange foreign-looking stand that Nan had never seen before and upon which Delia carefully placed the tray.

"Why, what a dandy little table it makes!" exclaimed Nan, admiringly. "Where did it come from?"

"I brought it from London, but it was made in India," explained Miss Blake.

Nan's eyes softened. "Where papa is!" she murmured softly to herself. "You have lots of nice things," she added, after a moment. "These pillows are downright daisies. I s'pose they belong to you."

The governess served her with soup. "They are yours whenever you care to use them," she returned in her quiet way.

"It's jolly having dinner up here," said Nan, not quite knowing how to respond to such a generous offer.

"Yes, isn't it?" assented the governess.

"Mrs. Newton don't use her basement for a dining-room, and neither does Mr. Turner. I wish we didn't. I think it would be perfectly fine if we could have ours up here, too."

"Why couldn't you?"

The girl leaned forward with a look of real interest in her face.

"Do you think we might?" she asked eagerly.

"I don't see why not. The books might be shifted to the other room. This might be re—well, re-arranged, and I'm sure it would make a charming dining-room."

"But that ugly old glass extension back there!" protested Nan in disgust. "Who wants to look at a lot of old trunks and broken-up things when one is eating? If we could only pull it down."

Miss Blake considered a moment.

"Why not take all the old trunks and broken-up things out entirely and make a conservatory of it. It faces the south. Plants would grow beautifully there."

Nan clapped her hands. "Why, that's perfectly splendiferous," she cried. "I never should have thought of it. I say, Miss Blake, let's do it right away, will you? I love flowers."

"Would you take care of them?" demanded the governess with a thoughtful look.

"Uh-huh!" nodded Nan, heartily. "I guess I would!"

"Very well, then," returned Miss Blake encouragingly, "I'll think about it. Perhaps Delia wouldn't consent. You know there is no dumb-waiter in the house, and if she had to carry up all the dishes at every meal, it would more than double her work."

Nan's face fell. "O dear!" she complained. "What a horrid old house! Can't do a single thing with it! It would have been such fun to change everything about!"

Miss Blake laughed. "Oh, if that was all your reason for wanting the improvements," she retorted. "I thought you wanted to gratify your sense of the beautiful."

"Well, I do," declared Nan.

"Then we'll see what can be done," and the governess set down her glass of water with a very knowing smile.

After dinner was eaten and Delia had carried away the tray and Miss Blake removed the wonderful folding stand, the governess looked up suddenly and said with unusual gravity:

"Nan, while I am here I hope you will never run out after dark alone again. It is dangerous. Do you understand me, my dear?"

The girl's eyes dropped. Yes, she understood perfectly. When the governess spoke in that low, decided voice it would have been hard to mistake her meaning.

"I had to go to-night," Nan answered, in a suddenly sullen voice.

"If you had waited a few moments I could have, and most willingly would have, gone with you. Never hesitate to ask me. I am always at your service. That is what I am here for."

Nan hesitated. "I—I thought you had gone away—for good," she stammered, lamely.

Miss Blake flushed. "What made you think I had gone away for good?" she asked, slowly repeating the girl's words.

Nan shook her head and gulped.

"I was in my room," continued the governess, after a pause, "and I heard—"

Nan put out both hands. "I know it! I know it!" she gasped. "But I didn't mean what I said—I didn't, honestly and truly. Before you came I learned it off, and I meant to say it, but that was before I saw you. I feel different now, and I hope—I hope—"

Miss Blake's hand was laid quietly on hers. "Wait a moment, Nan. Don't go on till you know what I was going to say. You seem to be trying to explain something that perhaps you might regret later. You think I overheard something you would rather I did not know? What I was going to say is this: I was in my room this afternoon and I heard a man crying 'Chestnuts!' It carried me back to the time when I was a little girl and used to roast them in this very—" she hesitated, then added slowly, "town. So I went out to buy some, that we might have a little jollification together with nuts and apples and perhaps a cookie or two, if Delia would give them to us. That is why I went out."

Nan twisted her fingers and looked down. "And I went out because you did," she faltered. "I thought you had gone away, and I went to Mr. Turner's to bring you back—if you would come. Say, now, didn't you hear what I said to Delia? I was awfully mad, and I guess I spoke out loud enough so folks on the next block could have heard. Honest now, didn't you?"

Miss Blake did not answer at once, and Nan could see that a struggle of some sort was going on in her mind. When she raised her face her eyes were very grave.

"Yes, Nan, I did hear!" she confessed, honestly.

The girl's cheeks blazed with sudden shame.

"And yet you weren't going to leave?" she said. "You were only going to do a kindness to me?"

Miss Blake shook her head.

"Dear Nan," she answered, smiling wistfully, "a good soldier never runs away for a mere wound. He stays on the field until he has won his battle or—until—he is mortally hurt. I do not think you will ever wish to cut me as deeply as that, and so—and so—I will stay until—the general orders me off the field. The day I hear that your father is to come back, that day I will resign my position in this house. Until then, however, you must reconcile yourself to my presence here, and I think we should both be much happier if you would try to do so at once, my dear."

CHAPTER VIII

NAN'S HEROINE

The strain Nan had given her ankle proved more serious than either she or Miss Blake had expected. It threatened to keep her chained to the sofa for days to come, and the girl's only comfort lay in the thought that now, of course, the governess would not force the question of study, and after she was up and about again she might be able to dispose of it altogether, and save herself any more worry on that score.

But Monday came, and, true to her word, Miss Blake appeared in the library after breakfast with an armful of school-books, to which she kept Nan fastened until luncheon time. It was perfectly clear that there was no escape. Miss Blake was armed with authority, and the girl knew herself to be under control. She fretted against it so persistently that if the governess had not had an enduring patience she must have despaired over and over again under the strain of Nan's sullen tempers, fierce outbreaks, and lazy moods. There were moments when the girl seemed to be fairly tractable, but there was no knowing when the whim would seize her to fall back into her old ways, so that, at the best of times, Miss Blake did not dare relax her control. Then Nan would kick her heels sulkily, and comfort herself with the thought that when her father came home all this would be put an end to. Miss Blake would go. Hadn't she said so herself? And that would finish up this studying business quick enough. She could cajole her father easily into letting her stay away from school, and then—here she would be, as happy as you please, with only those two, Delia and her dear daddy, to look after her, and no one at all would say no to anything she might choose to do. It was a blissful prospect. In the meantime there were lessons, and—Miss Blake.

But after a few days Nan found that, somehow, the lessons were not so hard after all, and she never would have believed that they could be so interesting. While as for Miss Blake—Well, a woman who sits reading "Treasure Island" and such books to one for hours together can't be regarded entirely in the light of a nuisance.

"I never knew geography was so nice before," Nan admitted one day after lessons were over. "I used to hate it, but now, why it's downright jolly! I never

saw such beautiful pictures! Where in the world did you ever get so many?"

"I took them myself!"

Nan's eyes widened. "Why, have you been to all these places?" she asked, not a little awe-struck.

Miss Blake confessed she had.

"And you took all these photographs your own self?" persisted the girl.

The governess laughed. "I'm like George Washington, Nan," she said. "I cannot tell a lie! I did them with my little—Kodak!"

Nan fairly gulped. She would have said "Jiminy!" but she knew Miss Blake disapproved of "Jiminy!" and somehow, she was willing to humor her just now.

"Only," went on the governess, "it isn't a little Kodak at all. It is a very fine camera indeed. Some day, if you like, I will show it to you, and then, perhaps you will be interested enough to care to learn how to take some photographs yourself."

Nan bounced up and down on the sofa with delight. "Oh, won't I, though!" she exclaimed feverishly. "Just won't I!"

"But mind you, my dear," warned Miss Blake. "If you once undertake it, I want you to persist. It is not to be any 'You-press-the-button-and-we-do-the-rest' affair. I want you to learn to finish up your work yourself. Do you think you will care to take so much trouble?"

Nan nodded energetically.

"Very well, then. So it stands. If you are willing to learn I'll gladly teach."

"Who taught you?" asked the girl curiously.

Miss Blake shook her head. "Just a man whom I paid for his trouble," she returned simply. "I wanted to learn, and so I went into a gallery and got some experience, and then came away and experimented on my own account. It has taken me years, and I am still working hard at it, for I believe in never being

satisfied with anything less than the best one can do."

Nan blinked. She herself believed in being satisfied with whatever came easiest, unless it was in the way of some sport, where she liked to excel.

"How jolly it must be to travel about—all over the world," said she, musingly. "When I'm grown up I guess I'll be a governess, or a companion, or something, just as you are, and get a place with some awfully nice people who will take me everywhere. Was it nice where you were before you came here? Were there any girls? Why did you leave?"

Miss Blake looked troubled, but Nan was not used to noticing other people's moods, and did not even stop to hear the replies to her own questions. "If you've been all over the world, you'll know where my father is, and can tell me about it. Oh, do, do! Show me some pictures of India, won't you please? Just think, I haven't seen my father for two years, and he won't be home until next autumn—almost a year from now. You ought to see him! He is the best man in the world—only I guess he is lonely, because my mother died when I was a baby, and he hasn't any one to keep house for him but Delia and me. Mr. Turner says he has lost a lot of money lately, too. I guess that's why he went to India. If I had been older he would have taken me. But he had to leave me here with Delia. Delia has been in our family, for, oh, ever so many years. She first came to live here when my mother was a young girl. She says it was the jolliest house you ever saw. My grandfather and grandmother were alive then, and mamma had a young friend, who was an orphan, who lived with them. They loved her just as if she had been their own child, and she and my mother were so fond of each other that—well, Delia says it was beautiful to see them together. And such times! There were parties and all sorts of things all the time till, Delia says, it was a caution. My grandfather wasn't very well off, and lots and lots of times my mother wouldn't have been able to go to the parties she was invited to, if it hadn't been for that friend of hers, who used to give her the most beautiful things—dresses, and gloves, and all she needed. She had loads of money, and every time she got anything for herself she got its mate for my mother. Don't you think that was pretty generous?"

Miss Blake bit her lip. "One can't judge, Nan," she said. "If your mother shared her home with this girl and she had money and your mother had not, I think it was only right that they should share the money too. No, I do not think it was generous."

Nan tossed her head. "Well, I think it was and so does Delia," she retorted hotly.

"It is easy enough to give when one has plenty," pursued the governess, almost sternly. "But when one has little and one gives that—well, then it is hard and then perhaps one may be what the world calls generous, though I should call it merely grateful."

Nan did not understand very clearly. She thought Miss Blake meant to disparage her mother's friend, the woman she had been brought up to think was one of the noblest beings on earth. She felt angry and hurt and almost regretted that she had confided the story to her since she made so little of her heroine's conduct.

"I don't care; I think she was perfectly fine and so does Delia. My mother just loved her and I guess she knew whether she was generous or not. When she went away my mother was wild. She cried her eyes out. But she married my father soon after that, and then—well, my grandmother died and then my grandfather, and I was born and my mother died and—O dear me! it was dreadful. Delia says many and many a time she has gone down on her knees and just prayed that that girl would come back, but she has never come and she won't now, because it is years and years ago and maybe she's dead herself by this time. Do you think Delia would have prayed for Miss Severance to come back if she hadn't been the best and most generous girl in the world?"

Miss Blake smiled faintly. "That settles it, Nan!" she declared. "If Delia wanted her back she must at least have tried to be good. And even trying is something, isn't it? And now, how do you think luncheon would taste?"

Nan was more than ever inclined to be sulky. Her loyalty was touched. Not alone did Miss Blake fail to appreciate her heroine, but she showed quite plainly that she did not want to hear about her. "All the time I was talking she fidgeted around and looked too unhappy for anything. I guess she needn't think she's the only one in the world that can make people love her. I don't think it's very nice to be jealous of a person you never saw. Pooh! I like what she said about trying to be good. I guess Delia knows," said Nan.

They ate their luncheon together in the library, and after they had finished Miss Blake excused herself and went upstairs to prepare to go out.

"After being in the house all the morning one needs a change," she said, "and it would be a sin to spend all of this glorious day indoors."

Nan sighed. How she longed to get away herself. But of course that was impossible, with this old troublesome ankle bothering her. If she could not step across the room, how could she hope to get into the street? O dear! When would it be well?

Miss Blake was tripping about upstairs and Nan could hear her singing as she went. Delia was up there, too. When Delia walked the chandelier shook.

"She follows Miss Blake about so, it's perfectly disgusting," thought the girl resentfully. "Now, I wonder what she wants in my room. I don't thank either of them for going poking about my things when I'm not there, so now! Well, I'm glad she's coming down, at any rate."

The governess appeared in the library a moment later, but Nan could scarcely see her face, she was so overladen with wraps and rugs. She turned the whole assortment into a chair, and before the girl could ask a question, she found herself being bundled up and made ready for the street.

"What are you doing?" she gasped out at length. "You know I can't walk."

"Nobody asked you, sir!" quoted the governess, gayly.

"Then what are you putting on my things for?"

"Ready, Delia?" sang out Miss Blake, cheerfully.

Nan heard the front door open. Then heavy steps came clumping along the hall, and in another moment she was being borne down the outer steps and set comfortably in a carriage by the good old Irish coachman, Mike, from the livery stable round the corner.

"Are you comfortable?" asked Miss Blake, with her foot on the step. "Have you everything you need?"

Nan nodded, and the governess, taking her place beside her, motioned to Michael, who climbed to his seat on the box, and off they drove.

"There is Delia at the window! Let's wave to her!" cried Miss Blake, with one of her happy girl-hearted laughs.

It seemed to Nan that she had never seen the Park look as beautiful as it did to-day. To be sure, most of the trees were bare, but the naked branches stood out delicate and clear against the blue of the violet-clouded sky and by the lake-shore the pollard willows were gray and misty, and a few russet maple trees still held their leaves against the sweeping wind. They saw numberless wheels spinning along the smooth paths, and though the governess said nothing, Nan knew she had given up this chance of a ride for her sake.

Impulsively she put out her hand and laid it on Miss Blake's.

"If it weren't for me you'd be on your wheel now, wouldn't you?" she asked.

"Yes," came the answer, prompt as an echo. "But as it is I'm not on my wheel, and it so happens that I'm doing something that gives me much more pleasure."

"If I had a bike it would make me simply furious to have to give up a ride such a day as this," said Nan.

"Then isn't it rather fortunate you haven't one?" asked Miss Blake, saucily. "But seriously, Nan, why haven't you one?"

Nan set her jaw. "My father can't afford it," she said proudly.

The governess turned her head to look at a faraway hill, and there was an embarrassing little pause. When she faced about again Nan could see that her chin was quivering, and in a spirit of tender thoughtfulness quite new to her, she hastened to change the subject since Miss Blake felt so badly about having asked the question.

"This is the lake where we skate in winter," she said. "That is, most of the girls come here. I go to the Steamer. I like it better."

The governess looked at it and asked, absently, "Why?"

"Oh, because its jollier there. Most of the girls I know—I don't know—that is, they don't know me; they don't like me much, and I'd rather not go where they are. John Gardiner and some other boys and I go to the Steamer and have regular

contests, and it's the best sport in the world."

But Miss Blake was not listening. She was thinking of other things, and only came back to a sense of what was going on about her when Nan gave a great sigh to indicate that she was tired of waiting to be entertained. The governess roused herself with a smile and an apology and began at once to chat briskly again.

"Whenever you want Michael to turn you have only to say so," she said. "What do you think of going down-town and buying some jelly or something for little Ruth Newton. We could stop there on our way home, and you could send it up with your love."

Nan nodded heartily. It always pleased her to give. She enjoyed, too, the thought of getting a glimpse of the shop-windows, which were already beginning to take on a look of holiday gorgeousness. So down-town they went, and Miss Blake not alone bought the jelly, but so many other things as well, that presently Nan began to have a feeling that for such a poor woman the governess was inclined to be extravagant.

She told Delia so when they were alone together that evening, Miss Blake having gone upstairs to write some letters.

"Oh, I guess you needn't worry," the woman said.

"But you don't know how many things she bought," persisted Nan. "I'm sure she can't afford it. Just think, a woman that works for her living the way she has to! But do you know, Delia, I believe there's something mysterious about her, anyway. She seems to see right into your mind—what you're thinking about; and every once in a while she lets out a hint that the next minute she looks as if she wished she hadn't said. I've noticed it lots and lots of times, and I'm sure she's trying to hide something. What do you s'pose it is? What fun it would be if she were a princess in disguise."

"Well, she ain't," Delia almost snapped. "She's just a good little woman that's trying to do her duty as far as I can make out, and if she spends money you must remember she has only herself to support."

CHAPTER IX

HAVING HER OWN WAY

"I know just the kind I want, and I won't wear any other," said Nan, irritably.

Miss Blake made no reply, and the girl sauntered off to another part of the store, and pretended to be examining a case of trimmed bonnets, which she could not see because her eyes were half-blind with rebellious tears. What right had any one to tell her what sort of a hat she ought to get! If her father was paying for it, she guessed it was nobody else's business to say anything.

Miss Blake held in her hand a handsome, wide-brimmed felt hat, trimmed simply with fine ribbon and a generous bunch of quills.

"It's very girlish and suitable, ma'am!" the saleswoman said, as she turned away to get another model.

After a moment Nan came hurrying back to the governess' side.

"Horrid old thing!" she said in a low voice, flinging her hand out with a gesture of disgust toward the despised hat. "It's stiff as a poker. Do you suppose I want to have just bunched-up bows with some spikes stuck in the middle to trim my hat! And all one color, too! I guess not!"

The governess bit her lip. "Perhaps we may be able to find something more to your fancy," she said. "But plumes are expensive and perishable, and if you have too many colors your hat will look vulgar."

"I hate this place anyhow," went on Nan, disdainfully. "Bigelow's! Who ever thought of going to Bigelow's?"

"Your mother did," said Miss Blake, quickly. "That is, Delia says she did. And I myself know it to be one of the oldest and best firms in the city. One can always be sure that one is getting good quality for one's money here."

"I never was in the place before," blurted out Nan, "and I despise their hats—every one of them. If you won't let me go to Sternberg's, where they have things

I like, I won't get anything at all, so there!"

She suddenly let her voice fall, for the sales-woman was back again with a fresh assortment of shapes to select from.

Miss Blake placed the hat she held gently upon a table and began to examine the others carefully, Nan standing by in sullen silence.

"This is a pretty one—this with the tips, don't you think so?" the governess asked, setting it on her hand and letting it revolve slowly while she regarded it critically with her head on one side.

Nan gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. What she wanted was a flaring, turned-up brim, with a dash of red velvet underneath and a bird-of-paradise on top, caught in a mesh of red and yellow ribbons. She had seen something on this order in Sternberg's window, and it had struck her fancy at once.

The governess hesitated, and then put down the hat she held.

"Very well. We will go to Sternberg's," she said, quietly, to Nan, in an undertone which the saleswoman could not distinguish. The girl started briskly for the door. Miss Blake remained behind a moment, and then followed after.

Now that she was to have her own way Nan was restored to good humor, and kept up a stream of chatter until they reached Sternberg's.

"There! Isn't that a beauty?" she demanded at last, indicating the hat in the window.

Miss Blake, with difficulty, concealed a shudder.

"It seems to me rather showy. But tastes differ, you know. I can't say it suits me exactly. Still, if you are pleased—you are the one to wear it, not I."

The hat was bought and Nan was radiant. She insisted on donning it at once, and Miss Blake tried not to let her discover how ashamed she was to be seen in the street with such a monstrous piece of millinery. Underneath her tower of gorgeousness Nan strutted like a turkey-cock.

"I told Delia before we came away that we might not be home before dusk, so

suppose we take luncheon down-town, and then, if you like, we will go to see Callmann. I haven't been to a sleight-of-hand performance since I was a little girl, and I always had a liking for that sort of thing."

"Oh, do! Let's! Can we?" cried Nan, in a burst of grateful excitement.

It was nippingly cold outside, and the warm restaurant proved a delightful contrast. It was jolly to sit in the midst of all this pleasant bustle and be served with delicate, unfamiliar dishes by waiters who stood behind the chair and deferentially called one "Miss."

Miss Blake left Nan to order whatever she pleased, and they dawdled over their meal luxuriously, the color in the girl's cheeks deepening with the warmth and excitement until it almost matched the velvet in her imposing hat. Every now and then she glanced furtively at her reflection in the mirror, and the vision of that bird-of-paradise hovering over those huge butterfly bows thrilled her with a great sense of importance and self-satisfaction. More than once she saw that her hat was being noticed and commented on by the other guests, and she tried her best to seem not aware—to look modestly unconscious. But Miss Blake, when she caught some eye fixed quizzically upon their table, blushed to the roots of her hair, and felt as though it would be impossible to bear the ordeal for a moment longer. Still, she did not hurry Nan, and no one knew, the girl least of all, what agonies of mortification she was enduring.

A deep-toned clock struck one full peal.

"That's half-past one," said Miss Blake, looking up and comparing her watch.

"When does the entertainment begin?" asked Nan.

"At two, I think, or quarter after. If we ride up we have still a few minutes to spare, but if we walk it would be wise to start at once."

"O let's walk," begged Nan. "It's such fun; there's so much going on. And now my foot is well, I just want to trot all the time."

Though Miss Blake was a good walker and took a great deal of exercise, she always preferred to ride when she was with Nan, for the girl forged ahead at such a rate and darted in among the maze of trucks and cars and carriages so recklessly that there was actual danger as well as discomfort in trying to keep

abreast with her. Still she made no objection to "trotting," and they started off at a brisk pace.

"Don't you just love to be in the stores around Christmas-time?" asked Nan, watching the crowds press and surge about the doorways of some of the most popular shops. "It's so exciting and the things seem so gay and alluring."

"Yes, it is very attractive—all the motion and color," replied Miss Blake, "but I don't like crowds, and when I am hemmed in at a counter and can't get away I feel stifled and smothered, and long to scream."

"Why don't you scream then? I would!" exclaimed Nan, with a laugh. "I'd shriek, 'Air! Air!' and then you'd see how quick the people would let you out."

Miss Blake smiled with what Nan saw was amusement at some just-remembered incident.

"I was watching a huge celebration in London one spring," she said. "It was in honor of some royal birthday or something, and the streets were packed with people all eager to get a glimpse of the military parade and the notabilities who were to take part in it. From the window where I sat I could not see an inch of pavement, the crowd was so dense. At last there was a sound of martial music and the First Regiment appeared in full gala array. Oh, I assure you it was very imposing and well worth taking some trouble to see. The crowds pushed and jostled, and beyond the first line or two at the curb no one among them could get more than an occasional glimpse of a stray cockade or a floating banner. Still the people were massed solidly from the gutter to the house-steps. We were wondering where the enjoyment in this came in, and congratulating ourselves that we were not doomed to struggle and fight for space in such a huddle, when suddenly we heard a shrill scream. It was a woman's voice crying, 'Air! Air! Give me air!' In another instant the crowd pushed back a step, and quite a respectably-dressed young person staggered weakly through the line to the curb, as if to get more breathing-space. Of course she could have got this in a much easier way by going in the other direction, but you see her plan was to get a better view of the procession, and she thought that was a good method of accomplishing it. It seemed a clever trick, and she was just settling herself to enjoy her improved position, when quick as a flash an order was given: Two men unrolled one of their army stretchers; the woman was whipped up and placed upon it; the poles were seized and off they went, carrying that misguided

creature with them through all the gaping, jeering crowd. The last I saw of her she was hiding her face in the coarse army blanket, probably 'crying her eyes out,' as you would say, with mortification and shame."

"What a joke!" exclaimed Nan. "Poor thing! She didn't see the parade after all, and I declare she deserved to. That was the time she was in it though, with a vengeance."

"Look out for this cab, Nan! Be careful. We cross here. Please don't rush so—I can't keep up with you," pleaded Miss Blake.

The girl gave her shoulders an impatient shrug and drew her eyebrows together in a scowl of irritation. But her face cleared as she saw Miss Blake buying their tickets at the box-office.

"Get them good and up front," she begged. "If we're way back we can't see a thing."

The governess hesitated an instant; then a curious expression came over her face and she said, deliberately, "Very well, dear! Up front they shall be."

The house was quite full and Nan thought it a singular piece of good fortune that there were places left just where she would have chosen to sit.

"Just think of having come so late and yet being able to get the best seats in the house," she said, exultantly.

Miss Blake smiled. She understood better than Nan did why the majority of the audience preferred places that were not so near the stage.

Both she and the girl herself soon forgot everything else in their interest in the mysterious tricks that were being performed before their eyes. Of course they knew that all this magic could be explained, but just at the moment it appeared difficult to imagine how. A man seems really no less than a magician who can take a red billiard ball from, no one knows where, out of mid-air, apparently, and suddenly nipping off the end, transform it into two, each equally as large as the first. Presently he thinks you would like to have a third, and, presto! he draws one out from his elbow. Now a white one for a change! But it is easy enough to get a white one. He opens his mouth and there it is, held between his teeth. Then he thinks he will swallow a red one. Pop! it is gone! A moment later he takes it

out of the top of his head.

Nan noticed that as the performance progressed the tricks grew "curiouser and curiouser," as Alice would say, and the wizard seemed to take his audience more and more into his confidence. He no longer confined himself to the stage, but came tripping down the steps that led from the platform to the middle aisle and addressed, first this one and then that from among his spectators—only Nan again noticed that these always happened to be sitting as they were themselves, in the foremost seats. He induced a man just in front of her to come upon the stage to "assist" him in one of his "experiments," and the girl trembled lest at any moment he might demand a similar favor of her, for though she was reckless enough as a general thing, she had sufficient delicacy to dread being made conspicuous in such a place as this.

"O Miss Blake," she whispered in the governess' ear, "can't we move back a little? If he should make me go up there I'd sink through the floor!"

"Probably you would. No doubt he would let you down himself—through a trap-door. No, we must stay where we are and we must bear it as best we may. Perhaps he will overlook us."

Nan thought of her hat and the many glances it had drawn to her in the restaurant, and for the first time she had a feeling of mistrust regarding it. Suppose it should fix his eye, with its towering bows and flaming bird-of-paradise! If it did, she would hate it forever after.

But she soon forgot her anxiety in her interest in the wizard himself. Silver pieces were flung in the air and then mysteriously reappeared in the pocket of some unsuspecting member of the audience who was much surprised at seeing them straightway converted into so many gold ones under his very nose. Innocent-looking hoops turned out to possess the most remarkable faculty for resisting all attempts to link them on the part of any one of the spectators, and yet immediately assuming all manner of shapes and positions in the hands of the dexterous magician himself.

At last a shallow cabinet was set upon two chairs in the centre of the stage, and after a word or two of explanation, the wizard drew first one chair and then the other from beneath it, and lo! the magic cupboard remained poised in midair, without any visible means of support whatever.

"You see, ladies and gentlemen," announced the suave magician, "this cabinet is bare; precisely like Mother Hubbard's immortal cupboard. Can you see anything there? No! I thought not. Now I will place within it these bells, so; and this tambourine, so; also this empty slate. You see it is empty. It is quite a simple slate, such as any school-child would use, and its sides are entirely bare. Now I close the doors of the cabinet, so; wave my wand, so; and—"

Immediately there followed the sounds of ringing bells and rattling tambourine, while in a moment all of these instruments came flying out of the top of the cabinet as if they had been vigorously flung aloft by hidden hands. The smiling magician stepped forward, opened the doors of the cabinet with a flourish, and lo! it was empty save for the slate, which proved to be covered over with scribbled characters, and which he politely handed down to persons in the audience for examination.

Nan was completely bewildered and so lost to all that was going on about her that she did not realize that the wizard was tripping down the stage steps and making his way affably up the middle aisle again. It was only when he spoke once more that she woke with a great start, and then to her horror she found he was addressing her.

"I am sure this young lady will not refuse me the loan of her hat for my next experiment," he began with a persuasive smile. "I assure you, Miss, I will not injure it in the least. You won't object, will you?" and he held out his hand engagingly.

The girl stiffened against the back of her chair, so disconcerted that she felt actually dizzy.

"Give him your hat," bade Miss Blake, quickly, as if to put an end to their really painful conspicuousness.

Nan obeyed blindly. The smiling magician took it with a profound bow and held it up for all the audience to see.

"Now you perceive, ladies and gentlemen," he remarked, "that there is nothing mysterious about this hat. At least I am sure the ladies do. To the gentlemen it doubtless seems very mysterious, but that is because they do not understand the art of millinery." As he spoke he made his way up the aisle and to the steps that led to the stage. "It is a beautiful hat. Very elaborate and of a most

stylish shape, as you see, but not at all mysterious. Yet I mean to make it serve me in a very interesting experiment, which I think you will admit is exceedingly won—"

But just here he stumbled upon one of the steps, and in trying to recover himself let Nan's cherished head-gear fall and brought his whole weight upon it, crushing it out of all recognition.

"Oh, dear, dear! What have I done?" he deplored in sincerest dismay.

Miss Blake's eyes fell and Nan's lips whitened. Every one was looking at them now, and the magician was making them even more conspicuous by apologizing to them over and over again in the most abject fashion.

"How could I be so awkward! Such a beautiful hat and ruined through my carelessness. I have no words to describe my regret. Do forgive me! But I promised to return your property to you uninjured, did I not, Miss? So, of course, I must keep my word." He held the battered mass of ribbons and bird-of-paradise high above his head as he spoke, and then went forward and placed a pistol in the hand of his assistant on the stage. The man retired to a distance and the wizard held the hat at arm's length as if for a target.

"Now, ready? Then—shoot!"

A second for aim: a report; and the smiling Callmann stepped forward with the hat in his hand, quite whole again and unimpaired.

A shudder ran through Nan as she heard the applause and saw her property held up to public view. She dared not turn her head to look at Miss Blake, and she hardly heard the wizard's voice as he asked to be permitted to use the hat for still another experiment, and she scarcely saw how he placed it on a table, a perfectly innocent looking table, and then proceeded to take from it a multitude of things—from a gold watch to a clucking hen.

When the hen came to light the audience fairly shouted, and Nan thought she could never in the world get up courage to set that hat on her head again and walk out before the eyes of these quizzical people.

"They'll laugh at me all the way," she thought moodily. "And if they ever see me in the street they'll say, 'There goes that trick hat! The one the hen came out

of!' I wish it was in Jericho!"

Miss Blake comforted her as best she could with little hidden pressures of the hand and whispered words of sympathy, but the rest of the performance was torture to them both, and when, at last, it was over and they were well on their way home, Nan heaved a great sigh of relief and tried to summon back her courage by declaring that "I don't care if they did laugh when that hen clucked inside it and he said he was afraid this was what might be called 'a loud hat!' It's heaps better than lots I saw on other girls, so there!"

"I am glad you are satisfied with it," said Miss Blake, simply.

CHAPTER X

EXPERIENCES

For the first time since Nan could remember, the house was full of the air of Christmas preparation. Of course she had always had presents, and she never failed to give Delia a gift, but there was no scent of mystery about the holiday celebration; no delicious odor of a hidden Christmas tree; no sense of unseen tokens; nothing to distinguish the time from an ordinary birthday anniversary. But this year everything was changed, and Nan was as much occupied with her own secrets and surprises as either Miss Blake or Delia, who whispered and dodged and smiled cunningly all day long in the most perplexing manner. But she confined her preparations to her own room, while the governess apparently needed the library and all the rest of the house, too, and Nan found herself barred out of Miss Blake's room by her own stubborn pride which still forbade her to go in without a formal invitation. She was also locked out of the library which was now being made festive for the coming holiday, so that at times she wandered about quite helplessly in a sort of forlorn state of having nowhere to turn.

She had fallen into the habit of running over to the Newton's while Ruth was sick, and she proved such a tender nurse and entertaining companion that the child's mother looked forward with relief to her visits, and only wished she would come oftener.

"She keeps Ruth so happy and contented. It gives me a free minute to turn 'round in, and is a real comfort."

"I thought you would find her helpful," responded Miss Blake. "She loves children, and they know it and love her back again. She is very gentle with them, and I know you may trust her, for she is as true as steel."

"She's a changed girl, that's the whole truth of the matter. You've simply tamed her, the young savage!"

"Oh, Nan has a fine nature. All she needs is judicious training. If I were not sure of that I should despair many and many a time. She needs judicious training and a world of patience and love."

Mrs. Newton dropped her work into her lap and looked up earnestly into the governess' face.

"Yes, I can believe it. What a rash, head-long sort of creature you must think me! Why, I was as bad as Nan herself, to go over there and simply browbeat her as I did! Do you suppose she will ever really forgive me?"

"I'm sure she has done so already. Nan is generous. She does not bear malice. She has a vast amount of pride but as yet she does not know how to use it."

"I should think it would be enough to break down your health—such constant care and responsibility. It is Nan's salvation to have you with her, but do you think you can hold out?"

Miss Blake pondered a moment and then nodded her head decidedly. "I will hold out," she said staunchly.

"You don't know how boisterous she was, and how it shocked me! At last I grew frenzied, and when Ruth was brought in to me injured in that way, through her fault, I supposed, I lost control of myself entirely, and felt that, come what might, the girl must be attended to. There's no doubt of it, your Nan is improved, and if this neighborhood is not made miserable by her piercing war-cries, her hairbreadth adventures, and her eccentric behavior generally, it is all owing to you. But here she comes herself! Put away your work! Quick!"

Nan knocked politely at the open door.

"Oh, come in, dear!" said Mrs. Newton cordially, and the governess looked at her encouragingly and smiled.

"Bridget told me to come right up," explained Nan. "Is Ruth out?"

"No, taking a nap in the nursery. She'll be awake soon now, I'm sure. Take off your things and sit down."

"Won't I be in the way?"

Mrs. Newton patted her on the shoulder. "No, my dear, you won't. On the contrary, it will be very pleasant to have you here to take a cup of tea with Miss Blake and me; will you excuse me a moment while I go and call Katy to bring it up?"

"I thought you were in your room," said Nan to Miss Blake as their hostess left the room.

"Did you need me? Why didn't you knock? What was it you wanted me to do?"

"Oh, nothing. I didn't need you—that is, there wasn't anything I wanted you to do, only—it seemed kind of lonely, and so I came over here."

"And I thought you would be locked in your own room for the rest of the afternoon. How dreadfully mysterious we all are nowadays."

Nan laughed. She got out of her coat with a tug and a squirm and flung it on the lounge. Then she wrenched off her hat (the Sternberg affair) and tossed it carelessly after the coat.

Miss Blake bent over and straightened the untidy heap without a word.

"Delia is making mince pie-lets for dinner," announced Nan.

"How jolly of her!" said Miss Blake.

"Huh!" exclaimed Nan. "She said you told her to."

The governess smiled.

Mrs. Newton came in a moment later and after her Katy with the tea-tray.

Nan sprawled down on the rug in complete comfort while Miss Blake and Mrs. Newton sipped their tea and talked of all sorts of things, to which she hardly listened.

She was full of her own thoughts, and somehow they were all connected with the governess. In fact, her influence seemed to pervade everything, and Nan often wondered how the house would seem without her, now that they had "sort of got used to having her around." Without a doubt she made herself useful. And somehow she managed to make people depend on her in spite of themselves. And yet she never made a fuss or exaggerated the things she did. She was always doing "little things "—little things that didn't make any show, and yet they were so kind they "sort of made you like her whether you wanted to or not." This thought came upon Nan with a start, that roused her from her musing and made her sit bolt upright with surprise. Had Miss Blake made her like her, then? After all the reproaches she had cast upon Delia was she no better than a turn-coat herself?

"We had ours built in before we came into the house," Mrs. Newton was saying. "It is a vast improvement. I wouldn't be without it for the world."

Nan pricked up her ears. She wondered what this desirable thing might be.

"Who did the work?" Miss Blake asked.

"Buchanan. And I'll say this for him, he did it well. I haven't a fault to find. I think you'd be satisfied with him."

"A person doesn't like to put a piece of work like that into the hands of a man one knows nothing about," resumed Miss Blake. "I'm glad to profit by your experience. It may save me, too, a great deal of worry and no little expense."

"Oh, yes," returned Mrs. Newton. "If one can economize on experience it's a great satisfaction. It's the best school I know of. But it's so expensive that it ruins some of us before we're done."

"What's the best school you know of?" asked Nan, curiously.

"Experience," replied Miss Blake.

"Oh!"

"Yes; and it's a school we all have to go to at one time or another," put in Mrs. Newton. "But we might make it a good deal easier for ourselves sometimes if we'd take hints from our friends who have graduated."

"Have you graduated?" Nan asked, half in fun, turning to Miss Blake.

But Mrs. Newton broke in before the governess could reply for herself. "Graduated! Well, I should think so! Why, she has carried off honors! She has taken a diploma—with a ribbon 'round it!"

Miss Blake laughed. "Nothing of the sort, Nan. I've had a few lessons, that is all."

"Oh, tell about some of them, won't you?" cried Nan, eagerly. "It would be lots of fun."

The governess considered.

"Well, yes. I will tell you of the very first lesson I can remember, if you care to hear," she answered, with a wistful smile. "I won't promise it will be 'lots of fun,' though."

"Never mind! Tell it!" And Nan settled herself more comfortably against the governess' knee quite as if that person were, in reality, her prop and stay, instead of being only some one she "sort of liked in spite of herself."

"I think it must have been the first real experience I ever had," began Miss Blake, musingly. "At least it is the first one I recollect. I was the littlest bit of a girl when my mother died; too young to realize it, and my father scarcely outlived her a week. He died very suddenly. They used to tell me that he died from grief. Anyway, he was sitting at his desk looking over some important papers connected with my mother's affairs, when suddenly he put his hand to his heart, gave a faint gasp—and was gone."

"What an elegant way to die!" broke in Nan impulsively.

Mrs. Newton gave an exclamation of real horror at her flippancy.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" the girl hastened to protest. "I think it must be worlds better than being sick, or hurt in an accident, or any of those dreadful, lingering deaths."

"After that I was given over into the charge of some distant connections of my father," continued the governess. "They were good, conscientious people, but they had no children of their own, and did not like other people's. I presume I was not a very captivating baby."

Nan straightened up suddenly. "I bet you were, though," she interrupted. "You must have been a dot of a thing, with crinkly hair and dimples, and mites of hands and feet. I should think they would have loved you—I mean, a poor little lonely baby like you."

Miss Blake smiled. "Well, however that was, Nan, I was brought up very strictly, and I assure you, I was made to mind my P's and Q's. One could not trifle with Aunt Rebecca! Well, one morning I was sitting at the foot of the staircase playing house. I can see myself now, squatting on the lowest step, my fat little legs scarcely long enough to reach the floor. I had on a checked gingham pinafore, and my hair was drawn tight behind my ears and braided into two tiny tails with red ribbons on the ends. I knew it was against the rule to play house in the hall, anywhere, in fact, but in my own little room—with the doors shut, but somehow I felt reckless that day, and when I heard Aunt Rebecca walking to and fro, just above my head, I didn't scamper off as I ordinarily would have done; I just sat still and said to myself, 'I don't care! I don't care!' It seemed to give me a lot of courage, and I wasn't a bit afraid, even when Aunt Rebecca's footsteps came nearer, and I knew she could see me from the top of the stairs. Indeed, I grew mightily brave; so brave, that after a couple of minutes I raised my voice and piped out: 'Aunt Becca! Aunt Becca!'

"'Well,' answered she, 'what is it? what do you want?'

"Even the severity of her voice didn't dismay me that rash morning.

"'I want Lilly,' said I, airily. Lilly was my precious doll. 'She's in her little chair in my room; won't you please to pitch me Lilly?'

"For a moment Aunt Rebecca hesitated. I think she must have been petrified by my audacity. But she recovered herself and turned, and without a word went to my room and got Lilly from her 'little chair.' I was as complacent as if it had

been quite the usual thing for Aunt Rebecca to fetch and carry for me. Indeed, perhaps I imagined I was instituting a new order of things, and that in future she would do my errands, instead of I hers.

"She came back to the head of the stairway and I looked up pleasantly, half-expecting, I suppose, that she would come down and deliver my darling dolly safely into my hands. But she didn't. If I were giving orders she would obey me to the letter. She 'pitched me Lilly.' I gave a dismal wail of dismay as I saw my dear baby come hurtling through the air, but when she landed on her blessed head, and I heard the crack of breaking china, I just abandoned myself to grief and howled desperately. Aunt Rebecca went about her business as if nothing had happened, and by and by I stole off with my ruined dolly and cried to myself in the back yard—because I had no one else to cry to."

"You poor little thing!" burst out Nan, indignantly. "What a detestable woman! As if she could have expected such a baby to know!"

"You're wrong, Nan!" the governess said. "It was a wholesome lesson, and I am grateful to Aunt Rebecca for having given it to me."

"Well, I shouldn't think you would be," insisted the girl rebelliously. "The idea of her expecting such a mite to understand!"

"Ah, but you see I did understand. And I have never forgotten it. I have never asked any one to 'pitch me Lilly' since that day—I mean never when I could go and get her myself."

Nan pondered over it moodily for a moment. "And did you have to stay in that house until you were grown up?" she demanded.

"Oh, no! When I was about your age I went to boarding-school, and everything was changed and different after that."

"How?"

"Well, I made dear, faithful friends who took me to their hearts and who made my life rich with their love. All that other hungry, empty time was over, and for many years I never knew what it was to feel sad or lonely, or to have a wish that would not have been gladly gratified if it could be."

"Now they were something like!" ejaculated Nan. "Dear me! I should think you would have been sorry when you got through school."

Miss Blake made no reply. She put up her hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the fire, and for a second or two there was a deep hush in the room. Nan was the first to break the silence.

"Goodness!" she cried, springing to her feet with a bound. "It's as dark as a pocket outside, and Delia'll think we're lost or something if we don't go home."

Miss Blake surreptitiously gathered her work together and slipped it into her bag. "Yes, we must scamper," she exclaimed, as she turned to help Nan on with her coat.

"Dear, dear, what a gorgeous hat!" exclaimed Mrs. Newton, as the girl set it carelessly upon her head.

Nan looked sheepish. "I'm glad you like it!" she ventured clumsily.

Mrs. Newton did not respond that she had not said she liked it. She busied herself with Miss Blake and her wraps, and replied merely, "It's a remarkable gay affair."

Then she kissed the governess "Good-night," and saw both her and Nan safely to the door.

The two hastened across the street to see which could get out of the wind first.

"I beat!" panted the girl, as she stood in the vestibule and saw Miss Blake breathlessly climb the last step.

"Yes, you beat! Fair and square!" admitted the governess as Delia let them in, chattering and shivering, from the chilly air.

"Who'll beat now, going upstairs?" screamed Nan.

Miss Blake made a dash for the first step and the two went flying up in a perfect whirl of laughter and fun.

Delia had forgotten to light the gas in Nan's room and the girl stumbled about blindly, crashing into the furniture and casting off her coat and hat in her old headlong fashion, not stopping to think of all Miss Blake's warnings on the subject, but just hurrying to get down stairs and "beat" the governess in another race.

"Clean hands! Smooth hair, and a neat dress for dinner!" sang out the governess gayly.

Nan shrugged her shoulders in the dark and made a lunge at the mantelpiece for a match. She struck it and lit the gas, swinging off to the washstand as soon as it was done.

Suddenly Miss Blake heard a shriek, a rush of feet across the floor, and then Nan's voice exclaiming "Great Scott!" in a tone that was a cross between a laugh and a cry.

She did not wait a moment but hurried instantly to the girl's door.

Nan was standing beside the gas fixture, and in her hand was her cherished hat—a ruined mass of smoldering felt and charred plumage.

"Nan!" exclaimed Miss Blake, horrified at the sight.

"I know it! Isn't it awful! I just slung it on the globe as I always do, and—and—when I lit the gas I forgot all about it, and it was ablaze in a minute. Don't say a word! I know you've told me hundreds of times not to put it there. But I forgot, and—O dear! what'll I wear on my head the rest of the winter? But it is too funny!"

Miss Blake tried to look stern.

"I'm heartily sorry you've lost your hat, Nan," she said, kindly, without a hint of reproach in her voice. "You were so fond of it. I'm really very sorry, dear!"

Nan checked her laughter. She let the hat fall to the floor. A sudden impulse seized her, and she strode up the governess and took her by the shoulders.

"You're a real dear not to say 'I told you so!'" she cried. "And you haven't jeered at me, though I know you hated the hat from the start. And now I'm going to tell you something—two things! First: I'm never going to hang up my clothes on the gas again, honestly! And second: I hated the old thing, too. The minute I bought it I hated it, and I've hated it ever since."

Miss Blake looked up, and their eyes met.

"Good for you, Nan," she said, standing on her tip-toes to pat the girl approvingly on the head. "Good for you! And now it's my turn to confess. Wait a minute!"

She flew out of the room, and before Nan fairly knew she had gone she was back again, and in her hand was a huge milliner's box.

"I couldn't help it!" she cried, half apologetically. "I got it that day, just to please myself—and now you'll wear it, won't you, dear? It's very simple, but it is of the best, and it will match your coat, you see."

She untied the string, lifted the sheets of tissue-paper, and displayed what even Nan had to admit was a beautiful hat.

The girl looked at it in silence for a moment; then she ducked down

impulsively, and gave the governess a quick, shy kiss upon the cheek.

"Thank you," she said, huskily, with a sort of gulp, and then she ran out of the room as fast as her feet would carry her.

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTMAS

"This is to be a German Christmas," Miss Blake said, "and we're going to celebrate it on Christmas eve. Of all the different customs I've seen I like the German the best. It is so jolly and freundlich, as they say over there."

So on Christmas eve the library doors were thrown open for the first time in days and days, and there stood the most glorious tree that Nan had ever seen. It was decked out with a hundred glistening things and laden down with red apples, yellow oranges, and pounds and pounds of peppermint candy, and barley-sugar figures, pretty to see and delicious to eat, to say nothing of Marzipan, to which the girl was introduced for the first time, and which she found altogether fascinating. Innumerable candles burned gayly among the spreading boughs, and at the very top hovered an angel with outspread, shimmering wings, her hands bearing a garland of glistening tinsel, and her garments ablaze with gold and silver decoration. Grown girl as she was, Nan was delighted. It was all so new and strange; so different from anything she had ever experienced before.

Beside the tree were tables spread with white cloths, and upon these lay the presents, and wonderful presents they proved. Miss Blake and Delia had outdone themselves, and Nan's table was a sight to behold. It seemed to her it held everything she had ever expressed a wish for—except a bicycle, of course.

A pocket-kodak from Miss Blake, a banjo from her father, skates from Delia, she had longed for just such a new pair, and innumerable other articles bearing no giver's name, but coming, every one, from the same generous source Nan knew well enough. She absolutely lost her head in the delight of possessing such an array of treasures.

Her own little offerings seemed to her poor and mean in comparison with this display; but Miss Blake's eyes actually filled with grateful tears at the sight of the half-dozen linen handkerchiefs the girl had marked for her with so much trouble and at the cost of so many hours of recreation, and Delia hugged her rapturously at the sight of the gorgeous dress-pattern that Nan had selected for her "all alone by herself," and that had come out of the saving of more than a half-year's allowance of precious pocket-money.

"Now, Nan!" said Miss Blake, when the first excitement had somewhat subsided, "there is one more surprise that Delia and Mr. Turner and I have planned for you, and as I expect it to arrive at any moment now, and as it is pretty big I want you to help clear away these tables to give it lots of room to move about in. We want to get everything out of the way and all the presents safely stowed aside upstairs so nothing will be broken. While we are going back and forth you may guess what it is, if you like."

"A bicycle?" ventured Nan, striding upstairs with her kodak in one arm and a bundle of books in the other.

"No, it's not a bicycle. Guess again. I'll give you two more," answered the governess, following after her with her load.

"I know what I want next to a bicycle."

"What?"

"I don't like to say."

"Why?"

"Well, you know," hesitated the girl, "if I said what it was, and if what you've got turned out something different, you might feel disappointed because you might think I did."

Miss Blake smiled. "That's a generous thought, Nan," she said; "but I give you free leave to speak out."

Even now the girl hesitated, and stood awkwardly balancing herself against the baluster-rail. "Even if you wanted to you couldn't give it to me," she blurted out, at length.

"Why?" repeated Miss Blake.

"Because—oh, because—it wouldn't come," she cried, with a rueful laugh.

"Now that sounds ominous," exclaimed the governess, as she and Nan started on their last trip. "It sounds as if you wanted a horse, or something of that sort, that might prove balky."

"No, it isn't a horse. But it's balky enough, if that's all."

"Then tell me why it wouldn't come?"

Nan let her armful of gifts fall on her counterpane in a heap. "Oh, because—because—its mothers don't approve of me. What I want is a party, so there! and I couldn't have one because, even if my father could afford it, no one would come. Grace Ellis wouldn't, nor Mary Brewster, nor any of those girls I'd want. They turn up their noses at me because they think I don't know how to behave. Once Louie Hawes spoke to me and I liked her, but the next time I saw her she looked the other way, and I suppose some one had told her something she didn't approve of. So she wouldn't come either—no matter how much I asked her, and of course I wouldn't ask her at all. Mrs. Andrews up the street asked me to Ruth's party last winter, but I heard their girl tell Delia that she did it because she had known my mother and felt obliged to, so I wouldn't go. I couldn't after that, you know. I did go to the Buckstone twins' party, but all the other girls got off in corners and laughed and talked, and I was left out and had to shift for myself. So I went and talked to John Gardiner and Harley Morris and those, and of course we got on first-rate—we always do, for if I can't dance I can skate, and the boys got me to promise I'd go with them the next good ice, and we got talking about other things, and I never thought anything about the girls any more until Mrs. Buckstone came up and said, 'I'm sorry, my dear, to break up this pleasant group, but we can't permit you to monopolize our young gentlemen. The rest of the young ladies are waiting for partners.' Then I knew I had got myself into a scrape, for Mrs. Buckstone was dreadfully icy and the girls were furious. So you see no one would come."

Miss Blake caught up a stray lock of hair at the girl's temple and tucked it back into place, smoothed the ribbon upon her "best dress" collar, and said tenderly:

"Well, that will all be made right to-night, I guess. Come, take my hand, and

let's fly down stairs, and be ready to receive, for you've got your wish—there's the bell!—and your party is coming in."

They met the first comers on the stairs, and had to hurry past them to avoid getting caught by a second installment. After that the guests came quick and fast, and Nan had all she could do to welcome them and wonder dimly in between how things were to be started, so that everybody should have a good time.

But, bless you! She might have saved herself the trouble, for Miss Blake simply set things going without any bother at all, and before Nan realized what was happening, she saw the governess and big John Gardiner leading in a lively game, while the music of a piano and some violins, which were hidden away out of sight, fell upon her delighted ear. She followed the sound, and it took her to the glass extension, which, to her astonishment, was all alight, and fragrant with flowering plants and towering palms. The "old trunks and things" that had littered the place were gone, and in their stead was all this soft greenness and bloom, while from above hung graceful lanterns, sending out a tender light that made the leaves look shadowy and waxen, and gave the spot a peculiar air of mystery and grace.

She found Louie Hawes and Ruth Andrews hidden away in a snug corner behind a screening rubber-tree. They were apparently deep in conversation when she came up, but at sight of her they fell suddenly silent and looked embarrassed and ill at ease. For a moment Nan was at a loss what to do. Then, all at once, Miss Blake's rule for etiquette flashed across her mind:

"When you don't know how to act, Nan, do something honest and kind, and that will be sure to be right."

She told herself that perhaps after all, the girls had not been talking about her, and said to them pleasantly:

"Do you like it away back here? It's rather out of the way of the games; but don't you want to play?"

"Oh, yes; by and by," stammered Ruth, awkwardly. "It's awfully pretty in this conservatory, and Lu and I got in here and couldn't get away. One wants to sit still and just enjoy it. I think I never saw such dainty lanterns."

The conversation seemed on the point of coming to a standstill, but Nan

plunged in again, her sense of being hostess spurring her on.

"I guess they're some Miss Blake brought with her from China, or somewhere. She has been around the world, and has collected any number of beautiful things. Some of them are perfectly fine."

"Oh, I think she herself is one of the loveliest things!" cried Ruth, enthusiastically. "She has a darling face. One wants to kiss her, she's so dear!"

"Mamma says she used to know her years ago at school," said Louie. "She says she is one of the finest characters she knows. She was delighted to have me come when Miss Blake asked me to your party."

"Yes, it was awfully nice of you to think of us," put in Ruth, laboriously.

Again the conversation threatened to flag. But here was Nan's opportunity to do something honest, and she did it.

"Oh, don't thank me. I didn't think of you," she returned bluntly; "that is, I didn't know anything at all about the party myself until a little while ago. Miss Blake did it all. I don't know how in the world she ever happened to ask just the ones I wanted, though."

Ruth and Louie exchanged glances. Then they laughed.

"Well, if you didn't think of us," they said, "you wanted us, so it's nice of you all the same."

That broke the ice, and it wasn't five minutes before all three were sitting together and chatting as comfortably as if they had been on the most intimate terms of friendship for years, and it was only Nan's sense of her responsibility as hostess that dragged her away at last.

"Miss Blake will wonder where we are. Won't you come into the other room? Besides you can't enjoy being cooped up in this little corner when the fun is going on outside."

"Oh, but we do enjoy it!" protested Ruth. "It's giving us a chance to get acquainted with you. And we want you to promise us that you'll go skating with us day after to-morrow. Please do!"

"Of course we know how you skate," declared Louie, "and we'll be so proud to have such a champion in our club. Say you'll come! And don't hold it against us that we haven't asked you before."

Nan's heart leaped. "Why, I'll love to," she said with a frankness equal to Louie's own, adding in a tone quite new to her, "if Miss Blake will let me."

Grace Ellis and Mary Brewster lifted their eyebrows in surprise as the three girls appeared in the doorway, chatting so intimately and being so plainly on the best of terms.

"Dear me!" whispered Grace, "what's come over Lu and Ruth? They actually look as if they liked her."

"Don't you believe it," declared Mary sourly. "They're here at her party and they can't exactly shove her off in her own house, but it will be 'for one night only.' Now you see! They won't want her around now any more than they have before—a rowdyish thing like that."

She had scarcely replaced her bitter expression by one more suited to the time and place when Louie came over to where they were, her face wreathed in smiles, and her arm flung impulsively around Nan's waist.

"O girls!" she cried. "Isn't it nice? Ruth and I have made Nan promise that she'll come skating with us day after to-morrow, and she's going to join the club. Won't it put a feather in our cap to have such a member?"

Mary knit her brows and Grace smiled icily.

"Very nice," they responded coldly.

Nan's eyes flashed, and then suddenly lowered. "Oh! I didn't give a definite promise," she returned quietly, and with unexpected dignity. "I said if Miss Blake would let me. I'm afraid she won't. I hurt my ankle not long ago, and I haven't dared exercise it much since. Probably Miss Blake will think I ought to save it for a while yet."

"But you were out on Saturday," protested Ruth. "I saw you. Your ankle is only an excuse. You skate so easily, it couldn't be a strain."

Grace looked at Mary with a curious expression in her eyes, but neither of them added her voice to the other girls' solicitations, and the little group stood there in what threatened to become a painful silence when Nan felt a light touch on her shoulder, and, turning around, discovered Miss Blake standing at her elbow.

"O Nan!" she said, smiling brightly at the other girls, as if to excuse herself for not including them in her familiarity, "won't you please go and see if you can't entertain that poor young Joe Tracy? I've done my best, but he won't come out of his shell for all I can do, and I think your hearty, breezy way is just what he needs. He looks so forlorn, tucked away 'all alone by himself,' as you would say."

She patted the girl affectionately on the shoulder as she sent her on her way, saying heartily, as she passed out of ear-shot: "I always feel perfectly secure when I can fall back on Nan to help me out with shy, sensitive people. She has such a great, warm heart that it seems to thaw their stiffness right out of them."

Louie threw her arm impulsively about the governess' waist:

"You're such a dear!" she cried, demonstratively; "and I'm over and over obliged to you for letting me come here and get acquainted with Nan. I think she is ever so nice, and it's a shame that we haven't known each other before."

Miss Blake gave the girl a hearty smile.

"Better late than never," she returned gayly.

Grace Ellis reddened and Mary Brewster tilted her chin superciliously, but they both turned their eyes suddenly in the direction of the other end of the room as Ruth Andrews grasped Miss Blake's arm, and whispered excitedly:

"For goodness' sake, do look over there! Nan has got Joe Tracy laughing already."

Sure enough, the lad's pale, sensitive face was all aglow, and, as he listened to what the girl was saying, his eyes brightened and his mouth danced up at the corners in a laugh of genuine appreciation. Nan was gesticulating in her own graphic fashion, and the girls could easily follow her by watching her expression and her vivid pantomime.

Plainly she was describing the sleight-of-hand performance to her bashful friend, and Miss Blake could readily see that she was not sparing herself in the recital.

She raised her hands to her head and pretended to take off her hat, which she made a show of reluctantly surrendering to some one who received it with a profound bow. Then she suddenly leaned forward, as if stumbling on something, and the next moment she held up her hand and seemed to be regarding some article upon it with an exaggeratedly doleful expression that was such an exact imitation of the renowned wizard's that Miss Blake recognized it at once, and laughed as heartily as Joe Tracy himself. By this time the girls were thoroughly interested, and kept their eyes fixed on Nan so that they might not lose one gesture nor the slightest change of expression.

"O dear! Those Buckstone girls! Why do they get in my way," lamented Louie Hawes, "I wish they wouldn't crowd round her so. First thing they know she'll notice them, and stop short off and won't tell any more."

"Hush, Lu! There go John Gardiner and Harley Morris!"

But Nan was in full swing now, and too absorbed in her story to be aware of the little court that had gathered around her. Joe Tracy's eyes followed her every movement with greedy interest, and when she at length imitated the flapping wings of the clucking hen he simply shouted with laughter and clapped his hands vigorously, quite lost to all but his appreciation and sense of the fun of the thing.

It seemed to remind him of something similar in his own experience, for he immediately started in on a description of his own, and Nan sat listening in her turn with rapt attention. Every now and then a shout of laughter would come from the group in the distant corner, and the girls longed to go over and join in the fun.

"Listen to John Gardiner 'haw-haw!'" cried Mary Brewster.

"Don't the Buckstone twins give funny little giggles?" interposed Louie.

"Why can't we go over and listen too?" suggested Ruth.

So they all, even Grace Ellis and Mary Brewster, went softly toward the alluring corner, and were just in time to catch the end of Joe Tracy's story, which

was so witty that John Gardiner swayed back and forward with delight and shook the room with his hearty laugh, and the Buckstone girls' giggle joined in like a shrill accompaniment.

It had all come about so naturally that Joe Tracy did not realize that he had been orating to a roomful, and he did not seem to mind it at all when he discovered that he and Nan had had an audience. His shyness was quite gone and his face was radiant with enjoyment.

The piano and violins started in again, and Miss Blake was heard inviting bulky Tom Porter to escort her down to supper.

Of course, Nan had known all along that there would be something to eat, but she had not dreamed of such a spread as this.

It made her eyes shine and her cheeks glow to hear such whispered words as these:

"Yes, indeed! Aren't you?"

"Far and away the jolliest one yet!"

"Do get me some more salad, won't you, please? It's the best I ever ate!"

"Up-and-down jolly time. A fellow likes to be made feel at home like this."

Miss Blake, who without seeming to be watching any one, saw that every one was well supplied, kept a constant eye on Nan, and at last, on the strength of what she discovered, thought it was time to interfere.

"Now sit down, my dear," she commanded softly, coming up behind the girl and touching her gently on the arm. "You are getting all tired out and having nothing to eat yourself. Every one is served and the waiters will look out for the rest. I have saved a place for you in the corner beside Louie and Ruth. So go now and rest and eat and enjoy yourself. You must not be the only one at your party who is neglected."

Nan gave her a grateful look and dashed off toward Louie and Ruth who were beckoning wildly to her to come. They had so much to tell that they almost forgot their plates in their eagerness to talk.

"Grace Ellis is just wild to come over here," confided Louie.

"But Mary Brewster won't let her. Mary just bosses Grace about till I think it's positively disgraceful," whispered Ruth.

John Gardiner sauntered up.

"Got everything you want?" he asked in a manful effort to be attentive.

"No!" replied Nan, promptly, with a twinkle in her eye. "I want a bicycle, please. Won't you get me one?" and she held out her plate as if to have it supplied with the desired article.

The tall fellow laughed. "With pleasure," he said, and took the plate and marched off with it.

"O dear! I hadn't finished my salad!" lamented Nan, looking regretfully after him.

Louie managed to telegraph their dilemma to Harley Morris, who promptly responded to it by appearing with another plate of salad and a dish of sandwiches. He did not go away after Nan was served, but stayed on and led in the laugh when John Gardiner reappeared with a tiny ice cream bicycle daintily poised against a mound of jelly, which he presented to Nan with a low bow full of mock dignity, saying:

"You have only to command and you are obeyed. Here is your wheel, and may it go as fast as if it were geared to a hundred."

"Thank you," replied Nan, accepting the joke and the plate at the same time. "It'll go fast enough, no fear of that. Eating is never up-hill work with me, and this has nothing to do but coast, you see," and she swallowed the first mouthful down with a jolly laugh.

"Look over at Mary Brewster! She's trying her best to pretend she ignores us," whispered Ruth, but not so low but that the young fellows could hear.

"Is one who ignores an ignor—amus?" asked Harley Morris, grinning broadly at his own witticism.

"Yes," promptly answered Louie. "And in this case especially so, for she doesn't know what she's losing."

There were more games after supper, and last of all came the jolliest part of the whole evening, an old-fashioned Virginia reel, Miss Blake and John Gardiner leading and the rest following with the heartiest of zest. In and out they tripped and up and down they ran till all were fairly out of breath. Then suddenly Miss Blake seized John's hand, and away they sped toward the library, the rest following helter-skelter, where the Christmas tree stood all lighted and ablaze.

"All hands round!" shouted John, as they formed a ring and pranced gayly about the fragrant tree.

Then up rose the governess' cheery voice, singing the dear old Christmas carol that is always new:

"Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled."

And the rest joined in and made the house re-echo with their hearty chorus:

"Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th' angelic host proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

It seemed to melt the hearts of every one there, for the voices that presently said "Good-night," were full of peace and good-will, and even Mary Brewster's had a ring of sincerity in it as she murmured:

"Good-night, Miss Blake! Good-night, Nan. I've had a charming evening, and I hope we'll know each other better after this."

CHAPTER XII

SMALL CLOUDS

It proved an ideal Christmas day. Clear and cold and spotlessly white, for the snow fell heavily all through the night, and covered everything with a mantle of glistening frost.

Nan looked out of her window, and gave a gasp of delight as she saw the shimmering, rime-covered trees, with the sunshine striking full upon them and bringing out sparks of light from every branch and twig. Whatever sounds there were in the streets came to her softened and mellowed over the snow-laden ground, and as she listened she felt a great wave of inward happiness surge into her heart and make the possibilities of life seem very different to her from anything she had ever dreamed of before. The snow, the sound of chiming Christmas bells, worked upon her, and made her feel that it would be easy to be good, and that her days ought all to be like this; that she would make them so, serene and melodious, every one a festival.

She heard Miss Blake stirring in the next room, and tore herself away from her dreams to begin the day well with a prompt appearance at the breakfast table.

"It seems to me that if father were only here I wouldn't have a thing left in the world to wish for," she said happily, spearing a gold-brown scallop with her fork and eating it with relish.

Miss Blake put down her coffee-cup just as she was carrying it to her lips, and her face wore the curious expression that Nan had so often noticed there and could never account for. But the girl was too busy with her own thoughts to regard it to-day, and the governess hastened to respond:

"Then next year, please God, you will be quite entirely happy. And a year is not long to wait."

"No, indeed!" broke in Nan. "Why, I never knew the time to go as quickly as it does lately. It doesn't seem any while at all since you came, and you've been here over two months. Just let's think what we'll do next Christmas, when father is home. To begin with, I'm going down to the dock with Mr. Turner, so that when the ship comes in he'll see me the first thing. Then we'll come up here, and you and Delia will be waiting to welcome him at the door, and there'll be decorations and things and—"

"You forget, dear Nan," Miss Blake said, gently interrupting her, "that I shall not be here then."

The girl's face fell and the light died out of her eyes. Then she brightened again suddenly.

"Oh, you must, you must! Why, my father will want to see you. Of course you'll be here. You'll have to stay and meet him. You can surely do as much as that. You don't know how dear my father is! And so handsome and good! Why, if you once saw him you couldn't possibly be afraid. He's simply the kindest man in the world, and when he smiles at you, you just love him—you can't help it."

Miss Blake herself smiled faintly. "I am sure he is all you say, Nan," she replied. "But listen! There go the first bells. We must hurry or we shall be late for church."

The girl rose and made her way rather slowly to the stairs. Somehow she felt less light-hearted than she had done a few minutes before. What was it? She could not understand. The world had seemed all joy and sunshine to her a quarter of an hour since, and now there was a cloud over her heart that dimmed for her even the radiant prospect of her father's return.

"I feel just like sitting down and having a good cry—if I ever did such a thing," she said to herself as she fastened on her new hat and tried to be glad that it was so becoming.

But as she and Miss Blake walked along the streets in the midst of a crowd of happy, chatting church-goers her spirits rose, and she nodded gayly to the Buckstone girls and Harley Morris, and broke into quite a ripple of laughter as John Gardiner overtook them and asked if the wheel he had brought her the night before had proved a good one.

"Oh, it was immense!" answered Nan, merrily.

The services were beautiful, and Nan entered into them heart and soul, listening to the sermon with rapt attention and letting her fresh young voice swell out jubilantly in the dear, familiar carols as she had never done before.

As they went out of church Miss Blake said to her softly:

"You won't mind going on without me, will you, Nan? I have a little errand to do before I go home. Tell Delia I'll be back in time for dinner."

"I have a little errand to do"

"But why can't I go with you?" demanded the girl.

"Because it—it wouldn't be best. I will explain it to you later. Now I must go. Tell Delia what I said. But if I should happen to be delayed don't wait, and don't —that is, tell Delia not to worry. Good-bye!" and she was around the corner before Nan could say another word.

Ruth Andrews joined her and they walked along together, falling at once into the easy terms of familiarity that had sprung up between them the night before.

"O Nan!" began Ruth abruptly, "you aren't going to be such a goose as to back out of joining the skating club just because—well, because Mary Brewster's such a prig? She isn't the whole membership, not by a good deal, and the rest of us count on your coming. Why, you'll be a tremendous acquisition. And the first meet is to-morrow. Won't you come?"

Nan hesitated. "It isn't because I'm a goose," she said at length. "That is, I mean—oh, I can't explain it, but really, Ruth, I'd rather not join. I wouldn't have a good time myself, and I'd only be spoiling Mary Brewster's pleasure. It's no use. I know she's not the whole club, and I really think the rest of you would like to have me, but somehow, knowing she didn't want me, would spoil the whole thing and I'd just be miserable the entire time."

Ruth shook her head as if at the hopeless state of Nan's obstinacy, but she broke in again immediately with a new suggestion:

"Besides, I don't think you can be at all sure she feels that way now. Why, I myself heard her telling you and Miss Blake that she hoped you and she would know each other better after this."

"Well, so we do," said Nan, whimsically. "I know now for a certainty that she doesn't want me, and she knows that I won't go where I'm not wanted, and if that isn't getting acquainted with a vengeance I'd like to know what is."

Ruth laughed ruefully, but broke in, with sudden inspiration: "O dear! You're as proud as a peacock, Nan Cutler. Louie will be dreadfully disappointed, for she told me to tell you she counted on you to take her out. She's never skated much,

you know, and she's wobbly on her ankles. She's afraid of the teachers, and she doesn't like to ask the boys, because they hate to have a girl hanging on to them, and the rest of us have as much as we can do to attend to our own affairs."

Nan's face lit up with quick pleasure. "Oh, if Louie needs me I'll come in a jiffy. If you see her, won't you tell her I'll be only too happy to teach her everything I know?"

"Then we'll call for you at ten sharp to-morrow morning," announced the wily Ruth, and before Nan could change her mind she had slipped off and left her standing with her word given at her steps.

"Where's Miss Blake?" asked Delia, opening the door in answer to Nan's ring and seeing her alone.

"Gone off somewhere on an errand or something. I don't know. She said she'd be home for dinner, but if she wasn't, not to worry and not to wait."

Delia wrung her hands. "O Nan, child, why did you let her away from you? She's gone to the Duffys; I know she has. And they've scarlet fever in the house. The milkman told me so this morning at mass. She's been going there for weeks, doing for them and carrying them money and things. The youngest of the children had been sick all the week, and now she's down with the fever. If I'd only thought to tell her this morning! But my head was so full of the breakfast and clearing up a bit after last night that I forgot. Oh, why did you let her away from you?"

"How could I know?" cried Nan, almost savagely. "I never knew she went to such places! What has she got to do with the Duffys, anyhow? Why hasn't somebody stopped her from going, I should like to know? She's no business to run such risks. The first thing you know she'll catch the fever, and then—and then—"

She turned her back on Delia, and the next moment was flying upstairs two steps at a time.

"What are you going to do, Nan?" cried the woman.

"Go after her and bring her home!" shouted the girl.

But Delia barred the way when she tried to come down again. "You can't do that, Nan," she protested. "It would only make things worse. Just wait, and see if she comes home to dinner."

"No; I want to go now!" persisted the girl.

"But don't you see it would only worry her?" insisted Delia.

Nan considered. "Well, I'll wait till dinner," she admitted; "but if she isn't here by then I'll start."

She sat down by the parlor window and commenced to watch. It seemed to her that every one in town came into sight but the one she was looking for with such curious anxiety. Suddenly her heart gave a great leap. She flew to the front door and flung it wide.

"She's come! She's come!" she shouted to Delia, exultantly.

"Nan, Nan!" cried Miss Blake, hearing the joyous ring in her voice and seeing the glad light in her eyes. "What is the matter? Has anything happened? Has—has any one come?" As she spoke her lips grew white.

"Yes! You're the matter! You've happened! You've come! I tell you I'm glad! And don't you ever go to those Duffys again, where there's scarlet fever, and you can die of it!"

Miss Blake sank upon the hall-chair and held her hand to her heart.

"Why, what's the matter?" gasped Nan, frightened at the sight of her white face.

"Nothing, dear, nothing! I was startled—that was all."

"But who startled you?" persisted the girl.

"Not you. It is all over now."

"You see," Nan hastened to explain, "the milkman told Delia there was scarlet fever at the Duffys, and we thought you had gone there, and it scared us to death."

"But I told you to tell Delia not to worry."

"Much good telling would do! Besides, you didn't tell me not to worry. Of course, she'd worry anyhow and so would I. But is it true? Have the Duffys got scarlet fever?"

Miss Blake hesitated. Then she said, truthfully, "Yes, they have, Nan. Little Mary Ellen has it. But you need not be afraid. I would not come back into this house without taking every precaution."

Nan cast on her an indignant look. "And you think that's what made us worry?" she asked, and turned on her heel and tramped upstairs in high displeasure. But she had scarcely got as far as the landing when she felt a hand upon her arm.

"Nan, forgive me. I didn't think so—really. I know you had my safety in mind. But I have been very careful all along. And now I have a good nurse for the child, and I think she will pull through."

"But promise me you won't go there any more," demanded Nan, sternly, only half mollified.

"I promise gladly. They don't need me now, and it would be wicked to take an unnecessary risk."

"Well, I should think so. Now, remember, you've promised. O Delia! Is dinner ready?"

All through the meal Miss Blake was aware of Nan's eyes fixed upon her in a peculiarly scrutinizing gaze. She was puzzled, but asked no questions, sure that, sooner or later, the girl would disclose the reason herself. At length it came.

"Does your head ache, Miss Blake?"

"No, dear; why?"

"Because your cheeks are pretty red, and I thought you might not be feeling very well."

"Probably the brisk wind has made them so, for I feel very well indeed."

"Oh!"

But at twilight Miss Blake came upon her bending double over a volume of the Encyclopaedia, and a glance showed her what article the girl was studying. It was that headed "Scarlet fever."

The book was shut with a clap, and Nan stalked off to replace it in the book-case without a word. She came back in a moment, however, and stood before Miss Blake like a grim young Fate, her dark eyes full of care and worry.

"See here! You've got to take something. There's no use fooling with a sickness like that. Your cheeks are red, and I shouldn't wonder but your throat is sore. When you came home you kind of went to pieces on the hall chair, and I guess your head is aching this minute. I don't say you've got scarlet fever, but—it looks mighty like it, that's all. Now don't be scared. I'll take care of you. I can, you know, if I put my mind to it."

Miss Blake dared not hug her, though it was precisely what she longed to do. She dared not laugh at her, either, for that would give lasting offense when Nan was so deadly in earnest. What she did was to say brightly, but in quite as off-hand and matter-of-fact way as the girl herself had spoken:

"I'm sure you could. But you see I am perfectly well. Honestly, I haven't a pain nor an ache, and if my cheeks are still red it's because the skin has been frost-nipped. I give you my word of honor I will go to a doctor if I feel the slightest symptom."

Her tone was so heartily sincere that Nan could not doubt her. She drew a long breath of relief, as if a heavy load had been lifted from her heart, and threw herself upon the lounge with a contented sigh.

"Just think," she said. "Last night this time I didn't even know I was going to have a party, and now it's all over and done with, and Ruth and Louie want me to go skating with them to-morrow. It's been the happiest Christmas I ever spent, with the exception of the Duffy part, and I wish it could last forever."

"I think some of it will," replied Miss Blake in her gentle voice, as Delia came to light the lamps.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE ICE

There was a great crowd on the lake. It was perfect skating weather, and every one who had skates and could use them, had come to enjoy the advantage of the first real ice of the season. The banks were thronged with onlookers, and it was a great inspiration to the expert ones to know that their performances would be watched and commended by such an audience as this.

"Goodness, girls! Did you ever see such a crush?" asked Louie feverishly, hurrying her pace, as she, Nan, and Ruth neared the spot.

"There won't be room to move," announced Nan, adding with a laugh, "much less to fall down in."

"All the better for me! I'll put on my skates and let the crowd push me round. I'm never too sure of myself, but in a crush like this, one can't go over, so I'm saved a heap of worry!" cried Ruth with a jolly laugh.

Nan's skates were on in a twinkling, and she longed with all her heart to be off and away. But the sight of poor Louie, struggling vainly with her refractory straps, kept her back.

"Oh, do hurry," urged Ruth excitedly.

"Did you ever see such contrary things?" gasped Louie, her cheeks crimson with cold, and the exertion of bending double in her fur jacket.

"Give them to me; I'll get them on in a jiffy," and Nan was down on her knees and the skates secured before Louie had even time to thank her with a look.

"Now, do come on!" cried Ruth, fairly dancing with eagerness.

"Oh, wait! wait! Please wait!" pleaded Louie. "This is the first time I've been on the ice this year, and I feel so nervous I could scream."

John Gardiner spun past with a nod and a flourish, but a moment later wheeled about and came skimming up to where they were standing, saying briskly:

"Jolly day, isn't it? Ice in first-rate shape, too. Too many people, but after a few of them get tired out it will be all right. Don't suppose they'd care to stand aside and let us show them what skating is, eh, Nan?"

Nan laughed. "Perhaps they wouldn't like the figures we'd cut. I'm not sure I would myself. Pride goes before a fall, and I'd rather be a bit humble and keep on my feet."

"As though you'd ever take a tumble," cried the young fellow with great scorn. "Oh, I say, come along and let's do a turn or two, as we did on the Steamer last year. Don't you remember what a rousing cheer we got? Let's try it again."

For an instant Nan's blood leaped. She liked to do daring things, and she loved applause. John Gardiner was as much at home on his skates as she was on hers, and they were singularly at ease together. Moreover, way down in her heart was a sort of lurking pride at being especially chosen by this favorite among the "fellows" and being seen with him in his attractive suit and his graceful "Norwegians" that were the envy and admiration of all the other fellows in town. It certainly was a temptation, and for a moment Nan yielded to it. Then she looked at Louie's anxious face and shook her head.

"I'm heaps obliged," she said. "But I guess I'd better not to-day. It wasn't much harm at the Steamer, for there was no crowd there to speak of; but here it's so public, I'm afraid it wouldn't look well."

John threw back his head and laughed.

"As if you cared how things look!" he cried, frankly.

Nan's cheeks reddened furiously. She looked down and drew a figure on the ice with the tip of her skate. Her confusion could not escape him, and he caught himself up instantly. "I mean, you've always been so sensible, you know. You haven't cared for tattle or nonsense. That's what's made us like you so. A fellow hasn't had to be on the continual jump for fear your hat wasn't on straight or your hair was coming down. You're as plucky as a boy, and it's like having another jolly, good fellow about when you're around. You're not going back on all that?

You aren't going to turn girly-girly? You aren't going to be a Nancy, are you?"

She lifted her head with a jerk. "No; I'm going to stay plain Nan," she retorted. "But I can't go out with you this morning, John—at least not now. Later I may take a turn if you're willing."

He saw that there was no shaking her resolution, and turned away with a frown and a sigh.

"Very well. If you won't, you won't. I'll look you up by and by, though, and maybe you'll have changed your mind by then," and he was off like a flash, his flying feet seeming scarcely to touch the ice, and his long, curved, glistening skates flashing back the sunlight from their dazzling nickel blades.

Louie clutched Nan's arm. "Oh, I'm so glad you didn't go!" she said, agitatedly. "I'm all of a tremble, and I'm sure I'll slip if you don't hold on to me."

So Nan held on to her, and slowly piloted her this way and that, urging her gently to strike out alone, and patiently waiting until she had the courage to try. Ruth darted hither and thither, minding it as little when she went down herself as when she was the cause of others doing so, and always skating with an awkward energy that was refreshing to behold.

"O Nan!" panted Louie, "how did you learn?"

"By getting up whenever I fell down," declared Nan, succinctly.

Ruth came toward them with arms flying like windmills.

"O girls!" she gasped; but just here her feet went from under her, and she sat squarely upon the ice with a great plump. "O girls!" she repeated, not a bit abashed and without trying to get up, "Mary Brewster and Grace are over there, and they just asked John to take them out—at least Mary did—and he said he was ever so sorry, but his 'card was full,' and they are simply furious."

"Get up!" commanded Nan, with lips that would twitch in spite of her efforts to control them. "You'll catch your death of cold!"

Ruth grasped her outstretched hand and struggled to her feet. "How are you getting on, Lu?" she asked, shaking the snow from her skirts.

"I think I'm doing a little better. Don't you, Nan?" appealed Louie, tremulously.

"Why, yes. You'll skate as well as any one after you've once gained courage," Nan returned cheerfully, and took up the slow, tedious task again of steering her laboriously this way and that, Louie meanwhile clinging to her arm and uttering little panic-stricken shrieks that irritated Nan beyond measure. No one could conceive how hard it was for the girl not to desert her clinging companion. She knew in her heart that Louie would never master the knack unless she were made to rely upon herself. As long as she could depend on Nan's support she would not make any effort to use her own energy, nor would she exert her will-power to force herself to strike out alone. The ice was in perfect condition to-day, but it would not long remain so with such a crowd cutting it to pieces, and the sun already thawing the powdered snow and threatening to do more damage to-morrow. If Nan lost her chance now she might not have another so good in weeks to come, for the weather was always uncertain and the holidays were short. Everything seemed to urge her to break loose from her self-imposed martyrdom and go her way rejoicing; the crisp air that sang in her ears and filled her with a sense of glorious exhilaration; the shimmering sunlight on the ice that seemed to scud before her and invite her to join in the race; the knowledge that she was in reality doing Louie a doubtful service by staying beside her, and, last of all, the look of disappointment in John's eyes as he shot past them at intervals, and saw that Nan was not yet ready to capitulate. A sort of war with herself was waging in her mind; her sense of duty against her preferences; her long established habits against her newly found resolutions. She had resolved to be like other girls in the future. It was like headlong, impulsive Nan to make a resolve like this, and never stop to realize that it was only the exaggeration of herself that proved objectionable; that it would be as impossible for her to be sedate and silent and serious as for a dashing dandelion to become a dainty buttercup.

To her it seemed as if Miss Blake and the rest—were demanding of her just such a metamorphosis and she had been trying—she really had—to recast herself in the mold she thought they exacted. And now here came John Gardiner, surely the nicest and most mannerly young fellow she knew, and the one whom even Miss Blake was pleased to call "a perfect gentleman"—here came John Gardiner, and told her that her despised characteristics were precisely the ones that made her valuable. She shook her head. It was no use; she could not understand.

"O Nan!" cried Louie, shunting along clumsily by her side and clutching her arm in desperation. "Won't you please get me over to the shore? I'm all tired out. I guess I'll go in for a bit and warm up and get rested, and then I'll come out again, may be, and take another try."

Nan assented with alacrity.

"You've made a pretty good beginning," she said with new encouragement in her voice.

"Oh, it's always the same!" wailed Louie. "Year before last I got so I could do it quite respectably, and then last year I had to learn all over again. I really thought I'd pick it up where I left off this year, but you see how it is! The very sight of the ice when I'm on skates makes me quake."

"Just force yourself to do it and you'll be surprised to see how soon you'll be skimming all over creation," advised Nan, as she unfastened her friend's skates and saw her start stiffly up the path to the Lodge.

Her heart gave a bound as she realized that she was at last alone and untrammeled. She pulled her Russian cap well into place, thrust her hands deep into her pockets, and set out for the middle of the lake, her lithe young body swaying gently forward as she was carried this way and that by her gliding feet. She looked about for John, but he was nowhere to be seen, and she concluded that he had given up expecting her and had either gone home or joined other friends. Ruth was forging about after her own peculiar fashion, getting in every one's way and under every one's feet, and enjoying it all immensely. She was perfectly self-reliant, and Nan did not feel that there was any necessity of offering assistance or even companionship to such a self-sufficient, resolute maiden, and so she set about enjoying her independence with a clear conscience. A moment later she had forgotten everything but the keen delight of the delicious exercise; the fresh current of air upon her cheeks; the sense of flashing through space "without any appreciable effort; the knowledge of her mastery of the art. She had not a shadow of fear. Instead, she felt a sort of wild exultation in her own daring, and set about doing difficult feats with an added delight in the very risk of the thing. Suddenly a shadow shot toward her from the back, caught her by the arm and went flying forward, suiting his rhythm to hers in an instant.

"Oh! heyo, John! I thought you'd gone home!" said Nan.

"Not a bit of it. Think I'd leave the ice when it's as prime as this? Not much. What under the canopy have you been about all this time? Toting Lou Hawes around when you ought to be making the best of the rarest chance you'll get this season, maybe?"

"Oh, that's all right," rejoined Nan in a matter-of-fact way. "I liked to do it—for a change. And she's a little timid."

"Well now, you're free, let's have a couple of extra good turns just to make up for lost time," and he took her hand and started off on a fine, free swing, Nan gliding beside him in such perfect accord that it seemed as if one impulse moved them both. They swung apart rejoined, and swung apart again. Then, dropping her hand John gave a curving glide to the right which took him a pace ahead of her, and she, repeating his movement, but toward the left, passed easily before him on the other side, so on and on in a sort of progressive chain, until at a sign they sped backward, reversing the order in which they had come, and reached the starting point and circled round it, clasping crossed hands and chatting gayly the while.

John saw that they had already attracted some attention, and it only made his pulses quicken. He also saw that Nan was oblivious to everything, but the mere delight of what she was doing, and he did not think it worth while to remind her that this was not the Steamer, and that if she wished to be inconspicuous, as she had suggested, she would better limit herself strictly to a commonplace gait. Instead he bent toward her, and said in a quick, low undertone, "I'll bet a quarter you've forgotten how to cut your name."

"Oh, have I?" cried Nan, the spur pricking sharply at her pride. "Want to see me do it?" and off she went accordingly, accomplishing the difficult figure without a thought of hesitation, and returning to his side laughing and triumphant.

"Now the spiral! Forward! Left foot first! Now right! Combination!"

John gave the directions in a sort of tense whisper. He was mortally afraid Nan would become conscious, and see what was going on about her. But he might have spared himself the trouble. She was absolutely blind to the crowd that had gathered about them, and all the commendation she was aware of was that which he gave her in a murmured "Good!" or "Fine!"

A wide circle had been cleared for them, and in it they and one or two other hardy souls were exhibiting their prowess, while the throng outside whispered and applauded and made comments on the different skaters and their respective skill and grace.

"There! That's the serpentine he's doing now! Isn't it pretty?"

"It must be frightfully hard to go backward like that!"

"I should think he'd fall on his head!"

"Look! See! She's starting off again! Doesn't she do it well?"

"Who is she, anyway?"

Nan had completed her figure, and was waiting at the edge of the circle for John to finish his and to come and join her. She stood well back, so that she might not interfere with the others, and thus it was that she was waked from her trance with an abrupt shock by the sound of two whispering voices, seeming almost at her ear, their murmur carried so in the chill, crystal air.

"Didn't I tell you she was a bold thing?"

"Sh! She'll hear you! She's right in front of us—only those men between."

"No she won't, either. We're too far away. Didn't I tell you Lu's and Ruth's friendship was for one night only? I knew well enough why Lu asked her to come. Any one could see through that. She wants to learn how to skate, and this was as ready a way as any to be taught, and she jumps at the chance."

"Oh, do hush! She'll hear!"

"Don't care if she does. I don't know what your opinion is, but mine is that it's positively brazen of her to do such things before a crowd like this. Dragging John Gardiner into it, too! It's a disgrace!"

"Sh, please! There he comes!"

Nan pulled herself wearily forward a step or two to meet him.

"I say, what's up? What's the matter?" he demanded anxiously, looking into her face and seeing the change it had undergone.

"Nothing! Nothing!" she reassured him quickly. "I'm tired, that's all. And I didn't realize these people were watching us. Let's get out of this. I hate the way they stare. I want to go home."

John took her by the elbow and steered for the bank.

"Won't you find Grace and Louie first? You came with them, didn't you? They won't know what's become of you."

"I don't care! I want to go home!" she repeated irritably.

They sped forward silently, and in a moment had reached the shore. Nan trembled so as she tried to unfasten her skates that John pushed her hands aside and made her submit to having him assist her.

"You've caught cold!" he said remorsefully, "I was a brute to keep urging you on. But I didn't dream you were tired. You looked so bright and well."

"I'm not tired. I haven't caught cold!" said Nan. "Don't bother about me, please. Go back and finish up your skate!"

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," rejoined he, removing his own skates. "But I've finished it up already," and he grasped her arm and tramped her off in the direction of the Park entrance with vigorous steps.

"Won't Lou and Ruth wonder?" he ventured again after a moment of silence.

"No! They don't care!" cried Nan, dismally.

"The mischief they don't!" and John gave vent to an exclamation of disbelief. "Why, Ruth was only telling me half an hour ago how good and generous you were, and Louie caught me in the Lodge and went into regular spasms over you. You're the patientest, the generousest—everythingelse-est girl she knows. I had actually to tear myself away from her raptures when I saw that you were free of her and could take a turn with me."

Nan shook her head.

"No, you're wrong, John!" she said hopelessly. "They don't like me. None of them do. It's no use. I thought Christmas eve I might make them, perhaps—but I give it up. I'm too—different!"

"Now, see here, Nan!" cried John, stopping suddenly in the middle of the path and confronting her squarely, "this change of base has come on you all of a sudden. You weren't in such a state before. You've seen something or heard something that's given you a turn. Say now, haven't you, honestly?"

Nan gulped and nodded grimly.

"I thought so. Well, now, you say you're different from the other girls, and so you are in most ways, but just at present you're doing the silliest trick I know. Going off by yourself and making people miserable all around. Do you know what a fellow would do in your place? Why, he'd go straight to the man he'd heard or seen back-biting him and he'd make him come out fair and square and own up—or shut up. 'You pays your money and you takes your choice.' That's what a fellow would do. But girls prefer to be martyrs and go about 'letting concealment prey upon their damask cheeks' and all that namby-pamby nonsense. Pshaw! I wouldn't give a rush for a girl's courage. It's all humbug."

"It isn't any such thing!" cried Nan, hastening to defend her sex. "It isn't because I'm afraid that I don't go straight up to the—the person. It's because I have too much pride. I wouldn't demean myself by letting her know I care."

"Oh, fudge! Pride! I like that! Care? Why, whoever she is, she can see that, anyhow, with half an eye. It's as plain as preaching. You came with Lu and Ruth, and were as gay and jolly as could be. Then, all of a sudden, you turn grumpy and want to go home, and say Lu and Ruth don't like you. The explanation of that is simple enough. You've heard some one saying something about you, or pretending to repeat something Lu and Ruth have said about you. There! Now haven't I hit the nail on the head?"

Nan made no reply.

"I wager I have, though," continued the young fellow, watching her closely, and drawing many of his conclusions from the evidence of her tell-tale face. "And I'd be ashamed, even if I were a girl, to let myself be worried by a thing like that. Besides, it isn't fair to Lu and Ruth. You ought to give them a chance to set themselves straight. You've no right to believe things of them till you've their

own word for it that it's true. Give them a chance, and if they act queer you can throw them over."

"But I can't ask them," burst out Nan. "It wasn't anything they said. It was about the way they feel, and if I give them a chance they may throw me over."

John laughed. "True for you. They may. But anyway, you'd have done the just thing. Whatever they did to you, you'd have played fair."

Nan thought a moment. Suddenly she turned on her heel and began to retrace her steps. "I'm going back," she said, stoutly, "to find Lu and Ruth! and—and—give them that chance."

"There! Now you're behaving like an honest man," announced John, with gusto. "One can't afford to be too perpendicular."

But before they had taken a dozen steps they came upon the two girls themselves, running breathlessly toward them.

"O Nan!" panted Louie. "What is the matter? Are you sick? Are you hurt? We couldn't find you anywhere!"

"We looked all over and got terribly nervous, and at last Mary Brewster told us you had gone home," Ruth broke in, gaspingly.

"She said John had taken you, and that you kind of walked as if you were dizzy or something. We've run all the way! Do say, are you sick?" pleaded Louie.

"Or hurt?" articulated Ruth.

John and Nan regarded each other solemnly for a moment. Then they both broke into a peal of laughter. Nan was the first to speak.

"No, I'm not sick and I wasn't hurt—the way you mean. I was a goose—that's all. I want you to forgive me."

"What for?" demanded the girls, in a breath.

"Why, for—for—making you run after me," replied Nan.

CHAPTER XIV

CHANGES

"Let's go back after luncheon," suggested Ruth as they tramped homeward.

The others assented heartily enough, and Nan was so eager to return to her sport that she did not wait for Delia to let her in at the upper door, but burst through the basement way, and ran against Miss Blake in the lower hall.

"Oh, excuse me!" she panted. "We've had a glorious time. We're going out again. Please may I have a bite of something quick, so I can run? We want to make the most of the daylight, and Lu can almost go alone."

"Certainly. Delia has everything on the table. But won't you want to run upstairs and give your face and hands a little scrub?"

Nan's forehead wrinkled, and she was on the point of uttering an exclamation of disgust. But she caught herself up, and pressing her lips together hard, flew upstairs without a word of protest. She finished her luncheon in marvelously quick time.

"If you wish to go you may be excused," her companion announced, as the last crumb was swallowed. A gleam of surprise lit upon Nan's face.

"Thank you," she said, and went her way feeling more contented with herself than she had done in many a long day.

It was late when she returned, and not finding Miss Blake in any other part of the house, she went to the governess' room and tapped on the door for admittance, a thing she had never done before, from pure perversity and a determination not to "let any person suppose she cared to see them when she didn't have to."

Miss Blake herself opened the door to her and invited her to "step into her

parlor," most cordially, adding:

"I'm just having my afternoon tea. Won't you take a cup with me?"

At first Nan could scarcely find voice to reply, so strange did she feel in this altered room. When she had last seen it it was bare and cold and comfortless, and now—

The windows were draped with inner curtains of dainty Swiss. Hangings of some soft, pale green stuff hung before them and in all the doorways. The bed was shoved into a far corner of the room, and where it had once been, against the wall, a low bookcase now stood, displaying rows of tempting books upon its well-laden shelves, and above them delicate bits of bric-à-brac. A rug covered the centre of the floor. The ugly mantel-shelf was hidden from sight by an Oriental scarf, and upon it stood all manner of odd and curious trifles. The shabby lounge was covered by a fine old rug and piled with cushions, while beside it stood the quaint stand and brass tray that Nan had feasted from when her foot was lame; only now it held a brightly burnished alcohol kettle, out of which steam was issuing in the most hospitable fashion possible. Here also were dainty cups and saucers, and here it was that Miss Blake brewed her tea after she had led her guest to a chair and helped her remove her cap and coat with all the solicitude of a veritable hostess.

"Well, how has the day gone?" asked she, trying not to betray her amusement at Nan's obvious amazement.

"Oh, finely! We had a jolly good time. Lu can go alone now. John and I took her out and simply made her skate. Ruth goes floundering about like a seal, and every one laughs at her, but she's so good-natured she doesn't mind, and one can't help liking her. Such a funny thing happened.

"We were standing still for a minute waiting for Lu to catch her breath, and all at once we saw Ruth coming galloping toward us in her ridiculous way. A big, fat man was skating in the other direction, but nowhere near her, and we didn't notice him particularly till she veered suddenly off and crashed straight into him, without any excuse at all, just hurled into him plump, and bowled him square over. It was the most deliberate thing I ever saw. She had gone out of her way to do it, but, of course, she didn't mean to. They both went crashing down with such a thump I thought it would break the ice, and as he went over he said:

'Good gracious!' in the mildest, funniest voice you ever heard. John hurried off and helped him up, and I got Ruth on her feet again, all covered with snow, and as mortified as could be, but choking with laughter. The man looked worried, and we asked him if he was hurt. He said, 'No! Oh, no indeed!' and then he turned to Ruth with the most embarrassed sort of apologetic smile—just as if he had been to blame.

"'I'm so sorry!' he stammered. 'It is the strangest thing how it could have occurred. I thought you were over there. I really thought I was in no one's way. Oh, would you mind telling me—a—what I said when I—a—fell?'

"Lu was swallowing her pocket-handkerchief to keep from laughing out, and I know I was grinning.

"Why, I think you said, 'Good gracious!'" said Ruth, shakily.

"'Oh, thank, you!' the man cried, looking ever so much relieved. 'I thought I said 'Good gracious,' but I—I wasn't sure. I'm very glad!' and he shambled off as if he were lamed for life, poor thing, while Ruth and Lu and John and I simply rocked with laughter. And now when anything happens John says 'Good gracious!' in the mildest tone, and then goes on, 'What did I say? Oh, thank you. I thought I said "Good gracious," but I wasn't sure!'" and Nan broke into a chuckle at the mere recollection of the thing. Miss Blake laughed in sympathy, and she and Nan drank their tea and nibbled their wafers in the most amicable fashion possible, talking over, not alone the pleasant experiences, but also that which had threatened to spoil Nan's day, the remembrance of which made her shudder even now.

She repeated the incident to Miss Blake, concluding with:

"I don't care what they think!"

"John was right," declared Miss Blake, "and you did what was brave and just. But don't give up trying to win Mary's and Grace's good opinion, Nan. I want you to be respected and loved, and you can be, if you will only be as true to yourself as you are to your friends. You were not satisfied to let Lu and Ruth rest under a false accusation this morning. Neither should you be satisfied to let yourself. Prove to Mary and Grace that you are neither bold nor brazen. Force them to see that you are kind and lovable and courageous."

"Oh, dear! How can I?" despaired Nan.

"Why, simply by being so," declared Miss Blake.

Nan fell silent, and then, when Miss Blake was just beginning to wonder what new caprice her guest had fallen victim to, she broke out impetuously:

"Oh, I say Miss Blake! it is just festive in here. I never saw anything that began to be so pretty."

It was genuine praise, and Miss Blake really flushed with gratification as she replied:

"Thank you, Nan. I think myself it is cozy, and I am very happy if my little nest pleases you. It is a very simple one. I am my own upholsterer and my own decorator, so I have a special reason to value any praise of my small domain. You must come often if you like it here, for I love to play hostess to so appreciative a guest!"

Nan settled back among the cushions with a contented sigh.

"I wish," she said presently, "I wish the rest of the house looked this way."

"If you really would like to make some changes, Nan, I will do my best. What there is in the house is good and substantial, and with a little alteration could be made to serve very well."

Nan looked up eagerly.

"Oh, let's try and fix up the house, for father's coming home. Mr. Turner will give us some money to pay for repairs, I guess—he always does when pipes burst and things. Won't it be jolly to watch father's face when he comes in and sees it all so pretty here? Poor old papa! Mr. Turner says he may come in the fall, and so we'll have all the summer to work and plan in, and then when he's here, won't we have a jubilation, Miss Blake?"

The governess stooped to pick up a pin, and she did not reply. Then she rose and carried the tea-cups and plates to the washstand, where she began rinsing them carefully.

"When your father comes home I shall not be here, you know," she said simply; "but you will be very happy together, and I am sure he would enjoy a pretty home!"

The radiance in Nan's face faded suddenly. The same dull pain was at her heart that she had felt and shrunk from yesterday. Only now it did not pass away, and all the evening she seemed to be haunted by a peculiar sense of impending misfortune. It was as though she had been reminded of some unhappy occasion that she had tried to forget. Every once in a while after that, when she saw Miss Blake laboriously toiling to renovate some dilapidated piece of furniture, or heard her discussing with Delia the remaining possibilities of this carpet or that pair of curtains, she felt an almost uncontrollable desire to cry out—so sharp was the sudden sting of regret that bit at her conscience—and so keen the pain that pierced her heart.

Miss Blake left her to enjoy her holidays in perfect freedom, but as soon as they were spent the books were brought out again and lessons resumed as strictly as if the discipline of an entire school depended on it.

But study had grown to have no terrors for Nan, and she was not at all aware of the thorough course she was being put through, because it was all accomplished in such an unobtrusive fashion. Miss Blake had a system of her own which she put into practice, and the girl followed her unconsciously with an interest that showed how wise an one it was. Latin and mathematics proved the most troublesome of the tasks, and would perhaps have led to some serious differences of opinion if Miss Blake had not confessed herself at the start "rusty" in these particular branches and suggested that they "go over them together."

"I really never was very strong in either of them, and it will do me good to review," she explained.

So, spurred on by the thought of competition, Nan did her best; went through the declensions with a rush, and quite outstripped her fellow-student in the matter of algebraic problems.

History was always simple enough with Miss Blake to make it seem like the most dramatic of romances, and the girl discovered a fresh interest in the Roman heroes when the scenes of their exploits was so graphically described to her, and when she could build up the ancient city for herself by the aid of Miss Blake's admirable photographs of the present.

"It seems to me you have done more traveling than any one I ever knew!" exclaimed the girl for the hundredth time one day.

"It has been all I had to do," rejoined the governess wistfully. "For many, many years I have had nothing else. But now all that is changed, and—as it is half-past one, and I hear Delia coming up to announce luncheon, I'll dismiss my class, and declare school over for to-day."

"That is always the way," mused Nan, "whenever I refer to her and try to start her telling about herself she veers off and talks of something else. Queer about her traveling so much, though. I wonder how she came to do it—when she's so poor. She never said straight out she was some one's companion, and I don't think a governess would be taken all over the globe like that."

While the ice lasted Nan had many a good hour upon her skates. Miss Blake too donned hers, and at these times the tables were turned and Nan became the patient teacher, the governess the obedient pupil.

"My ankles are weak," pleaded the pupil in apology for persistent failure.

"Exercise 'em and they'll grow strong!" declared the intrepid instructor in peremptory tones.

"It's no use, I can't reverse, Nan!"

"Pooh! 'Never say can't till you've proved that the task is impossible,'" quoted

Nan, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"You're real mean, so there!" responded Miss Blake in return with such a good imitation of her own querulous tone that the girl burst into a shout of laughter, and the two started off again to make another, perhaps futile attempt, at the difficult feat, until, by the latter part of the winter, Miss Blake acquitted herself so creditably that her teacher regarded her with pardonable pride, and declared,

"There, now! You ought to be 'all primmed up with majestick pride.' You skate as well as anybody now, and you've got rid of every particle of nervousness."

There were many things beside skating that the governess set herself to accomplish during these months, and Mrs. Newton often took her to task for working so hard.

"You are beginning to look completely fagged. Do let the house go. What do you fret over it for? If Nan wants alterations, why not let Mr. Turner engage competent people to do the work? You have responsibility enough without planning and overseeing all these improvements."

But Miss Blake only shook her obstinate little head and continued to discuss ways and means with Mr. Turner and Delia and to direct the workmen, who presently took possession of the house, and made it seem like a Bedlam into which order could never be restored.

"Oh, that's fine!" cried Nan, clapping her hands when she heard of the governess' plans. "That hall closet was no good anyhow. Delia only kept her brooms and dust-cloths there, and it's just the place for a dumb-waiter. But if we turn the library into a dining-room, what are you going to do with the books?"

"The best of them can be put on low shelves along the parlor walls, and we'll take the rest upstairs and make a sort of cozy study of the front room for your father."

"Splendid!" cried Nan.

For weeks the place was in a turmoil. Carpets were taken up, some of them never to go down again, curtains were unhung, cleaned and folded carefully

away, and when the coast was clear the work of remodelling began in earnest.

It seemed to Nan as if it would never come to an end, but little by little things began to assume a more promising aspect, and at length the last lingering workman dragged himself reluctantly away, and then Delia descended upon the place, armed with scrubbing-brush and pail, and waged a mighty war upon every spot of dust or paint anywhere to be found.

The parlor had been freshly papered, and its walls no longer frowned gloomily down upon the inoffensive guest, but seemed to cast a faint, rosy smile at the redecorated hall and the new dining-room beyond. Miss Blake stripped away every vestige of tarletan, and let the fine oil paintings display themselves unveiled to the public eye.

"We can have the windows screened if we are afraid of flies," she said as she folded away the unsightly shrouds, and Delia echoed, "Why, so we can!" in the promptest assent, and as though it had been her own idea all along.

The draperies were of the simplest sort, but Nan thought them perfection. She fairly danced with delight as she fancied her father's face when he should see his altered home. He would never recognize in this attractive, tasteful room the old, gloomy parlor of former days.

The furniture was drawn out of its martial line and placed here and there in inviting positions by loving, artful hands. Various pieces were banished altogether, and where this chair or that had grown shabby Miss Blake renewed its usefulness by covering it over with some odd material that harmonized nicely with the old-fashioned shape of the frame and the tone of the rest of the room.

A simple fireplace had been set in the blind chimney-piece, in which were placed grandma's graceful andirons, buried so long in the attic that Nan had never seen them, while the old mantel-shelf in the library was torn out altogether and a stately new one put in its stead, and in this too was a place for wood and fire-dogs. The two French windows leading into the glass extension were transformed into doorways, and gave pleasant vistas of a blooming conservatory, into which the south sun shone genially the best part of the day.

Louie and Ruth came in on a special visit of inspection when the work was all completed, and it did not detract from Nan's enjoyment to hear them say that they thought the house one of the prettiest they had ever seen.

"It has such a fresh, comfortable look," exclaimed Louie.

"As if you lived in every part of it and enjoyed it yourself, and wanted other people to enjoy it with you," added Ruth.

"So we do," declared Nan; "that's just what we do. Isn't it, Miss Blake?"

And Miss Blake nodded a smiling assent, though she knew quite well that until very lately Nan had never thought about the matter at all. She had taken her home for granted, and it never had occurred to her to try to improve it in any wise. But the governess had had more in mind than the mere indulging of the girl's fancy when she set about rearranging the place. As in most of her characteristic schemes there was "a method in her madness." Nan soon discovered that a dainty home brought its obligations with it.

"Do you notice," said Miss Blake one day, "that since the household arrangements have been altered there has been a good deal more work to be done?"

"Why, I don't know," rejoined Nan; "why should there be?"

"Because all these bits of bric-à-brac we have set about must be dusted every day, and because throwing the parlor open, as we do, makes another room to look after. Then the plants in the conservatory should be carefully tended if we want them to live, and Delia has to take double the steps she used to take when we ate in the basement. Really, Nan, as things stand, I feel the work is going to be too hard for her."

"Dear me! Whatever are we going to do?" demanded the girl anxiously.

"Simply, she must have help."

"You mean another servant?"

"No, not that. I cannot increase the household expenses in such a way without your father's knowledge and approval. What we have done now is almost more than I dare think of. My only comfort is that it has come out of your money."

Nan gave a start. "My money!" she exclaimed. "Why, I never knew I had any. Goodness! tell me about it."

"There is nothing to tell. Simply, some one who owed your mother a debt and was unable to discharge it during her lifetime, has paid in a certain part of it to Mr. Turner for your benefit—or so he tells me. Both he and I thought it wise to use it in this way. The house is virtually yours, and unless you improve it from time to time it will decrease in value. We both felt that since you wished it, and since it might be looked upon in the light of protecting your property, we might safely lay out the money as we have done without first consulting your father."

"Oh, I'm glad," cried Nan. "I didn't want him to know. It'll be all the bigger surprise to him when he comes home. But what are we going to do about Delia?"

"That is what I want you to tell me," rejoined Miss Blake.

"I?" queried the girl. "Why, I'm sure I don't know what we can do, unless we hire another girl—and you say father can't afford that."

"Now, Nan, listen to me," said Miss Blake, seriously, drawing her chair to the girl's, and emphasizing her words by laying her hand upon hers and tapping it gently whenever a point was made. "Let us put the matter quite plainly, and see if we can't come to a conclusion that will both help Delia and save us the trouble of engaging another maid. One pair of hands can't do the work in this house! You admit that?"

"Yes; I s'pose so," conceded Nan.

"Well then, obviously, we must secure the aid of another pair—perhaps even two."

"Uh-huh!" assented the girl cheerfully enough.

"Not only that, we must secure the aid of another pair, if not two, at no additional expense to your father."

Here Nan's head began to drop. "That's what floors me," she responded perplexedly. "The rest is easy enough to settle; but how in the world we are going to get people to work for us for nothing—"

"What are those things in your lap, Nan?" asked the governess suddenly with a quick smile and an extra tap of the finger on the girl's palm.

"My hands, of course."

"Why shouldn't they be the pair we need? I cordially offer the use of mine."

"Oh!"

Nan's face was rather blank. "I hate housework," she added, and her mouth drew down at the corners in a pout of petulance.

"I doubt if any one really cares for it. But it must be done, and in this case you and I must consent to do it, at least in part. Now that you have looked the facts in the face, let us say no more about it, after we have settled just what we prefer to do. I have always taken care of my own room. Will you see to yours after this?"

"I s'pose so.

"Then there is the dusting and the plants."

"I'll take the plants," Nan hastened to declare.

"And the dishes on Mondays and Tuesdays?" continued Miss Blake.

There was a pause.

"If there's one thing I despise it's washing dishes," cried the girl, her voice trembling with irritation.

The governess looked down at her own two delicate little hands and seemed to be considering. Then she raised her head quickly, and said, without a shade of resentment in her voice:

"Very well then, dear, I'll take the dishes. So here is the way it stands: You care for the plants and your own room and I'll look after my room and do the dusting and the dishes."

"You'll have more to do than I," hesitated Nan.

"No matter; if you do your share well, and don't neglect it, I am willing to stand by my part. Is it a bargain?"

Nan nodded grimly, and they shook hands upon it.

CHAPTER XV

A TUG OF WAR

"Is Nan in?" asked Ruth, coming to the house one day in the very teeth of a blinding snowstorm, and putting the question to Delia with a very decided note of excitement in her voice.

"Yes, she's in; but she's pretty busy," replied Delia, showing the guest into the dining-room, where the bright logs were blazing cheerfully in the fireplace, and where Miss Blake, enveloped in a huge apron, was kneeling before the hearth and polishing its tiles till they shone like gems. She stopped to welcome the guest in her own hearty, informal fashion.

"O Ruth! come in and sit down. I wondered who could be brave enough to face a storm like this. Why, it is almost a blizzard. Take off your things, dear, and get warmed. You won't mind my going on with my work?"

"Oh, no! not at all. Please don't stop. Thank you. This is as comfortable as can be. But then, one always is comfortable here. I came to see Nan about something important. She's busy?"

"Yes, in her room. But if you don't mind waiting a little I think she will soon be able to come down," responded the governess genially.

"Then I'll sit here, if you don't mind," and the girl settled herself in an engulfing armchair with a sigh of satisfaction, her eyes following Miss Blake from place to place as she tripped briskly about, energetically wielding her dust cloth and whisk broom and humming contentedly as she worked.

"Perhaps you won't approve of the plan that I've got in my mind, and won't let Nan go into it," ventured Ruth, presently.

"I can't fancy you suggesting anything that I would so seriously disapprove of as that," returned Miss Blake, smiling kindly, but asking for no further enlightenment on the subject than her guest was inclined to give of her own accord.

"Well, then, it's this: If the cold weather lasts we'll have elegant sleighing, with all this snow, and I want to hire a sleigh, just any common old thing will do, and fill it with straw, and all of us girls and boys go off on a screamingly fine sleigh-ride. If it clears we'll have a full moon, and I think it would just be the jolliest thing in the world. Now please say Nan can go. She'll love to I know, and she always makes things snap so," pleaded the girl, fixing her eyes on Miss Blake's face with a peculiar intensity of expression.

The governess hesitated.

"Oh, please say she can," reiterated Ruth.

"My dear Ruth, I can't say anything until I know more of the matter. You say you girls and boys are to go. What girls and boys do you mean?"

"Why, Lu and Grace and Mary and the Buckstone girls, of course; and John Gardiner and Harley Morris and Everett Webster, and oh! all those fellows—the ones in our set; you've met them all."

"And is there to be no grown woman in the party—no chaperone?" suggested Miss Blake.

Ruth looked down and began picking a thread from the thumb of her glove.

"Oh, of course; mamma wouldn't let me go unless there was a chaperone," she replied after a moment, but tamely, with the ring all faded out of her voice.

"No, I am sure she would not," the governess remarked dryly.

"I thought of you at once," Ruth began again with an upward glance that however did not meet Miss Blake's eye. "But then we all thought that it would be too much to ask of you—to ride all those miles with a noisy crowd in the cold and night, and—so on, and so—so—just before I came here I ran into Mrs. Cole and asked her to chaperone us, and she said she would."

The governess laid her duster on a chair, and unbuttoned her apron very deliberately.

"Mrs. Cole," she repeated half-aloud, as if speaking to herself, and her tone had something in it that seemed to call for some sort of justification from Ruth.

"You know she's just been married, and she's as full of fun as she can be. And she likes a good time immensely, and loves to be with us girls, and it won't bore her a bit to go, and it's ever so much better to have her than—than—some one who wouldn't enjoy it, you know."

"Is Mr. Cole to be of the party?" Miss Blake inquired, still with that odd inflection.

"Why, no," responded Ruth, twisting her handkerchief into a hard knot. "There won't be room for him. But Mrs. Cole said it didn't matter in the least. She says she often goes off and leaves him, and he has just as nice a time sitting home with his cigar and a book or something."

"They have been married, I think, three months," Miss Blake commented half to herself.

"Yes, about," replied Ruth. "And Mrs. Cole is just as gay and jolly as she ever was. You may think that it isn't very dignified for a married woman to—"

"Oh! my dear Ruth," interrupted the governess hastily, "I am not disparaging Mrs. Cole, and I have no right to express an opinion concerning her conduct, but I think—yes, I am quite sure that I prefer Nan not to join your party."

Ruth jumped from her chair with a cry of protest: "O Miss Blake! Don't say that! Think of it, we're going to drive down as far as Howe's and have a supper and it will be such fun. We want Nan awfully. She's just the best company in the world, and if she doesn't go it will be—well, it will be too bad. Do please say she may."

Miss Blake shook her head somewhat sadly. "I can't say so, Ruth. There are special reasons why Nan ought not to go—reasons that I can only explain to her, but which I am sure she will understand. You other girls have your mothers, but Nan has none, and that means that she has no protector, now that her father is absent, unless I can stand in such a relation to her. Believe me, I do not

voluntarily deny Nan any pleasure, but there are some instances in which I must."

"But it's going to be perfectly proper," Ruth insisted, almost in tears. "You don't think my mother would let me go if it wasn't going to be perfectly proper, do you, Miss Blake?"

The governess stood before the fire and rested her arm on the high mantel-shelf, tapping the fender lightly with the toe of her slipper. At Ruth's question she turned her head quickly from the flames toward the girl with a compassionate smile.

"No," she hastened to declare, "I am sure your mother would not let you go to anything that she knew to be in any respect not altogether as it should be."

There was just the shade of an emphasis on the word knew—just the merest breath of a pause before it. Miss Blake gazed frankly and fearlessly into the girl's eyes as she spoke, and Ruth's lids dropped suddenly as if she had been trying to look at the sun and it had blinded her.

There was a pause and in it they could distinctly hear Nan's feet going to and fro on the floor above their heads, and her sharp young voice shouting the chorus of some tuneless popular air, in her own perfectly cheerful, earless fashion.

"Oh, Miss Blake, please!" quavered Ruth.

If she had known the governess as well as Nan did she would have known that it was worse than useless to "tease." As it was, she was aware of some force here that did not appear in her own easy-going mother, and unconsciously she bowed to it—but even as she did so she gave a last wail of entreaty from pure force of habit.

"Please, Miss Blake!"

"No, Ruth. I can't consent to Nan's joining you. If she goes, it will be in direct defiance of my authority and against my wish and approval. But when she hears what I have to say I do not think she will go."

"Don't think who will go?" demanded an eager voice, as Nan came pelting in at the door, having flung down stairs in such a whirl that they had scarcely

realized she had started before she was here.

"Heyo, Ruth! When did you come? You're a dear girl to venture out a day like this! Who'll go where, 'you don't think,' Miss Blake?"

Ruth rose and began dragging on her gloves. "Hello," she said, blankly, in return for the other's greeting.

"Who'll go? Who'll go?" insisted Nan, tapping the floor with her foot to emphasize her impatience.

Ruth looked at Miss Blake a little sullenly, and said nothing. Miss Blake looked at Nan.

"You," she returned simply. "I was just saying to Ruth that I am sure you would not go anywhere against my plainly expressed wish."

The girl threw back her head with an unrestrained laugh.

"Oh, now, you're bragging!" she cried breezily. "Don't count too much on me. I'm a queer creature. I don't know what I'd do if I were hard put!"

Ruth glanced at Miss Blake again as she buttoned her coat. The governess' face was quite placid, but there was an expression in her eyes that was quite new to the girl and that she did not care to face.

"The fact of the matter is, Nan," Miss Blake explained, "Ruth has come here to invite you to join a sleighing party to be given—what night did you say, Ruth?"

"The first clear one," responded the girl still sullenly.

"The first clear night," resumed Miss Blake. "All your friends are going, and it would give me as much pleasure to have you join them as it would you to do so, but—under the circumstances it is impossible to do anything save—" she paused an instant, and Nan broke in impatiently:

"Under what circumstances? There aren't any circumstances! A sleighing party! Why, it'll be just magnificent and gorgeous! Of course I'll go. Hurrah! Ruth, you're a dear to ask me! Go? Well, I should think so!"

Ruth fastened her fur boa about her neck, and murmured something almost inaudible about having to hurry home.

"Well, you can count on me," cried Nan, flinging her arm about her friend's waist and escorting her to the door. "Good-bye! Thanks heaps for asking me! Las' tag!"

The front door slammed, and the girl came back to the library with her cheeks aglow and her eyes flashing. "What fun!" she exclaimed. "I know what we'll do! We'll go down to Howe's and have a supper and a jolly good time generally. Mary Brewster and Grace and Ruth had it all planned out for the next good snow, and I'd forgotten. O goody!"

Miss Blake was standing as they had left her, by the fire, with her foot upon the fender and her hand upon the high mantel-shelf. Now she took them both down and turned to Nan, saying in a low, controlled voice:

"Nan, I want to talk to you about this party. And you must hear me out, even if some of the things I am about to say do not please you." She kept her eyes on the girl's face as she spoke, and saw its expression change quickly from one of eager anticipation to one of growing apprehension and then again to one of dogged opposition. So vivid were these changes that she almost lost the necessary courage to go on, for she read in them that her task promised to be no easy one.

"Well?" said Nan, tapping her foot impatiently, as Miss Blake did not at once continue.

"Please sit down here, and I will try to say what I have to say as quickly as possible," resumed the governess, drawing a long breath.

Nan obeyed, but with a decidedly impatient fling of herself upon the low ottoman Miss Blake had indicated.

"As I said to Ruth," the low voice commenced, "under almost any other circumstances it would give me the greatest pleasure to know that you were to enjoy this sleighing party with the others. If Mrs. Andrews or Mrs. Hawes were going it would settle the question at once."

"Or if you were," suggested Nan, with a curl other lip.

Miss Blake's face paled, and for an instant she regarded Nan in a sort of surprised, hurt silence. Then she replied, steadily: "Yes, or if I were. But as it is Mrs. Cole, the case is entirely altered. Mrs. Cole is scarcely more than a girl herself, and—I say this to you, Nan, simply because I must—she has never been, to my idea, a lady-like young woman. She has always been flippant and frivolous and boisterous; anything but a good companion for a number of impulsive, impressionable girls like yourself."

"Oh, pshaw!" interrupted Nan, impatiently. "There's nothing against her at all. She's lots of fun, and a body'd be a great goose that tried to suit all the old frumps in town. She said so herself, and she's married and she knows."

A ghost of a smile flitted across Miss Blake's face. Nan's emphasis reflected so directly on her own condition of unauthoritative spinsterhood.

"If you and the other girls have no more careful a chaperone, one who will be no more of a restraint than Mrs. Cole, I am afraid the party will prove a rather uproarious one. And I cannot help thinking that this is precisely the reason Mrs. Cole has been asked to attend you; that you might not be under any restraint. I don't for a moment think any of you girls would deliberately take advantage of your liberty, but you are full of animal spirits, and when you get in full swing it is a little hard, perhaps harder than you know, to rein yourselves in. I am afraid Ruth has not been quite candid with her mother. At all events, I am sure that if Mrs. Andrews realized the circumstances she would think twice before letting Ruth go. It is not only that I think Mrs. Cole will not prove a restraint; I am afraid she will intentionally lead you on. And if she does, I am afraid your sleigh-ride will be decidedly unconventional."

"I hope we'll have a splendid time," announced Nan, setting her jaws with a snap of her teeth.

But the governess went on as if she had neither seen nor heard.

"It is very important, Nan, that you especially should not be identified with anything of the sort. It might injure you in such a way that the harm could never be repaired." She paused and Nan straightened herself with a jerk.

"I'd like to know why it's more important for me than for the other girls? If their mothers think it's good enough for them I guess it's good enough for me, and if they can be trusted I guess I can."

Miss Blake hesitated, but only for a moment. Then she went on steadily and firmly, but without the least suggestion of sternness in her voice or manner.

"The reason is simply this: You have not had the advantages the other girls have had. You have had no mother; no careful, loving training from the first, and —excuse me, dear—your behavior has shown it. How could it be expected not to do so? People have criticized you, and their criticisms have been severe, unjust even. Lately you have set yourself right with most of your neighbors, but it has been hard work, and it has been only begun. It will still be hard work to keep their good opinion. If you want to hold a place in their esteem you must earn it and keep on earning it. The other girls might do with perfect safety what you could not dream of doing, because in them it would be looked on merely as a single slip; with you it would be backsliding. Do you understand me, Nan?"

There was no reply, but the girl's bent head was answer enough. Miss Blake passed her hand tenderly over the roughened hair, and for a long time there was silence between them. Nan was thinking, and Miss Blake was content to let her think.

The tall clock in the corner tapped out the minutes with slow, even ticks. The fire burned steadily on the hearth, and the logs settled as they burned. Outside the high wind raced madly around bleak street corners, carrying the snow before it in white, blinding clouds. The air was so full of the swirling, eddying flakes that it dimmed the light and made evening seem to have settled down long before its usual time. Every now and then there came to them from the conservatory a faint, faint breath from a blossoming daphne, as though the delicate thing were breathing out sweet gratitude for its shelter from the storm.

Nan could not help responding to the quieting influence of it all. It was very, very different from the place as it used to be, and she felt the difference and the suggestiveness of it more now than she had ever done before.

Suppose the change in herself was as marked as this? Every one seemed to like her nowadays. They said she was altered and improved, and if they said so, she supposed it must be true. What, then, if she were to turn about and be her old self again?

What if Miss Blake were to give the house its old aspect again? Ugh! It was disheartening even to think of such a thing. But granting that she were to let

things go back, she couldn't undo some of the improvements she had made? So it seemed reasonable to Nan that even if she let herself be as she had been for awhile, just to rest from the constant trying to be good, for a day or so, the really important changes must still remain; like the dumbwaiter and the wall paper and the frescoes and the woodwork. And, pshaw! Just going to this sleigh-ride wasn't going to prove that she was backsliding, anyway! Miss Blake was too particular —making an awful fuss over nothing. Mrs. Cole was all right enough. Lots of nice people knew her, and the girls always liked to have her around, she was so gay and jolly. And now that she was married, it was fun to have her chaperone them, for she never interfered, nor was wet-blankety, like mothers and people, no matter what was going on. In fact, she often urged them on and suggested things the girls themselves would never have thought of, so that wherever she was the fun promised to run high. It was too bad of Miss Blake to have put the case as she had. It simply meant that if Nan went she deliberately disobeyed her wish and defied her authority.

For the first time the girl seemed to get a glimpse of the tactful, tender way in which she had been guided. She saw that this was the first instance in which she had been put under definite restraint. Always before Miss Blake had left her seemingly to decide for herself, and she had never been aware of the influence that led her in the right direction.

But this was different. This was discipline, and she rose against it instantly.

If she did not go on the sleigh-ride she would only be obeying Miss Blake's injunction. There was no credit or virtue in that. There might be some satisfaction in denying one's self a pleasure if one felt one were independent, and that what one did was self-abnegating and laudable. But if one acted under compulsion—! Pooh! Nan guessed Miss Blake thought she was a mere child to be ordered about like that.

And yet, with all this, there was a strange unfamiliar tugging at her heart to confess herself willing to obey. She actually had to make an effort to keep from doing so. She scarcely knew how it happened, but all at once she became conscious that she had shaken herself together and that she was saying, in no very gracious voice to be sure, but still that she was saying, "Well, if you will have it your own way, you will I suppose. There! I promise you I won't go on the sleigh-ride. Now, does that satisfy you?"

Miss Blake took her hand from Nan's hair so hastily that the girl lifted her head in astonishment. But the governess had neither the air of being angry nor of being wounded as she feared. She simply rose and said in quite a matter-of-fact tone as she turned toward the door:

"I demanded no promise of you, Nan, and I give you back your word. Moreover, I entirely recall my injunction. Do as you please. If you decide to go you will neither be disobeying my order nor breaking your own promise. You are quite free and untrammeled, my dear."

Nan sprang to her feet.

"Huh!" she cried in an exasperated manner, "I know what you mean! You mean I am quite free to go and—take the consequences. That's what you mean."

Miss Blake paused but made no reply.

"But suppose there aren't any consequences?" pursued Nan, biting her lip and scowling darkly from between her knitted brows.

Miss Blake turned her head.

"There are always consequences," she said over her shoulder in a voice that was very low and serious.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SLEIGH-RIDE

The storm lasted for three days and then came a term of perfect weather. Under foot the snow was packed hard and tight into a compact mass over a bed of ice, and overhead the sun shone out from a cloudless sky, while the air was so keen that it kept the mercury very close to the zero mark even at midday.

"How is this for high?" demanded Ruth exultantly, as she and Nan met toward the end of the week, the first time they had seen each other since that

stormy day when the subject of the sleigh-ride had first been broached to Miss Blake.

"The weather, you mean? Oh, perfectly fine!" responded Nan.

Ruth drew a step nearer to her.

"It's all arranged for to-night. Not a soul has refused; every one we've asked is going, and the sleigh is a regular old ark. We've got everything our own way. Mike, from the stables, is as solid as a brick wall. The horses are perfectly safe and we're going to have footstoves to keep our toes warm. Mrs. Cole has telephoned down to Howe's to have our supper ready, and we're going to have a simply stunning time."

Nan tried to smile, but failed, and Ruth was too full of her own affairs to notice.

"We're going to start at eight sharp. First we thought we'd pick up the party as we went along, but Mrs. Cole said it would waste too much time, so we're all going to meet at her house. I've so much on my mind my head's spinning. Be sure you're on hand at eight. We're not going to wait for any one."

"O Ruth!" faltered Nan, flinging out a detaining hand as the girl was about to go. "I'm not going. Didn't I tell you?"

Ruth stopped short and gazed at her in bewilderment.

"Not going! What on earth do you mean?"

"I can't go; that's all," stammered Nan, flushing hotly at the seeming weakness of the confession.

Ruth stared at her blankly.

"Well, I like that!" she enunciated at length.

"Why, I told you, didn't I?" asked Nan.

"Told me what? That you weren't going? Well, I should say not. Miss Blake said you couldn't but you said flat down you would, and, of course, I believed

you. Don't you remember the last words you said as I went away that day were that I could count on you? And so, of course, I counted."

Nan stood and regarded the snow at her feet in silence.

"It's right-down mean to back out at the last minute when the party's all made up and the couples all arranged and you've given your word. We've been awfully careful whom we've asked, because we only wanted a certain kind—not alone a certain number. Of course, we could get lots of girls to take your place and jump at the chance; but we prefer you, and you'd given your promise."

Nan ground the snow under her foot until it squeaked.

"I thought you were sick, or something, when you didn't come around," went on Ruth, sternly. "I never imagined for a minute it was because you meant to flunk and leave us in the lurch like this. If I'd thought that I wouldn't have gone to all the trouble I did to save you a place next to John Gardiner when Mary Brewster was fighting tooth and nail to get it."

The pinched snow squeaked again under Nan's grinding heel, this time louder than before.

"It's all nonsense, Miss Blake's not wanting you to go," pursued Ruth. "Everything is as proper as pie, and if the boys get to carrying on a little too much Mrs. Cole will settle them in no time. She's real determined when she makes up her mind. What under the sun does Miss Blake think we are going to do? But that's no matter now. You gave me your word, and you've no right to go back on it. Besides, it'll set us all topsy-turvey with our accounts, for if you don't go of course you won't turn in your share of the tax, and we couldn't ask any one at the last minute just to come as a make-shift and expect her to pay for the privilege. The end of it will be the rest of us will have to make it up, and if you think that's fair I don't!"

"I'll gladly pay my dues," returned Nan, more meekly than Ruth had ever heard her speak. "You can ask any one you choose as my substitute, and say anything you please to explain my not going, and I'll stand by you."

This began to sound serious, and Ruth felt it was time to clinch her argument.

"If you go out Louie Hawes will, too. Her mother said she'd let Lu go if Miss

Blake would let you, but that if Miss Blake objected she thought it would be best not to have Lu join. She said she made Lu's going entirely conditional on yours. So, you see, if you back out you'll not alone be breaking your promise, but you'll be breaking up the party and making a mess of it all round. I told Mrs. Hawes you were going, and Lu's heart is set on it. If she has to stay back now, at the last minute like this, it will disappoint her dreadfully, and I wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to you again."

Nan felt that she had been driven into a corner, and that there was but one way out of it. In spite of her strong desire to go with the girls, she had determined to stick to her resolve to stay behind. She had hardly known why she had tried to avoid them all these days. But now she knew. It was because she was afraid they would shake her resolution. Once she would have called herself cowardly for trying to spare herself such temptation, but now she knew better; she saw she had been simply wise. It would not have been brave, but merely reckless, to have done otherwise. She had known ever since Miss Blake spoke that she was free to do as she pleased. That she was held by no promise; that she was compelled by no stronger claim than Miss Blake's disapproval, which might be, after all, only a groundless personal prejudice, she thought. She hardly realized why she felt bound to obey. And now along came Ruth to prove that there were other claims outside Miss Blake's. She remembered perfectly having said that Ruth could count on her. Here was a very definite promise, although it had been made in half-ignorance, and she understood clearly that Ruth meant to make her keep it. Then, again, she was directly responsible for Louie's disappointment, and this seemed to her, as Ruth had intended it should seem, a compelling conclusion. If she had been older her reasoning would not have stopped here, but, as it was, she perceived only two sides to the question, and this that Ruth had just presented seemed infinitely more convincing than the one Miss Blake had tried to make clear to her. Ruth's logic she could understand; the governess' seemed vague and incomprehensible. In one case she had been coerced into making a promise from which she had later been absolved; in the other she had given her word of her own free will, and she was being stoutly held to it. There were other influences at work, but Nan did not know it. She honestly believed she was waiving all considerations but those with which her duty was concerned, and she thought she had done so when she broke out with a sort of impatient groan:

"Oh, dear! I never saw such a tangle!"

"Well," returned Ruth grimly, "I don't know anything about that, but whatever it may be, I've got the strong end of the line and I mean to hold it. You've just got to go and that's all there is to it."

Nan gave a rueful laugh. She more than half-liked to have Ruth leave her no alternative. It somehow made her seem less responsible to herself. If the decision were taken out of her hands she could not be held accountable and—the enjoyment would be there all the same.

"I wish you'd let me off, Ruth," she protested weakly, as a sort of last sop to her conscience.

Ruth saw that she had prevailed and gave her head a triumphant toss. "Well, I won't, so there! And what's more I can't stand here wasting time like this another minute. I have a hundred things to do before eight o'clock, so good-bye! Be sure you're on time for we won't wait a second, and if you don't arrive none of us will ever speak to you again, so there!"

Nan stood dumbly stubbing her toe into a little mound of snow quite a minute after Ruth had left her. She had not even glanced up when, in response to her friend's last declaration, she had said, "Very well; I'll be on hand," and her voice had sounded so flat and lifeless that Ruth thought it better to hasten off before the words could be recalled. When Nan spoke in that half-hearted tone Ruth had no faith in her strength of purpose. She walked home in a doubtful frame of mind, wondering if, after all, the promise would be kept.

But Nan had no such misgivings. She knew perfectly well that she was "in for it" now, but, strange to say, she felt no exultation in the prospect.

"Oh, dear!" she snapped out peevishly, with a last vicious dig of her heel into the snow, "every bit of enjoyment is taken out of it, I never saw anything so provoking, in the whole of my life. If Miss Blake only hadn't been so mean, I might have been spared all this fret and bother and been just as jolly as any of them. But how can a person have a good time when they know there's some one at home pulling a long face and making one feel as if one were breaking all the laws. It's just too bad, that's what it is."

But Miss Blake neither "pulled a long face" nor by any other means tried to impress Nan with a sense of her disapproval. She took her decision quietly, and made no comment upon it one way or the other. But when it neared dressing

time, and the girl had gone to her room to prepare, she tapped gently for admittance and came in, bearing in her hand a coquettish sealskin hood which she generously offered to Nan, saying:

"It's bitterly cold, and I know you won't want to tie a comforter about your ears. If you will wear this I shall be only too happy to lend it to you. See, the cape is so full and deep your chest and back can't get chilled, and it is not at all clumsy, as so many of them are. Try it on. I think it will be becoming and I know it will keep you warm."

Nan was at a loss for words. Miss Blake had none of the air of heaping coals of fire on her head, but just for a second the girl suspected her of it and hung back reluctantly. Then she looked into the frank, honest eyes and all her suspicion vanished.

"You're—you're awfully kind," she stammered, hastily.

"Try it on," repeated Miss Blake, cordially.

Nan took the soft, warm thing by its rich brown ribbons and, setting it snugly on her head, tied the strings into a big broad bow beneath her chin.

"It's not so unbecoming!" commented the governess, observing Nan critically with her head on one side.

Nan looked in the mirror. What she saw there was the reflection of a flushed, excited face with keen, young eyes that were just now unusually large and bright. Sundry riotous tendrils of hair had escaped from their restraining combs and were flying loose at the temples, and, framing all, was a circle of dusky, flattering fur which lent a look of softness and roundness to the firm, square chin and rose above the brow in a quaint, coquettish peak which was vastly graceful and becoming.

"O Miss Blake!" cried Nan, her eyes flashing with pleasure, "isn't it the darlingest thing? And as warm as toast! I'll be ever and ever so careful of it. You're awfully good to lend it to me. But I really think I oughtn't to take it. Something might happen; it might get lost."

"Don't give it another thought," Miss Blake said, kindly. "Just wear it and keep warm and comfortable. You must take the gloves, too. They will keep your

fingers cozy."

So Nan set out looking like a young Russian in her borrowed furs and feeling what satisfaction she might in the consciousness that she was appearing, if not behaving, at her best.

She found most of the party already assembled at Mrs. Cole's and as the door was opened to her, a loud chorus of shouting laughter met her ears and she was laid hold of by a dozen hands and dragged forward under the gaslight.

"Pooh!" shrieked the chorus again. "This one's easy enough! Nan Cutler! first guess," and she was released as hurriedly as she had been set upon, while the entire company fell upon a later comer and tried to discover the identity of the muffled, veiled individual before she had either spoken or recovered from the unexpected onslaught.

"Well, Nan," cried Harley Morris, jovially, "you're the only girl who isn't muffled out of all recognition. We've had a dandy time trying to identify some of them."

"I never saw you look so well," declared Louie Hawes, generously, with her eyes glued to the fascinating peak.

"Nor I," broke in Mary Brewster. "Really, I didn't know you at first. That hood is as disguising to you as our veils are to us."

Nan flushed, but made no response. Harley Morris gave a low whistle and strolled off to join John Gardiner, who was standing before the fire talking with grave-faced Mr. Cole, and as he went she heard him murmur under his breath:

"Sweet remark! Oh, these dear girl friends!"

It instantly changed her feeling from momentary resentment toward Mary to pity for her.

All at once Mrs. Cole's shrill treble was heard high above the hum and murmur of the other voices, crying:

"Now, girls and boys, time's almost up! It any of the party's missing, he or she will be left behind! Prompt's the word."

Then, stepping over to her husband, she tapped him lightly on the shoulder and said:

"There now, Tom, I'm glad we're going, for you're looking as solemn as an owl. Cheer up and have a lovely time with your book and that jolly fire, and don't forget to go to bed at nine o'clock like a good little boy."

Mary Brewster laughed, and most of the others joined in her merriment. But Mr. Cole looked so troubled and stern that Nan, who was gazing at him from the corners of her eyes, saw no reason to laugh at his wife's sally, but felt a much greater inclination to cry for pity of him and his anxious face.

Suddenly she was roused from her musing by John Gardiner's voice close at her ear.

"Nan!" he said.

"Oh, heyo, John!"

"I want to tell you something," he went on, nervously, in a hesitating whisper. "From the looks of her, Mrs. Cole means to carry things with a high hand to-night. Hope we won't come to grief. Sometimes the motto is 'everything goes,' and then it isn't so easy to hold back and stand for the things you ought to. I depend on you, Nan, to keep a level head, for some of us'll have to act as ballast or we'll all go under."

Nan's face glowed with gratification. "All right, John," she responded staunchly, and then, Mrs. Cole giving the signal, in an instant the roomful seemed to fling itself helter-skelter to the hall-door, fastening boas and mufflers as it went, all eager and breathless to be off. There was a deal of laughing and exclaiming, shrieking and protesting as the girls were bundled, one after another, into the sleigh.

"Is this you, Lu?"

"Yes. O dear! I have lost my veil. No, here it is, dragged under my chin."

"I thought I was to sit next to you, Nan!"

"Oh, that's all right, Mary's there, and it's too late to change now. No matter."

John Gardiner leaped up.

"I say there, Mike, hold your horses for a second. Would you mind moving down a place, Mary? Thanks! Mrs. Cole said I was to sit next to Nan, and as we are all under her orders to-night I'm bound to obey. There! this is what I call festive! 'A thorn between two roses,' eh?" and he settled himself comfortably between the two girls with a great, hearty laugh and a final "Ready!" at which word the horses started into a brisk trot. Their bells broke into a silver chime; the sleigh swept smoothly over the glaze of snow, and the evening's fun began.

Some one had brought a tin horn, and this was blown with such a vim that conversation was impossible. But remarks and retorts were shouted from one side to the other, and the tamest of them brought forth peals of laughter.

The heaven above them was densely black, and out of it flashed innumerable stars like sparks white-hot and quivering with inward fire. But the wind that swept across the sky was so cold that it made it seem to contract and retreat and leave the shivering world an inconceivable depth below.

Swathed and bundled as they were, the girls very soon began to feel the deadly chill in the icy air.

"Nan's shivering like an ash-pan!" John cried out suddenly. "Has anybody got an extra shawl or something they can lend her?"

"Hush!" returned the girl, trying to control her trembling, "it's nothing; I'm all right."

"Pity she can't keep warm with John Gardiner beside her!" Mrs. Cole suggested.

In the shadow Nan's teeth came together with a snap of disgust. She saw now what it was in Mrs. Cole that offended Miss Blake. She had never noticed it before, but it had been there, and she knew it. John made no retort, while the others laughed and applauded.

"Here, Nan!" spoke up some one at the other end of the sleigh, "here's a cigarette. Take it and warm yourself before its genial blaze," and it was passed along from hand to hand, its ruddy point glinting out in the shadow as it went along. When it came to Mary, instead of handing it on at once, she held it a

moment, then suddenly raised it to her lips.

"Hey, there! Turn off the draught!" cried its owner merrily at sight of the newly-glowing tip.

"Shut down the damper!" shouted some one else.

"I dare you to smoke it!" laughed Mrs. Cole.

Mary deliberately took a long puff.

Nan leaned back behind John and laid her gloved hand impulsively on Mary's shoulder. "O Mary!" she protested in a whisper. "Don't. Please! It'll make you sick."

But the girl was not to be thwarted. She shook off Nan's hand impatiently.

"Mind your own business!" she replied, and took another puff.

On they swept through the icy air, across the snow-covered country, amid the white night. The horn blew; the voices sang and shouted, and finally the sleigh swung up before the hospitable road-house, where every window was alight and their steaming supper awaited them.

It was harder to get out of the sleigh than it had been to get in it, for joints that at first had been limber and strong were now stiff and cramped from cold and disuse, and the girls made a sorry show, limping and halting from the sleigh to the house. When Nan first gained the ground she could hardly stand, but a little vigorous exercise soon sent the blood tingling through her veins again and unknotted her muscles, and she was about to run gayly up the path when she felt a hand upon her shoulder, and looking round saw Mary Brewster beside her, her face ghastly and drawn in the pallid moonlight and her chin quivering weakly in a manner that Nan saw at once was not the effect of the cold.

"Lean on my shoulder and I'll get you up to the house in a jiff," she said, in a low whisper.

Mary clung to her, wavering and faint, without a word, and in the confusion no one noticed her plight. Nan had fairly to drag her up the steps, and then again up the staircase to the room the woman of the place had showed them when Nan

had drawn her aside and told her of their dilemma.

"It's the cold!" gasped Mary, crying abjectly between her spasms of misery.

"No such thing!" returned Nan stoutly. "It's that villainous cigarette. But never mind now. There! Don't think of anything but getting better. I'll stroke your head for you. It must be aching terribly."

So she soothed and comforted the girl as best she could, and the kind mistress of the house came up every now and then with offers of help and reports of how the supper was progressing below, and after a while Mary grew quieter and could do something beside moan and cry and wring her hands over her own wretchedness.

"Nan," she whispered presently in a conscious-smitten voice, "I want you to leave me and go down stairs. You've given up the best part of the fun for me, but you shan't lose it all. Please go down!"

Nan shook her head. "No, you don't, ma'am!" she declared cheerfully, and Mary was too exhausted to argue the question. She felt deliciously drowsy and the freedom from pain made her tearfully happy. Vague, dreamy thoughts were wandering through her brain, and one of them was that Nan had been very kind to her. She had not deserved it. She had been mean to Nan. She admitted it. She ought to beg her forgiveness. It was so good to be out of pain that she was willing to do anything to prove her gratitude. She opened her eyes and saw Nan bending over her with a face full of sympathy. She put up her hands and drew the face down to hers, her lip trembling like a little child's.

"Kiss me, Nan!"

Nan kissed her.

"I want you to forgive me. I've been hateful to you and you've been generous and kind and—I love you for it. I'd like to be your friend—if you'd let me, after the way I've treated you."

Nan kissed her again. "Never mind that now. We'll begin all over, and I guess I can behave a little better myself. Now go to sleep and get a good nap before it's time to go home."

CHAPTER XVII

CONSEQUENCES

As soon as she saw that Mary had fallen soundly asleep Nan rose and slipped noiselessly down stairs. She had no trouble in finding the supper-room, for she had only to follow the echoing sounds to be led directly to the door. She stood a moment on the threshold before she laid her hand upon the knob. It seemed to her she had never heard such a hub-bub, but as she listened she seemed to hear, over and above it all, Miss Blake's soft voice saying quietly:

"If you and the other girls have no more careful a chaperone than Mrs. Cole, I am afraid your party will prove a rather uproarious one."

"Rather uproarious!" Nan smiled, as she repeated the words to herself. Then she turned the knob and pushed open the door.

The clamor surged louder than ever, and for a second seemed almost to stun her. Dishes were clattering, and every one seemed doing his or her best to add to the tumult and confusion. No one noticed Nan standing dumbly in the doorway, and it was only when some one's eye fell upon her as she took a step or two forward that there was a cry of "Hullo! Here's Nan!" and she was pulled to the table, forced into a chair, and plied with all sorts of dishes and questions, until she put her hands to her ears and begged for mercy.

"Here's some salad! Take this!"

"The jelly's most gone and what's left of it is melted. But you're welcome to it such as it is and what there is of it."

"Where have you been all this time?"

"We've been calling you every sort of a name for being so rude as to stay away from the supper."

"Oh, Nan had her good reason," shouted Mrs. Cole, pushing back her chair and springing to her feet.

"Come, girls and boys!" she cried shrilly, "it's getting late. If we want to dance we'd better be about it."

Of course that led to a general uprising, and in a moment the whole tableful was swarming toward the parlor.

"How do you like it, Nan?" asked John Gardiner, quizzically, coming and leaning toward her to whisper the question in her ear, as they stood at one side waiting for the music to begin.

"Like it!" repeated Nan, "I think Mrs. Cole's simply—well, I'm sorry she was ever asked to come. It would all have been so different if we had had Mrs. Andrews or Mrs. Hawes or—just imagine Miss Blake acting as she has to-night!"

"I can't imagine it!" returned John, emphatically, "and worse yet, Mike is in no condition to drive us home. He's been drinking. I went out to see if the horses were all right and being fed, you know, and there I heard about it. Mike simply mustn't drive."

Nan pressed her hands together and gave a stifled groan.

"That's what I wanted to tell you," continued John, hurriedly. "It isn't safe to let him try and I'm going to take his place myself. I don't know how long I can stand it, for it's colder than ever and I haven't any driving gloves, but I'll do the best I can and perhaps some of the other fellows will lend a hand."

Nan thought a minute. "I tell you what," she declared at last, "I'm going to do part of the driving myself. I'll sit up front and when you give out I'll lend a hand and we'll get through somehow. I've Miss Blake's gloves and they are as warm as toast."

The anxious look faded a little from John's face, and in spite of himself he showed he was relieved. "I may not have to give up at all," he said at length; "but if I do there's not a fellow in the whole lot I'd rather trust the reins to than you. Come! They're making a move. Get your things on as quick as you can and be where I can see you so we can take our places without making too much

talk."

In a twinkling Nan had flown upstairs, roused Mary and helped her to get ready and was hooded and cloaked and standing in the hall-way. The others came up one by one and presently the big door was opened and they trooped through it out into the waiting sleigh. John gave Nan a hand and she sprang quickly to the place beside him on the driver's seat. They started.

It proved a very different matter sitting on that unsheltered box facing the wind to cuddling, as they had done before, among the warm straw with their faces shielded from the current by the high protecting sides of the sleigh, and after a very little while Nan had to set her teeth to keep from crying out for the pain in her stinging cheeks.

Back of them the rest of the party shouted and tootled and yodeled as cheerfully as ever. Every one wanted to know what had become of Mike, and as nobody could tell but John and Nan, and they wouldn't, the questions went unanswered, and by and by the subject was dropped and only occasional spiteful jokes made by Mrs. Cole at the expense of John's driving and Nan's sitting beside him while he did it.

Happily the horses knew the way home and were eager to get there, so they did not have to be urged or guided. But it was necessary to hold a tight rein, and John's hands soon began to feel tortured and twisted with the strain upon them biting through their numbness like screws of pain. He shook his head determinedly when Nan offered to relieve him, and at last she had to wrench the reins from him in order to take her share of duty and give him a chance to recover a little.

So, taking turns faithfully like good comrades, and exchanging never a word, they got the sleigh and its load safely into town at last, and not one of the gay, irresponsible party knew how difficult an achievement it had been.

Miss Blake herself opened the door to Nan and let her in. One glance at her, as she stood huddled and quivering with cold in the vestibule, was enough. Not a question was asked. She was led gently into the warm dining-room, her hood and cloak taken from her and her frozen hands briskly chafed, while on Miss Blake's tea-stand stood her little brass kettle, bubbling and purring merrily above its alcohol flame, and hinting broadly at soothing cups of something "grateful

and comforting."

Nan let herself be waited upon in a sort of half dream. The agony in her hands had been so great that it had taken all her strength to bear it, and now it was going she felt weak and babyish.

"O dear!" she broke down at last, with a gulp of relief. "It's been an awful evening! Mrs. Cole was detestable. Do you know what she did?" and then came out the whole story pell-mell: all told in Nan's blunt, uncompromising way, and giving Miss Blake a better idea than anything else could have done of just how right she had been in opposing the girl's going under such chaperon age.

She was too wise to say "I told you so," and she was too sincere to try to gloss over the probable result of the episode. She looked grave and thoughtful when Nan had finished her account, and her voice was very serious as she said:

"What the consequences to the others may be I don't know; I dread to think. But I feel that at least you and John and Mary have seen things as they are, and will profit by your experience. You remember the talk we had at Mrs. Newton's before the holidays? She said 'Experience is an expensive school, and only fools can afford to go to it,' or something like that; you are no fool, Nan. I think you will see more and more plainly, as time goes on, that there are some things that we cannot afford to do. We cannot afford to buy a momentary pleasure at the price of a lifetime of regret, and we cannot afford to spend even one day of our life in unscrupulous company. It costs too much. We think we have a very keen business sense, we men and women, but we allow ourselves to be cheated every day we live in a way that would disgust us if we were dealing in dollars and cents. Self-respect is more valuable than momentary enjoyment, yet those boys and girls sold one for the other to-night.

"As for you, I think you made a good exchange, Nan, when you gave up your supper for Mary's sake. Love is a reliable bank, dear, and you can't make too many deposits in it. It always pays compound interest, and the best of it is, it never fails."

Nan's lips opened as if she were about to speak, but she closed them again, and sat looking into the fire very seriously and silently for some time. Then the lips parted again, and this time the words came, though even now with an effort:

"I guess you'll think it's no credit to me that I'm sorry I went. But I am sorry,

and I would be if it had been the best time in the world. I didn't want to go, really, after you said you'd—rather I wouldn't. I didn't, honestly. It won't do either of us any good for me to say now that I wish I had done as you wanted me to. But I do wish it. I've hated myself all along for acting as I did. Now don't let's say anything more about it—but—but—I wanted you to know how I feel."

There was an ominous catch in her voice that warned Miss Blake not to pursue the subject. Nan could humble herself to apologize, but to follow the abasement up by shedding tears on it was too much for her dignity, and she fought against it stolidly.

But the governess knew her well enough by this time to feel assured that what she said was true, and she accepted the clumsy, halting "amende" as gratefully as if it had been the most graceful of acknowledgments.

"Dear me," she broke in, in quite a matter-of-fact way. "Do you know that the small hours are getting to be large hours, and we are sitting here as unconcernedly as if it were just after dinner. Come, let us both get upstairs and to bed as fast as our feet can carry us," and she promptly set the example by extinguishing the lamp and helping Nan to shoulder her armful of wraps.

"Oh, by the way," she said, as they readied the upper hall, and the girl was about to make return of the hood, "you may keep it if you will. Accept it and the gloves, with my love, as a sort of recompense for what other things you have missed this evening."

Nan was too overcome by the richness of the gift to make any response at all for a moment. Then she blurted out awkwardly, though in a very grateful voice:

"You're so good to me it makes me—ashamed. You're always giving me things. It isn't right. You give away everything you have."

Miss Blake lifted her chin and laughed gayly over the cleft in it.

"No, I don't," she returned, tip-toeing to drop the gloves, like a blessing, on the girl's head. "I have one or two things which I keep all for myself. But if I like to give presents, do you know what it's a sign of? It's a sign I'm poor. Poor people are always possessed by a passion for giving presents. It's true! I've always noticed it! Good-night!"

And that was the last Nan heard about the affair from Miss Blake. Unfortunately—or fortunately—it was not the last she heard of it from others, by any means. It was a long, long time before it was allowed to drop.

In the first place, Michael was discharged from the stables, and this led to a vast amount of discussion, for the poor fellow, who was temperate by nature, was thrown out of employment in midwinter, and his predicament seemed a pitiable one to those who really understood the facts in the case.

Miss Blake, when she heard of the affair, had bidden John Gardiner bring the man to her. She heard his story, and then sent him off with a few kindly, encouraging words, and the poor fellow felt comforted in spite of the facts that she had given him neither money nor any definite promise of help. When he had gone she sat for some time thinking busily, her chin in her palms and her elbows propped on the desk in front of her. She was still for so long that John and Nan stole off after a while and tried experiments with the kodak on some back-yard views, and when they came back to Miss Blake's room to ask her opinion on some point of focus they found the place deserted and the governess gone.

The next day Mike was discovered sitting smilingly enthroned in his accustomed place on the lofty box of the livery "broom-carriage," and he vouchsafed the information to congratulating friends that: "Ut's another chanct Oi hav, though how Oi come boy ut ye'll niver know anny moar than Oi do mesilf, for Misther Allen was that set agin me he wuddn't hear a wurrud Oi'd sa'. But Oi have another chanct and ut's mesilf 'll see till ut, ut lasts me me loife-toime."

"O dear!" complained Ruth to Nan, "I never want to hear the name of sleigh-ride again so long as I live. Everywhere I go, they say so significantly: 'We hear you had a very gay time the other night! Well, well! such things wouldn't have been tolerated when I was young!' and then they make some cutting remark about Mrs. Cole, and I'm afraid it's not going to be very pleasant for her after this, for none of our fathers and mothers want to have anything more to do with her. They say her example has been so bad. And one can't have a bit of fun nowadays, for we're all being kept on short rations to pay up for the other night."

But as the weeks passed the gossip died away and then every one breathed freer again.

Latterly Nan was filling her part of the household contract with considerably less ill-will than she had shown at the beginning, but even now there were occasional lamentations when the day was especially enticing, and her spirits rose and soared above the pettiness of bed-making and the degradation of dusting. It took her about twice as long to get through with her share of the work as it took Miss Blake, and she could never console herself with the thought that it was because the governess shirked. Occasionally she let her own tasks go "with a lick and a promise," as Delia described it, bat when she saw the thoroughness with which Miss Blake did even the least important thing she had the grace to be ashamed and to determine on a better course in the future. But before she really settled down to a stricter habit of conscientiousness something happened that gave her more of an impulse than a course of lectures would have done.

The winter had been a long and unusually severe one, but by March it seemed reasonable to suppose that its backbone was broken. Nan had preferred the care of the conservatory to the duller and less interesting work of dish-washing, and Miss Blake, in letting her take her choice, had only exacted the promise that her charge was not to be neglected. Nan had, as we know, given her hand upon it, and so the matter stood. The governess never "nagged" her about her duties; she took it for granted that the girl would honorably keep her word.

And indeed for some time she was tolerably thorough, watering the plants and loosening the soil about their roots; sponging the leaves of the rubber trees and palms and picking off all the shriveled leaves and faded petals from the flowering shrubs and keeping the temperature at as nearly the right degree as was possible with such varying weather and their simple device for heating the place.

But she found it was much more of a tax than she had first supposed. At the start plants had seemed so much more inviting than dishes that she had appropriated the care of them at once, and now that she discovered what her selection really involved she felt almost aggrieved, and was inclined to be cross when she saw Miss Blake's tasks finished for the day while her own was scarcely more than begun.

"Provoking things!" she would declare as she dashed a double spray of water on the rubber trees that did not need it, and gave but a mere sprinkle to the blossoming azalias that did: "if I'd known what a nuisance you were I can tell

you I never would have taken you! Here! will you come off, or won't you?" and she would give some wilted blossom a vicious jerk that would set the entire plant shaking in its pot as though it were trembling with distress at the rough treatment it was receiving. If Miss Blake heard her she gave no sign. Sometimes when they passed a florist's window she would stop and look wistfully in at the bewildering display, and Nan would know that she was longing to go in and buy some especially fascinating orchid or unusually rare crysanthemum. But she would not yield to her impulse, for on one occasion the girl had said with a shrug of impatience:

"For goodness' sake don't get any more. It's all I can do to attend to the bothersome things now. I wish they were all in Hong Kong—every one of them."

"Provoking things!"

"Provoking things!"

So since then there had been no further additions to the conservatory, and Miss Blake had to check her horticultural ardor or confine it to her window-sill upstairs.

But the plants throve in spite of their ungracious nursing, and when she was not irritated by them Nan was very proud of the fine showing they made.

"I think that double, white azalia is one of most beautiful things I ever saw: so pure and delicate!" said Mary Brewster to Miss Blake, hanging over it in honest admiration one leaden-skied day when she come to carry Nan off to her house to dinner and was waiting while the girl went upstairs to get ready.

"Yes," replied the governess, "I love it! But then, I love all the dear things—even those poor woolly-leaved little primroses that have almost less charm for me than any flowers I know. I'm so glad they are all doing so well. I can't bear to bring a plant into the house and then have it die. It seems almost like murder. But now I must run away. I have an appointment with my dentist at three. It is very good of you to ask Nan to dinner to-night, and I'm doubly glad it happens as it does, for she would have to dine alone if she stayed at home, for I have to go out of town on business and cannot get back tonight. Delia will call for Nan at nine o'clock. Good-bye, and have a pleasant evening!" and she caught up her satchel and was off in a twinkling.

But after she had let herself out of the front door she came back and called Nan to the head of the stairs.

"It's bitterly cold," she said. "I had no idea it was so severe! Be sure you wrap up warmly, Nan, and don't forget your gloves and leggings when you come home. Oh, and the plants! You'll not fail to look after them when you get in—the last thing before you go to bed? I think it will freeze to-night, and they will need extra heat. Now, good-bye again, and God bless you!"

Nan waved her a vigorous adieu with the towel she held in her hand, and this time the governess was off in earnest.

The two girls followed her out not long after, and went laughing and chatting down the street.

"I've asked Grace and Lu and Ruth to come in after dinner, and we're going to have a candy-pull. I didn't ask John, but I told him what was up, and he said he and Harley and Everett had been wanting to call for some time, and as I'd be sure to be in, he thought they might as well do it to-night. I told him he'd have to 'call' loud, for we'd be in the kitchen, and probably wouldn't hear him, and he said he'd see to it that we did; so I suppose we'll have them too."

Among them all it proved a gay evening, and seemed unusually so, for of late jollifications had been rare. As Ruth said, "they were all kept on short rations to pay up for the other night."

It appeared to Nan when Delia arrived that she had made a mistake in the hour, and had appeared at eight instead of nine; but as it happened Delia purposely delayed in order that her girl might have an extra sixty minutes, and when she pointed to the clock, whose short hand pointed to ten, Nan could only shake her head, and say: "Well, I suppose so—but it doesn't seem as if it could be."

It was so cold that Delia had brought an additional wrap for her, and the girl was glad to avail herself of it when she felt the nip of the freezing air.

"Why, it's much worse than it was this afternoon," she said. "If this is spring, I'd just as lief have winter. I tell you what it is, Delia, it won't take me long to tumble into bed. I'm frozen stiff already. I hope you locked up before you came out, so all we'll have to do will be to go upstairs. I hate to putter about in the cold."

It seemed strange to go to bed without Miss Blake's cheery "Good-night!" ringing in her ears. It was the first time the governess had spent a night away from home since she first came to the house, almost six months ago, and Nan devoutly hoped there wouldn't be a repetition of the performance in another half-year. Her empty room gave one "les homeseeks."

In order to forget it and to escape the cold, Nan cut short her preparations for

the night and got into bed with as little delay as possible. She cuddled comfortably between her smooth sheets and soft blankets and in a moment was soundly asleep.

When she waked the next morning it was with a vague feeling of responsibility, as though she had gone to sleep with a weight of some calamity on her heart. As she dressed she tried to recall it but there was nothing in yesterday's experience to depress her and she ran down to breakfast determined to shake off the haunting impression. But all through the meal it clung to her and she could not get rid of it. To be especially virtuous in Miss Blake's absence and show her that she was "dependable," she took the dish-washing upon herself and got through with it speedily. Then up to her room to set that in order, and then down to the conservatory to attend to the plants.

It was just as this juncture that Delia heard a wild cry of distress ring through the house. She ran upstairs in a fright and found Nan standing at the threshold of the conservatory door gazing in and wringing her hands. The sight that met her eyes was a pitiful one. There was not one plant among them all that had outlived the night. The leaves of all were frozen black.

CHAPTER XVIII

"CHESTER NEWCOMB"

"Oh, do you think I could?" demanded Nan, eagerly.

Miss Blake considered a moment. "I don't see any reason why it might not be arranged."

"It's right by the sea and Ruth says they never fuss about clothes down there. Just anything will do."

The governess smiled. "Nevertheless I think you will need a couple of changes. I have sometimes been asked to visit country houses where 'anything would do,' and I've generally found that it all depends on what one understands

by 'anything.'"

"I can wear a shirt-waist in the morning and in the afternoon I can wear a—a—another one," announced Nan.

Miss Blake laughed. "You poor child," she said, "I do believe you haven't much beside for the summer."

"You see," broke in Nan, shamefacedly, "Delia didn't know anything about styles and I didn't—care, and so we sort of let clothes go. It isn't because father wouldn't want me to have nice things."

Miss Blake took her up quickly. "I know it is not. And now we must set to work at once to get you properly provided, for you are old enough now to 'care,' not necessarily about styles, but certainly about making a creditable appearance, and I want you to have a suitable wardrobe so that you may always keep yourself tidy."

It seemed to Nan that the wardrobe Miss Blake proceeded to provide for her was something more than merely "tidy." The frocks were simple, it is true, but very dainty and tasteful, and in her new interest in them and the way they were made she quite forgot to complain at the extra inch or two which the governess caused to be added to the length of the skirts.

There had been some stormy scenes when the winter dresses were being made, Nan insisting that she would not wear "such horrid dangling things that were forever getting in her way." She wanted her skirts made short, and if she couldn't have her skirts made short, etc.

The skirts had not been made short, and these were even longer. Clad in them Nan looked very tall and womanly, and Delia realized for the first time that her "baby" had ceased to be a little girl.

So at last the preparations were completed and the girl started off to spend a fortnight with Ruth at the Andrews' beautiful summer home by the sea. Then came gay times. Early morning dips in the surf; clam-bakes on the beach; long, lazy hours spent on the veranda, when the day was too warm for exercise, and when it was cooler, fine spins along the hard, white sand, for miles beside the shimmering sea.

Nan grew as brown as an Indian, for she scorned shade-hats, and oftenest had nothing on her head at all but her own thick thatch of riotous brown hair.

Ruth's brother taught Nan to swim, and she entered into it with so much zest that to his surprise he found his only difficulty lay in trying to restrain her. Nothing seemed to daunt her, and whatever any one else did she immediately wanted to try.

"The fact of the matter is," young Mr. Andrews declared one day, "you ought to have been a boy. You'd make a capital fellow."

"I know it," admitted Nan, frankly. "I love boys' sports and pranks, and to think that all my life I've just got to 'sit on a cushion and sew up a seam.' It's perfectly awful."

"Fancy!" exclaimed Miss Webster, a fellow-guest, and a young lady whom, by the way, Nan regarded with a good deal of disdain, because she seemed what John Gardiner called "girly-girly," and was flirtatious. "Fancy! Why, I wouldn't be a man for anything in the world! Just think what hideous clothes they wear."

"Thank you, Miss Webster," retorted Mr. Andrews with mock solemnity.

"Oh, I didn't mean you," she returned with an emphasis and a soft glance of the eyes. "You really dress extremely well. I adore your neck-ties and your boots are dreams."

Helen Andrews tried to hide a scowl of irritation. Alice Webster was her friend, and she disliked having her display herself in her worst light. She knew her to be a warm-hearted, honorable girl whose gravest fault, which, after all, might be only a foible, was her tendency to turn coquettish when she was in the society of gentlemen.

Ruth rose and beckoned Nan to follow her.

"Isn't she a lunatic?" she demanded, as soon as they were out of ear-shot.

"Perfect idiot!" responded Nan. "I should think your brother would just duck her in the water some fine day when she's making those sheep's eyes at him. I would if I were in his place."

"Oh, he doesn't care. He thinks she's lots of fun. Besides, he's going away to-morrow, and won't see her again unless Helen makes her stay longer."

"What'll she do for some one to make eyes at?"

"Don't know. Helen generally has a lot of company, but just now there seems to be a famine in the land!"

Suddenly Nan stood stock still.

"What's the matter?" demanded Ruth.

Nan waited a moment, and then bent over and whispered something in her ear.

"Magnificent! We'll do it!" cried Ruth, clapping her hands, and breaking into a peal of laughter.

"Not to-night—while your brother is here!" protested Nan.

"Of course not. To-morrow though, sure. Carl will be gone and the coast clear, and meanwhile we'll drill."

For the remainder of the day the girls were absorbed in something which took them to their room and kept them there, and they only appeared when dinner was announced, and the family already seated at the table.

"Well, Miss Nan," Carl Andrews exclaimed, "I wish you were a boy, and I'd take you up into the mountains with me and teach you how to handle a gun."

"What fun!" cried Nan.

"Yes, it would be great sport, and I warrant you'd like camp-life, too. It's just the sort of thing that you'd enjoy. Only I'm afraid it would agree with you so well that you would grow an inch a week, and considering you are a girl you'd better not get any taller."

"O dear! Don't say that," groaned Nan, "for I probably shall grow lots more as it is. You see I'm not quite sixteen yet. Do people ever get their growth before they are sixteen, Mrs. Andrews?"

"Oh, sometimes," replied the lady kindly. "I scarcely think you will grow any more, my dear. But I wouldn't worry about it in any case if I were you."

"But I don't want to tower over everybody," wailed the girl. "Just think, I'm head and shoulders above Miss Blake now!"

"But Miss Blake is a 'pocket Venus!' Just as high as one's heart," said Carl Andrews. "I took her home the other night and she barely reached to my shoulder."

"Then you and Nan must be about the same height!" said Helen.

Nan made a grimace.

"Good rye grows high!" quoted Miss Webster, good-naturedly. And then the elder Mr. Andrews, who was a little deaf, began to talk about the crops, probably thinking they had been discussing grain, since he heard the word "rye."

Early the next morning Carl Andrews started off, and the family waved him a vigorous good-bye from the veranda steps, and after he had gone the different members of the household went about their own particular business, and did not meet again until luncheon-time.

It proved an unusually warm day, and when evening came the young people were glad to sit quietly on the veranda in the dark and enjoy the heartening breeze that swept up from the sea. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews had gone, as was their custom, out driving immediately after dinner, and so the four girls were left to themselves. They were just laughing over Ruth's description of one of Nan's exploits when the maid appeared bearing a letter on a salver.

"For Miss Cutler," she said, and handed it to Nan.

The girl excused herself and hastened indoors to read it. A moment later she called to Ruth.

"It may be news from home," surmised Helen. "I hope it's nothing serious. Her father is away; has been for two years or more. I believe they expect him home this fall," and then she and Alice fell to talking of other things and Helen was just wishing Carl could see her friend in this mood, and know how womanly and sensible she could be when suddenly they both stopped talking at the sight

of a man's figure coming up the long pathway from the outer road.

"Who can it be?" whispered Helen.

"A tramp?" suggested Miss Webster.

"No. A tramp wouldn't come straight up to the house. It must be a caller; possibly a friend of Carl's," murmured Helen.

The stranger came directly toward the veranda, but at the steps he paused a moment as though embarrassed at sight of the two girls unexpectedly rising to meet him from out of the shadow.

"Is Mr. Andrews in?" he asked, in a low, shy voice, and Helen said she was sorry, but neither her father nor brother were at home. To which did he refer?

"To Mr. Carl Andrews," and then it was explained that he and Mr. Carl Andrews were great chums. They—

"Won't you take a seat," asked Helen, hospitably, and he accepted at once while she introduced Miss Webster and herself and he gave his name as Chester Newcomb.

"Oh, yes; I've often heard Carl speak of you," declared Helen, and then she had to excuse herself to answer Ruth who was calling to her vociferously from upstairs.

"I'm afraid Nan has had bad news," she said, anxiously. "Excuse me, please. I'll go and see what she wants and be back directly."

Mr. Newcomb and Miss Webster fell at once into an easy chat. That is, Miss Webster did. She rattled on in her least attractive manner, and became so absorbed that she only noticed how long Helen had been absent when Mr. Newcomb rose to go and she had not yet returned.

"Pray don't call her," he entreated. "She probably is very much engaged. I—I am spending a couple of weeks here and shall be charmed to come again if I may."

Miss Webster could only in turn assure him that she—that Helen and she

would also be charmed, and then he bowed himself off, striding down the path with a free, somewhat boyish swing, and disappearing at length in the shadow of the shrubbery.

He came frequently after that and the girls began to chaff Miss Webster about her "conquest" for he never seemed to care to come when the rest were about, but chose such times for his calls when he and Alice could stroll in the garden after dusk or sit and watch the sea and the stars from the shadow of the broad veranda.

It was very romantic and Miss Webster wore a dreamy, rapt expression nowadays that sent Nan and Ruth off into fits of laughter when they were out of the range of her eyes and ears.

"What a pity it is he can't be here to see?" gasped Ruth.

"Oh, he sees enough, never you fear," Nan assured her. "When one casts sheep's eyes like that they hit even in the dark! Poor thing! She is such a goose. Last night when he told her he was going to-morrow she grew quite tragic and __"

"O Nan! How could you listen?" cried Ruth in a shocked voice but immediately after going into another spasm of laughter.

"She quotes Shakespeare at him," gasped Nan, convulsed with mirth, and not a bit abashed. "You ought to hear. It's rich!"

"Well, we must see that the coast is clear to-night for I s'pose she will be particularly touching, and Helen is getting awfully hard to manage. It wouldn't do to interrupt them at the last minute just when he was getting pathetic maybe. I wonder what he'll do?"

"He'll be real dignified," declared Nan, solemnly. "You wait. He'll be eloquent even if he is 'only a boy' as she says."

So the two girls disappeared utterly after dinner, and when Mr. Newcomb arrived he found Miss Webster quite alone, for Helen also was nowhere to be seen.

"She hasn't been very well lately," Miss Webster explained. "She looks

terribly pale and anxious and I'm afraid she has something on her mind. Her headaches worry me!" and then she fell back into her poor, little artificial manner again and sighed and looked sentimental and was altogether "idiotic" as Nan would have said, and their two low-pitched voices could be heard murmuring away in the stillness until poor Helen, who was really half sick with a nervous headache upstairs, could have cried with irritation and pain.

She sat up on the bed when Ruth came into the room, and attacked her at once.

"I can't stand it another minute. It's driving me wild!"

"Hush! It's only to-night. This is the last time. Don't make a scene!" pleaded Ruth.

"I'll never get over it," wailed Helen. "It simply is the most detestable thing I ever knew. In our own house too! If this weren't the last time I—"

What she would do was never discovered for just at that moment a shrill scream ran through the night, followed by the exclamation in a familiar voice:

"Great Scott! My wig!"

And Ruth and Helen rushed below to find Miss Webster in a state of collapse on one of the veranda settees and Nan standing over her, clad in complete male attire, and fanning her frantically with a curly, blonde wig which she wrenched by force from the trellis where it had inadvertently caught.

"I was just leaning back and being beautiful, and it got hooked on a wire or something, and when I went to get up it stayed there and gave me away!" she promptly explained.

Then there was a scene.

Miss Webster wept! Nan lamented! Ruth laughed, and Helen scolded, and no one heard a word any one else was saying.

But after a time every one grew calmer.

"O Helen! I've made such a fool of myself," cried Alice abjectly. "How can

you ever respect me again?"

"Respect you? Think of me!" sobbed Helen. "Can you ever forgive me for knowing it all this time and letting it go on? Nan, you wretched girl, come here this minute and beg Miss Webster's pardon. Ruth Andrews, this is your work, Miss! See what you have done, and in your own house, too!"

But at this time Alice surprised them all. She put a gentle hand on Helen's arm and said quite simply, and with a touching dignity:

"Please don't ask anybody to beg my pardon. I deserved the lesson! The girls needn't say a word. I—I—I am a goose, but I'll really try to be better, and the kindest thing they can do is never to refer to it again."

The rare tears sprang to Nan's eyes, and she grasped Miss Webster's hand in a grip that hurt.

"You're downright fine!" she said, "and I'll never forget you as long as I live."

And then she had to beat a hasty retreat to escape Mr. Andrews and his wife, who were just driving up to the door.

But the secret leaked out, and she and Ruth were reprimanded sharply by Mrs. Andrews who, for once in her life, turned severe and called them sternly to account, and it was Alice Webster herself who interceded for them, and begged that everything be forgiven and forgotten.

They were her devoted slaves after that, and Nan, whose fortnight had been extended, at the Andrews' request, to a month, took especial delight in fetching and carrying for her to the close of her stay, and in every possible manner making her feel how sincerely she regarded and respected her.

As for Miss Webster, she seemed like another girl. In fact, Carl Andrews declared that he had never known what a "good sort" she was and said he was mighty glad they had prevailed upon her to stay.

He never knew why the mere mention of his friend, Chester Newcomb's name should cause such a convulsion in the household, and when that gentleman finally arrived, and the family met him for the first time, it certainly seemed strange that they should all redden and stammer as if they had been "awkward

nursery children appearing at dinner."

Nan especially could not be induced to have anything to say when he was near, and when Carl discovered this he took a mischievous delight in forcing her into his company and watching her try to "squirm" out of it again. Miss Webster took pity on her and in the simplest, most natural way came to her rescue whenever she was being victimized, and by and by it became apparent even to Carl himself that "Ches and Miss Webster hit it off first-rate."

But at last Nan's visit really drew to a close, and, in spite of her reluctance at leaving these good friends, she felt satisfied to go home—she did not stop to ask herself why.

Town seemed very stuffy and tame after the freedom of the country and the sea, but when Miss Blake asked her if she would like to go away again she replied: "Not alone," and then blushed shamefacedly and tried to change the subject.

While she was gone the governess had committed an extravagance. She had bought a new bicycle.

"What under the sun did you do that for?" demanded Nan. "Your other was a beauty and as good as new."

"But it wasn't new," suggested Miss Blake, lamely.

"Pooh!" sniffed Nan.

"I wanted this year's model."

"Oh, very well! If you can be as particular as all that! How much did they allow you on the other machine? I hope you made a good bargain," said Nan.

"I didn't let them have the other machine," hesitated Miss Blake. "It didn't seem worth while. Besides I may want to use it myself sometimes. Won't you come down and see the new one?"

Of course Nan did not delay, and she went into raptures over the beautiful wheel, praising it generously as she examined every point with the eye of a connoisseur.

"But it seems to me a pretty high frame!" she speculated, standing off and taking it in from a distance.

"I wanted a high frame," responded Miss Blake.

"Seems to me pretty well up in the air for you, even with the saddle down," insisted Nan, doubtfully.

"You try it," suggested the governess. "If it suits you it will certainly be too high for me."

"It does suit me," announced Nan, balancing herself by a hand against the wall. "You'd better send it back and get a lower frame."

But Miss Blake shook her head.

"No, I like this and I'm going to keep it. But of course if it is too high I can't use it, and so—so—I'm afraid you'll have to, Nan. You won't mind, will you? I mean getting your birthday present this way ahead of time? I thought if we waited you'd lose the whole summer."

Nan flung herself from the wheel in a rapture of surprise. It seemed too good to be true. She could not believe it. Miss Blake had her thanks more in the girl's radiant delight than in the mere words she spoke, though these were genuine enough and full enough of gratitude.

All through the long season after that, whenever the heat was not too intense, Nan and her wheel could have been seen flashing through the Park or taking a well-earned rest in the cool shadow of the Dairy porch, where a sip of water seemed sweeter than ambrosia and a fugitive breeze more aromatic than any zephyr from Araby the blest.

Sometimes she and Miss Blake took longer trips into the country, and then the governess had to be constant in her warnings to her against her reckless fashion of riding. Again and again she spoke, and Nan always meant to take heed and then always forgot, and fell back into her old way once more.

"I can't resist such a coast as that was," she would plead. "And if I got off for every old man who thinks he has the right to the road I'd be dismounting all the while."

"I beg you not to take such risks," Miss Blake would rejoin. "It simply spoils my ride for me, Nan, to see you so reckless. Such head-long wheeling has nothing to recommend it. It is neither expert nor admirable. When you fling along so blindly you are merely doing a foolish, heedless thing and running serious risks. I am sure you will come to grief some day."

"Don't you worry! I am as much at home in my saddle as I would be in a rocking-chair. See me ride without touching the handle-bars!"

And presently she would lose all recollection of her good resolve, and go hurling on at a break-neck speed in the van of some skittish horse, or slowly zig-zag ahead in the path of some stolid coachman, causing him to anathematize all wheelmen in general and this especially provoking specimen in particular, while her watching companion held her breath in trembling alarm.

At last Miss Blake told Nan decidedly that unless she were willing to ride properly she must give it up altogether.

"I cannot stand this strain any longer," she said, in real distress.

She and Mrs. Newton and the girl herself were taking their first ride in company since the early summer. Now it was autumn, and the leaves were turning. Mrs. Newton had just come back from the country, and Nan was eager to display her skill, which she felt had improved not a little since their neighbor's departure.

The fresh wind, keen and bracing as it came from the sea, filled her with a sense of new strength and energy, and she felt the effect of the invigorating atmosphere in her blood. A scent of burning leaves was in the air, and the indescribable suggestion of coming winter gayety. To-day the road was crowded with carriages. They thronged the fashionable drive, and lent it a peculiarly animated aspect. Equestrians and wheelmen were also out in full force, and the presence of so many people set Nan's blood tingling with excitement. She tossed her head back, as the governess uttered her decision, with the impatience of a mettlesome horse.

"Now remember!" warned Miss Blake.

Perhaps it was just this extra little warning that proved too much for Nan's overcharged, headstrong spirit—or perhaps she did not hear in the midst of the

noise of hoofs and wheels about them.

They were spinning noiselessly along the outer edge of the driveway leading from the Park entrance to the cycle path, when suddenly Nan gave a quick run forward and then made a swift dart for the other side, weaving perilously in and out among the horses and moving vehicles, dexterously dodging, veering, and turning until Miss Blake's heart throbbed thickly from dread and her pulses beat heavily in her temples.

"I must overtake her," she cried to her companion. "She will be killed! I must save her!"

Even as she spoke her breath caught in a short gasp, and she turned suddenly rigid and ashen white.

Coming up the road at full speed was a horse, whose driver, sitting close over its haunches in his narrow sulky, was racing his animal against one similarly driven and urging it on to its utmost pace for winning honor.

At his approach a clear path was made for him by the turning right and left of the throng—by all save Nan.

She heard a man's voice shout hoarsely to her. The oncoming horse had the speed of a racer.

A spirit of mad defiance possessed her. She steered straight as an arrow before her. Then, like a flash, she veered, dodging from under the horse's very nose. She had accomplished her feat very cleverly.

But alas, for Nan!

Even as she sped on, full of the exquisite thrill of exultation in her own prowess she heard behind her the sound of a dull, fear-thickened cry. Then a sudden confusion of voices and the cessation of rolling wheels. She stopped and turned.

The onward sweep of the mass of vehicles had been instantaneously checked. The road was clear for some rods before her and in the centre of this open space lay—a broken bicycle.

A little group of men crowded close about some central object on the ground. Women were wringing their hands and weeping hysterically, and one woman—it was Mrs. Newton—was crying wildly,

"Let me go to her! Let me go!"

The circle of men upon the ground made way, and then Nan saw what it was around which they knelt.

She gave a quick, fierce cry of pain. The little governess lay quite still and motionless. Her eyes were closed; her face was white as marble. All her bright hair was lying loose about her temples—and it was streaked with blood.

CHAPTER XIX

IN MISS BLAKE'S ROOM

Nan never forgot that scene. It seemed to her afterward, that even in the midst of the horror that almost stupefied her and made her blind, it had been indelibly photographed upon her brain to the merest detail with torturing distinctness.

She could see Mrs. Newton's drawn, livid face, and the stern, set expression of the men who gathered about in knots here and there discussing the accident in whispers, or arranging the best means of getting back to town. A doctor, who happened to be near at hand, had sprung forward at the first moment of alarm, and he and a strange, kind-faced woman were together bending over the prostrate form between them, while over all arched the high dome of the blue October sky, beyond them stretched the level road, narrowing in the distance to a point that seemed to pierce the sea, and on either side spread the branches of bordering maple trees, each shining brilliant and gorgeous In the autumn sunlight.

Presently, in response to a demand from the doctor, a low-hung carriage drew out from the ranks of waiting vehicles, and into it was lifted, oh, so carefully! the inert form of the governess, and her head laid upon Mrs. Newton's lap.

Nan pressed close to the wheels.

"Can't I go with her?" she whispered.

Her companion gazed at her blankly for a moment. Then she seemed to realize the question, and answered it.

"No," she replied. "Get my machine, and—and hers, and see that some one carries them back for us—some man will do it."

Then without another word she turned her head away, and slowly, slowly the carriage moved and began its snail's-pace journey townward.

Nan looked helplessly about her.

"Won't some one take the bicycles home?" she pleaded.

She never knew who performed the office. She never cared. She gave some stranger her address without the slightest interest as to whether he was trustworthy or no, and then, mounting her own machine, she sped home as fast as the wheels would turn.

Thus it was that when the dreary little cavalcade reached home at last everything was in readiness for its reception.

There was no difficulty nor delay in getting upstairs, and in an incredibly short time the place had assumed the air of hushed solemnity that always seems to overhang the spot where illness is.

Nan crouched outside the threshold of the sick-room and listened to the low sounds within with a feeling of overwhelming guilt at her heart. She dared not go in.

At last the door was opened, and the physician stepped forward. He saw Nan cowering in the gloom.

"What is this?" he asked kindly.

Nan dragged herself up painfully, as though her limbs had been made of lead.

"Have I—have I—killed her?" she managed to gasp.

The doctor bent on her a pitying look.

"Killed her?" he repeated. "I do not know what you mean. Do you mean will she die? No, my child, not if we can help it—and God grant we may. But it may be long, very long, before she is well. She has been badly hurt, poor little soul!"

Then followed a term of harrowing suspense. Nights when Nan thought the sun had forgotten how to rise—so long they seemed and never ending.

The fever that followed the first season of lethargy raged fierce and hot for many a day, and the delirium that accompanied it was difficult to quell. It seemed at times as though it must burn the patient's very life away. It was during these days that Nan learned how much she had caused her friend to suffer. What, in her moments of consciousness, she had never permitted to pass her lips, now in these hours of delirium she dwelt on and repeated over and over. It was of Nan, always of Nan that she spoke.

Nan must have this; Nan must not do that. It was her duty to protect Nan and guard her. She followed the girl in perilous journeys; she tried to guide her from dangerous courses. She betrayed her anxious care for her in every word she uttered. And then sometimes she would say something that Nan could not comprehend.

"Florence's child!" she would murmur. "Florence's child!" and then she would catch herself back with a sudden look of fear as though she had betrayed a secret.

"My mother's name was Florence," Nan would say brokenly. "But I don't know what she means. She never knew my mother."

At last came a change, and then Nan was excluded from the room.

"You might excite her, and she must be carefully guarded against any chance of that," the doctor said in explanation.

But Nan was almost too happy to care. The first sound of the low, sweet voice speaking intelligently sent a thrill of passionate gratitude to her heart.

How she and Delia plotted and planned for the invalid. How Nan made the room to fairly blossom with the flowers that daily came pouring in from all manner of strange and unexpected sources.

"I never knew she had such lots of friends," the girl said one day to Delia.

The woman looked down at her with a flash of superior understanding in her eyes.

"She's a wise one," she said. "She goes her own way, and it's little she asks of any one and it's less she says. But what she does ain't little, I can tell you, Nan. I know of many a thing she's done for those who, if they haven't got money, have the grateful hearts in them to remember kindness and to love the one that shows it to them. Some day you'll know her for what she is, and then you'll never strive against her any more and you'll love her as many another has done before you."

The girl gazed straight into the woman's eyes. "I love her now, Delia," she said. "I've loved her from the first minute—only I didn't know it some of the time and the rest I was a horrid—little—beast, so there!"

Oh, the happy days that Nan spent in that quiet room above stairs. How she grew to love it! The sunshine coming through the curtains and making great patches of mellow light upon the floor seemed more bright here than anywhere else. If it rained, this place was less dreary than any other, and in sun or storm it was the only spot that Nan felt had the power to quell her wayward mood when it rose against her will and urged her back to her hoydenish exploits once more.

Miss Blake, lying back against her snowy pillows, had a look of such inexpressible sweetness to Nan that often and often the girl would fling herself beside the bed with her arms about the fragile figure, crying:

"Oh, you dear, you dear! how I love you!" and then the other, with a very happy smile would invariably answer, "And I you, Nan."

It was all understood between them now. Pardon had been humbly asked and freely granted, and there was now only the remaining regret of impending separation; the dread of the parting that was to come.

At one time they had thought that it would occur within a few weeks' time, and the joy that Nan felt in her father's return was overshadowed by the grief she

experienced in the coming loss of her friend.

But now the date of Mr. Cutler's home-coming had been postponed. He would leave Bombay as he had at first intended, but business would detain him in London, and he could not expect to reach home until that was completed—so Mr. Turner said.

Thus Nan had to reconcile herself to her disappointment and the indefiniteness of her father's return, in the thought that if her meeting with him was deferred, why, so was her parting from Miss Blake.

The weeks that passed before the governess was fairly convalescent had brought them well into November. They had been busy, helpful weeks for Nan. In her thought for her friend's comfort she had unconsciously learned a lesson in gentleness and patience that nothing else could have taught her. Her voice grew lower, her step lighter, and the touch of her fingers more delicate. All this could never have been accomplished in such a short space by ordinary means, but Love is a magical teacher and he instructed her in his art.

As the dear invalid grew stronger Nan tried to beguile the long hours by reading aloud to her from her favorite authors, sage philosophers, wise poets, and tender tale-tellers. Sometimes she did not at all comprehend the meaning of the pages she read, but Miss Blake was always ready to give her "a lift" over the hardest places, and to her surprise she grew really to love these serious books, and to get an insight into the beauty of their character.

Once in awhile she would take up the daily paper to give her friend an idea of "what was going on in the world," seriously reading discussions about this "bill" or that "question" with absolutely no conception of what the whole thing was about.

One day, it was during the last of November, she sat before the fire in the governess' room feeling especially contented and placidly happy. Miss Blake, safely ensconced among her cushions, was cozily sipping a cup of bouillon.

The room was very still.

Suddenly Nan jumped to her feet, and, clasping her hands high over her head, said, with a luxurious sort of yawn:

"Oh—my! How I'm liking it nowadays. Things are so sort of sweet and cozy. Do you s'pose it's too good to last? Do you s'pose it has anything to do with my trying to be good and not letting my 'angry passions rise'?"

The governess nodded her head, but made no other reply and after an instant Nan slipped to the floor again, and, sitting Turk-fashion beside her companion's knee, considered how possible it would have been for Miss Blake to have taken that occasion to lecture her on the past error of her ways. But she had learned that it was not the governess' way to preach. That nod was as eloquent as a sermon to Nan, and she understood it perfectly.

"Shall I read you something from 'The Tribune'?" she asked, after a moment's musing. And she took up the paper and began searching for the editorial page. When she had found it she set about reading the first leader that came to hand, quite regardless of whether it would prove interesting to her auditor or not. The fact that it was unintelligible to her seemed a sort of guarantee, in her mind, that it would be interesting to Miss Blake. She read on and on until both her breath and the column itself came to a stop.

"You poor child," said the governess affectionately. "Don't read another word of that. How stupid it must be for you. Here, take this book of dear Mary Wilkins. We can both of us understand her, and she will do us both good. You need not victimize yourself a moment longer, dear Nannie."

But Nan, radiant with good humor, felt a sort of glory in just such self-victimizing. She searched through the page for further unintelligible text.

All at once she paused and read a few lines to herself. Then she burst into a laugh.

"Here's something about a man who has such a funny name. It's James Murty, alias Dan Divver, alias Shaughnessy. What a last name—Shaughnessy! And why was he called alias twice over, Miss Blake? I didn't know one could have the same name more than once. It seems awfully expensive—I mean extravagant." Miss Blake laughed.

"You are thinking of Elias, Nan. This man's name is not Elias. Alias is pronounced differently, and is not a name at all, but a word signifying otherwise, or otherwise called. It means that the man has gone under those different titles. And I don't think I care to hear what it has to say about the gentleman, dear. He

probably isn't just the sort of person whose exploits would make fair reading."

"Is he bad?" asked Nan.

"I should gather, from his names, that his existence had been somewhat checkered," replied the governess with a twinkle in her eye.

"Is it wicked to go under other names than your own?"

Miss Blake flushed as she bent forward to place her empty cup upon the table by her side. She was far from strong yet; the slightest exertion brought the blood to her cheeks.

"Not necessarily," she said. "But as a general rule people whose lives have been simple and upright do not need to live under an assumed name. Of course there might be exceptional cases—and there is a difference between an alias and an incognito."

"What's an incognito?" questioned Nan.

"Why, if a person of rank or importance travels through a country and wishes to escape publicity, he often does so incognito—that is, unknown. He will drop his official title and take his family name or part of his family name with a simple prefix. For instance, a king might care to be known as the Duke of So-and-so; a Duke as Mr. ——, whatever his surname chanced to be. That would not be wicked and it would not be an alias. And sometimes people who are not nobles find it desirable to remain unrecognized for a time. Take it for granted that I was not, in reality, a governess at all; I mean that I was not forced by circumstances to take such a position, but that I for some reason chose to assume it. That I cared to come here and be with you because I had known and loved your parents long ago and wished to do my best for their child. Then suppose I did not care to disclose my identity to—to—people because of—well, no matter—I simply came here giving you but part of my name—not the whole, why it might not be a wise course, but it certainly could not be called a wicked."

"Oh, how I wish you had," cried Nan. "It would be splendid fun. Just like a princess in disguise and things. Say you aren't a governess and that your name isn't Blake. Oh, please do. It'll be just like fairy-stories if you will."

"How can I, dear, when I am and it is?" replied the governess, slowly. "I am

no princess in disguise, I assure you. I am simply a very prosaic little woman and your devoted friend. I don't think I could possibly discover anything at all resembling a fairy-tale in my life. But some time, perhaps, when you are older, and when—I mean, if we meet again, I will tell you all there is to tell about myself—that is, if you care to listen. It will not be exciting—but you might care to know it."

"Oh, I would, I would!" the girl exclaimed heartily. "But I hate to have you talk of 'if we meet again.' Why, we must, Miss Blake. Don't you know I couldn't live and know I wasn't to see you any more? It's like the most awful thing that could happen to have you go way at all, and the only way I can bear it is thinking of how we'll see each other often and often. Why, my father will be so thankful to you for taking such care of me! I guess he won't know what to do. And when you see him and find how good he is, you won't be afraid a bit. You'll just as lief stay here as not. He's the best, the dearest—oh, you couldn't help but like my father."

A soft hand patted her head in loving appreciation, but not one word said the governess, and the two sat together in silence for some time thinking rather sober thoughts, until the sound of the door-bell broke in upon the stillness and brought Nan to her feet and sent her flying to the balusters to peep over and discover who the late caller might be.

"It's Mr. Turner, and he asked for you," she said, coming back into the room and bending to gather up the scattered news sheets that strewed the floor. "He looked as solemn as an owl, and he asked for you in a voice that made me feel ever so queer—it was so trembly."

"He may be cold," suggested Miss Blake.

She rose and settled the pillows upon the divan. She would have to receive her guest up here. She was not yet permitted to venture below. She and Nan stood ready to receive him as he entered the room, and after the first greetings the girl was about to sit down beside her friend when the lawyer said abruptly:

"My dear, I must ask you to permit me to talk to Miss Blake alone to-day. I have some private business to transact with her. You will pardon me for asking you to leave us."

Nan rose immediately with a smile of good-natured understanding, but as she

turned to leave the room she saw that the face of the governess was deathly white, and she ran back to her, crying:

"What is it; oh, what is it? Are you faint? Let me get you something."

She was in a sudden bewilderment of alarm. Miss Blake gently put her aside, saying calmly,

"Why, nothing is the matter, Nan. Nothing at all, my dear. I am strong and well now, you know. Quite strong and well. You must not make Mr. Turner think I am ill, else he will go away again, and I shall not know what he has to say to me. I am quite able to hear—whatever it is. So go away, dear."

The girl obeyed, and the next moment the door had closed behind her, and only the sound of her voice from without, singing in happy reassurance, broke the stillness of the room where the lawyer and the governess stood facing each other silently.

CHAPTER XX

THROUGH DEEP WATERS

Mr. Turner was the first to speak. "Sit down," he said kindly. "You must not stand."

Miss Blake sank into her place upon the divan, but she did not lean back. She sat stiffly upright, nervously locking and unlocking her fingers in her lap and compressing her lips tightly, but asking no questions—saying no word.

The lawyer drew a chair beside her and slowly, deliberately seated himself in it.

"You remember," he began at length, in a hesitating sort of way, "that I told you some time ago that I had some reason to fear that affairs were not prospering at Bombay. I wish to come to the point at once; to spare you all suspense. I am

afraid Mr. Cutler is in some serious difficulty, and—"

He paused. The governess leaned forward, and her breath came quickly.

"Go on," she whispered.

"For some time past his letters have been most unsatisfactory. He has seemed depressed and discouraged. What word I have received from him during the past few months has been of such a character as to lead one to form the gravest suspicions. His letters have been short and hurried—written, evidently, under great mental strain. And latterly they have ceased altogether. For the last two months, ever since you have been ill, I have heard literally nothing from him. His plan was to leave Bombay in September. That he kept to his original purpose I have no reason to doubt. He was on the steamer, or, at least, his name was on its passenger list. Of course while you were so ill I could say nothing to you of this—besides I had only my suspicions then. But as time passed, and no communication from him reached me I grew apprehensive. Within the last two weeks I have sent numberless dispatches to him to his London address, but not one of them has received a reply—in fact, no one of them has been delivered to him. The people there do not know where he is. I have cabled to Bombay, thinking he might have been detained there unexpectedly, but that, too, has proved of no avail. The Bombay house know nothing of his whereabouts. He left them as he intended to do in September, and since then they have heard from him as little as I."

Miss Blake's eager eyes seemed to search the lawyer through and through. He shifted uneasily in his place.

"It is very difficult to go on," he said, with a nervous, constrained cough.

"Quick! Quick!" whispered the governess. "Tell me everything now—this minute. Tell me! Tell me!"

"There is little more to tell," said Mr. Turner sadly. "This afternoon I received a wire from his London banker, and it seems—that—he, William Cutler, is—is—dead."

There was a low cry. Miss Blake had leaped to her feet at his words, and now she was swaying forward as though too faint to stand. The lawyer sprang forward to save her from falling, but she pushed him away with both hands

almost savagely.

"No, no!" she gasped. "I am strong. I am strong. But—God pity us! My poor little Nan—and—oh, my poor little Nan!"

She sank back upon the divan and buried her face in her outstretched arms.

The lawyer rose and went to the window.

Outside the wind blew drearily. The bare trees showed but dimly through the gathering dusk. It was a bleak, cold outlook. Presently down the street came a man with a lighted torch and set the gas-flames to flickering in every lamp along his way.

Mr. Turner watched him until he had passed out of sight—then he turned about and came back to the sofa once more.

Miss Blake had raised her head and sat staring blankly before her, dry-eyed, but with an expression far sadder than tears; the dull, lifeless look of helpless misery that has not yet been touched with submission.

"Shall I leave you now?" asked the lawyer softly. "Perhaps you would rather be alone. I can come again—whenever you wish. Perhaps it would be better for me to come again when you are stronger—better able to bear it."

She turned her large eyes upon him in a sort of mute supplication. All the light had gone out of them now. Mr. Turner reseated himself and continued:

"He died in a hospital in London of a malignant fever. No one saw him. He was buried within twenty-four hours, I presume according to the law in such cases. Of course, I have no particulars, only the barest outline of facts. Undoubtedly I shall receive a letter by the next steamer, giving details. It is all desperately sad—heart-breakingly sad. Poor fellow! So young and to die alone among strangers."

Miss Blake stretched out her hands supplicatingly.

"Don't," she pleaded.

"Shall I tell Nan?" Mr. Turner asked after a moment. "Perhaps it would be

better if I should. You have undergone enough."

"No, no!" she cried. "No one must tell her but myself. But first I must talk to you about—about—you know when I came here I had reasons for wishing her not to know who I was. Now I will tell her. There is no more need to withhold anything. Delia always knew—from the first—but she never told Nan and she never would have told. But that is all over now. There is no need for secrecy any more. And I will stay with her. I will keep her with me always. She has no one else now, and I—I—I am free to do as I please. If—if he has left her unprovided for, why, that shall make no difference to her. I have plenty and she shall share it with me. She shall never feel the care or want of anything that I can supply. Ah, Mr. Turner, I am glad I came. It has been hard, but I am glad I came."

She broke down completely. Her frail figure shook with shuddering sobs.

But she was not a woman to give way long, and in a moment she regained her self-control.

"I must have time to think," she said. "Everything seems so changed and strange. I scarcely know where I stand. The suddenness of it has been so horrible. I suppose he must have been ill for a long time—too ill to write. And by and by when they took him to the hospital he must have been unconscious, and so they could not communicate with his friends. That would account for it all, his not writing nor receiving the dispatches—and his friends not knowing where he was."

Mr. Turner nodded. Then he rose.

"I will leave you now," he said. "You are completely worn out. If you will take my advice you will defer telling Nan until tomorrow. I fear the strain will prove too great for you."

She smiled faintly.

"Oh, no," she replied. "I am stronger than you think. But the child shall not be told tonight. I will leave her in peace for one night longer. I will let her get one more good night's rest. Then to-morrow, when she is refreshed and strengthened by her sleep she can learn it all."

The lawyer held out his hand. "This has been one of the hardest trials of my

life," he said. "But you have helped me by your bravery and fortitude. I thank you from my heart. Good night!" and in a moment he was gone.

That evening Miss Blake bade Delia take Nan to the Andrews'. She wrote a short note to Ruth's mother in which she begged her to keep the girl through the evening and make her as happy as she could. She briefly stated the reason for her request.

Nan knew that something was being kept from her but she never suspected what. She fancied it must be connected with Miss Blake's private affairs, and she asked no questions. When she reached the Andrews' her exuberant spirits reasserted themselves and she spent a gay evening with Ruth, Mrs. Andrews leading in the fun and seeing that no one passed a dull moment. They played all sorts of games, and then finally Bridget appeared with the crowning delight, a tray upon which a tempting array of good things was set forth. How Nan enjoyed it! She often thought afterward what a happy evening it was. At ten o'clock Delia called for her and she went home through the still night, thinking all sorts of merry thoughts. Miss Blake listened with apparent interest to her description of her evening's jollification, and when she had finished gave her an especially tender good-night kiss, saying:

"God bless you, my Nan. Sleep well, dear, and let us both pray for strength to bear God's will."

The next morning after breakfast Nan discovered why Miss Blake had bade her especially to pray for strength.

Poor child! She felt so utterly weak and helpless in her misery. At first she could scarcely realize what had befallen her and she kept insisting, "It isn't my father that has died. It is some one else. How can I feel that he isn't alive? He can't be dead! He isn't! He isn't! Why, only yesterday I was expecting he would soon be home. It's some other man who hasn't got a daughter that loves him so."

But by and by she grew desperate in her wretchedness and then it took all Miss Blake's influence to restrain her from really wearing herself out in the abandon of her grief.

But by evening the house was quiet. Nan's loud sobbing had ceased and she lay quite still and exhausted, stretched upon the divan in Miss Blake's room, with her throbbing head in the governess' lap. A tender hand stroked her disheveled

hair, a tender voice spoke words of comfort to her, and she was soothed and solaced by both.

"Shall I tell you a story, Nan?" asked Miss Blake at length.

The girl gave a silent nod of assent.

"Well, once upon a time," began the governess in a gentle monotone, "there lived two girls and they were friends. They loved each other dearly. One was tall and fair and beautiful, and the other was small and dark, and if people ever thought her even pretty it was because love lighted their kind eyes and made it seem that what they looked upon was sweet.

"The first girl had father and mother and a happy home. The second was an orphan, having nothing to remind her of the parents she had lost when she was a baby but the fortune they had left her. She never knew what love meant until she met her beautiful friend. Then she learned. Oh, how those two girls loved each other! When Florence, the beautiful one, found that Isabel had no home she pleaded with her parents to take her into theirs, and they not only took her to their home but to their hearts as well. And so she and her dear friend grew up together like sisters, and the little lonely girl was not lonely any more, but very, very happy among those she loved. Well, time went on, and by and by when the two girls had become quite young women, the first more beautiful than ever, the other a little less plain, maybe, something happened that, in the end, caused them to be separated forever.

"God sent into their lives the self-same experience and into their hearts the self-same thought. It was a beautiful experience and a beautiful thought, but if it was to mean happiness for one, it must be at the cost of grief to the other. Perhaps it was because they both knew this that neither of them told her secret. But presently it was decided which was to have the happiness. It came to the one who expected it least—who had the least right to expect it. It came to Isabel, and for a moment she thought she might accept it. But it was only for a moment. Then she knew that she must relinquish it. It would have been base, would it not, my Nan, to have defrauded the friend who had done so much for her? And so she, Isabel, left the house that had been her home for so many years, and quite solitary and alone sailed across the sea to the other side of the world, and there she stayed for—well, over a dozen years, my dear.

"It was soon after she went away that your mother—I mean Florence—was married. Isabel heard of it and was glad. And later, when she learned that a dear little daughter had been born to Florence, she was happier still. But then came sad news. Oh, such sad news! The beautiful young mother died, died and left her little baby girl behind her with only the poor father to take care of it.

"Then, after that, Isabel heard nothing more for a long, long time, for Florence's good parents were dead and her husband and Isabel were—well, not at enmity, Nan, but not at peace together. It was all owing to a misunderstanding, but that did not alter it. They were not friends and Isabel was too proud to write and ask him whether all went well with him and the little daughter or whether she might perhaps help to care for the child. And so years passed and then one day Isabel felt that she could remain away from America no longer. All the time there had been a great longing in her heart to return, but she had tried to smother it and tell herself that she had no Fatherland; that America was no more to her than any of the strange countries she had lived in; that her acquaintances abroad were as much to her as her friends at home. But, as I say, by and by she could resist her desire no longer, and so one day she set sail for America—I think it must have been after she had been absent for quite fourteen years—and oh! how her heart beat when she saw the dear land once more. Well, I must make my story short, Nan, so I will not tell you how it came about that she first heard that Florence's little daughter had grown into a tall girl; that she was living in the old house where Isabel had spent so many happy years; that her father had gone to some far Eastern country and left her in the charge of a faithful servant of her mother's who had loved them all in days gone by. But she learned all this and more beside and then something told her that it was her duty to go to Florence's child and care for her and show her as well as she might how to be a noble, true, and lovely woman, as her mother had been before her. So she went to the little girl as governess and at first the child was opposed to her, but by and by she—I really think she grew to love her almost as much as the governess loved the child. And all this time the father never knew who was caring for his girl because in the letters that went to him the governess was spoken of by but part of her name. She chose to live incognito, you know what that is, Nan, because she feared if he knew who was serving his child as governess he would write to her in his proud fashion and say:

"No; I need no one to care for my daughter for love. Whomever I employ I will pay. You are a wealthy woman. You need not work for money. My few poor dollars are nothing to you. Besides—"

"And then I think, Nan, he would have referred to the old disagreement and it would all have been very painful, and she would have had to go away and been lonely ever after and have left undone her duty to Florence's child. So she lived quietly in the old house with the little girl and the servant and all went well for a year and then—well, then, dear Nan, I think I need not tell what happened then. But, oh, my dear, you are my own little girl—Florence's child and I loved her, ah! I loved her so. For her sake you are mine now. Never say that you are 'all alone' again. I have taken you as a sacred trust. Come to me, Nan, for I am lonely too, I am lonely too."

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS

It was Christmas eve. Nan was sitting before the dining-room fire curled up in a huge arm chair thinking. Her pale face had grown wonderfully sweet during the last few weeks; the curves about her mouth had softened; her eyes had lost their keen sparkle and gained a softer light instead. She seemed to have undergone a complete transformation, and any one seeing the headstrong hoyden of the year before would have found it difficult to recognize her in this gentle-mannered girl with her serene brow and patient eyes, to whom suffering had taught so hard a lesson. Her black dress and her parted hair gave her a wonderfully meek look. But Nan was not meek. She was merely controlled. The same hot passions still rose in her breast, but she tried to restrain them now.

This evening she was thinking over all that had happened during the past year; especially she was trying to project her thoughts into the future, and to imagine what would occur in the years to come. She had not yet become accustomed to the idea of life without her father. It seemed to her that he must be alive, and she often waked up in the night from such a vivid dream of him that it seemed as though he really stood beside her, and that she might feel his hand if she stretched forth her own in the dark. It was difficult to reconcile herself to living without the hope of his return; it was hard to convince herself that she must never look forward to receiving a letter from him again. But she knew it must be accomplished, and the effort would help to make a noble woman of her.

As she sat there in the dim room, with only the fire to light it, she wondered whether anything could make of her as noble a woman as was her "Aunt Isabel." In her heart she felt not. Aunt Isabel was simply perfect in the girl's sight, and if she could ever have been brought to doubt her perfection, why, there was Delia to prove it with her emphatic:

"No, ma'am! There ain't no one in this world like her. She is the best, the generousest, the most self-sacrificin' soul on earth—that she is, and I've known her ever since she was a child. If any one was to ask me the name of the woman I've most call to honor an' love, I'd say 'twas Isabel Blake Severance an' never stop a minute to think it over."

And both Nan and Delia had long ago decided that while other women might be more beautiful, no one could have softer, sunnier hair than Aunt Isabel, nor truer, tenderer eyes, nor a prettier nose nor a sweeter mouth. And Nan was quite confident that if one hunted the whole globe over one could not find dimples more entirely winning nor hands whose touch was so absolutely soothing and soft.

But Miss Severance could never be brought to admit these important facts, though Nan often sought to convince her of their truth. She was too busy a woman to have time to think whether she were beautiful or not.

"Good is the thing," she would say, in her brisk fashion. "If I can look in the glass and see the reflection of a good woman there, I have no right to regret that she is not a beautiful one."

Just now she was upstairs, busied with some matter of mysterious importance from which Nan was excluded. She and Delia had been shut into her room all the afternoon. Nan had ample time and opportunity for the manufacture of her own Christmas gifts, Aunt Isabel being so much occupied, behind closed door, with hers.

For quite a time now Nan had been forced to station herself in the regions below stairs, where she would hear the bell if it rang, so that Delia might be free to give all her attention to Miss Severance. Evidently great things were in operation above. Nan wondered what it could all be about.

Christmas had lost much of its joyousness this year, but still there was a little flavor of merriment left. Aunt Isabel had no sympathy with the hark-from-the-

tombs-a-doleful-sound attitude. She thought it was one's duty to be as cheery and hopeful as possible, and not to add to the misery of the world at large by forcing it to witness one's private grief. She and Nan had their hours of tender mourning and sincere regret, but it was always Miss Severance's desire that no unwholesome brooding should be indulged in by either of them.

So the girl tried to restrain the tears that would rise at the thought of these saddened holidays, and endeavored to bring her mind to bear on more happy subjects. She thought of her plans for the next day; she made a mental recount of the gifts she had prepared, and then, somehow against her will, her memory took her back to that morning when she had heard of her father's death and listened to Miss Severance's story, and she lived over again those intense moments when it almost seemed to her her mother had been restored to her in this rare friend. The simple history had a peculiar fascination for the girl, and she liked to think that it was here, in these very rooms, that it all had been enacted.

She liked to look into those books of Miss Severance's that had her mother's name upon the fly-leaf, and she liked to think that they were given to "Bell with Florence's fond love."

Miss Severance had several photographs of her mother as a girl that Nan had never seen, and she was fond of looking them over and exclaiming at the "old-fashioned" frocks and quaintly arranged hair, and wondering whether this happy-looking girl ever discovered the sacrifice her friend had made for her.

One day Nan asked Miss Severance as much, but Aunt Isabel had shaken her head gravely and said:

"No, Nan, she never did. And don't think of that part of the story, my dear. It was no more than I ought to have done. You must not make a piece of heroism of it. I only told it to you because unless I had, it would have been difficult to explain why I left her and went so far away."

"Aunt Isabel," Nan said, "won't you tell me just what it was you gave up?" But Miss Severance shook her head.

What the girl could not at all comprehend was the fact of any one's being "not at peace" with Aunt Isabel. Aunt Isabel, who never was unjust nor unkind, nor anything but generous and good to every one. She thought if she could have spoken to her father she could have convinced him that he was mistaken about

Aunt Isabel. But that was impossible now. Her father—again the hot tears came surging up, and her breast began to heave.

Suddenly she started. What was that? She jumped to her feet. Somebody was turning the knob of the street door and fitting a key in the lock. At first it was her impulse to cry out, but she mastered herself and ran quickly through the parlor and stood bravely on the threshold waiting for the door to open and admit the intruder. Her heart beat like a trip-hammer in her side, and the pulses in her wrists and temples throbbed painfully. She saw the door move inward, she felt the rush of cold outer air upon her face, and then—

In a moment she was locked in two strong arms, her head was pressed against a dear, broad chest, and she was crying "Father! Father!" in a perfect ecstasy of rapture and a tempest of tears.

For a few moments neither of them said a single word. They just clung to each other and wept—the strong man as well as the slender girl.

They seemed to lose all other thought in the joy of the meeting. Then somehow they found themselves in the library, and Nan, still sobbing for very happiness, was listening to her father as he told her how, for many months, he had been ill, but had tried to fight it off and overcome it, because he was so anxious to get home, and he could not bear to think he might be prevented. Then, just before his ship sailed, and after he had enrolled himself among the list of passengers, and bidden good-bye to those he knew, he was stricken down and for weeks lay unconscious, between life and death, as utterly unbefriended as though he had been in the midst of a wilderness. How he came to recover he never knew, but it seemed as though his great longing for home gave him strength to battle through the dreadful fever. Then, almost too feeble to stand, he was taken to the ship and borne to England, his body weak from suffering, but his heart strong with hope.

The voyage was a severe one, and before he reached London he had a relapse, so that when they entered port he had to be carried ashore, and, too ill to know or care what happened to him, was taken to a lodging-house and nursed back to health once more by the keeper herself, whose son was the steward of the ship on which he had crossed.

"You can fancy, Nannie, that I had only one thought all that time—to get back to you. The first move I was able to make was to the ship, and I sailed without having seen or spoken to a soul I knew in London. Then on board I met a friend, who told me of the report of my death, and I knew that you must have heard it. The people at the bank would communicate with Turner, I felt sure. Ah, what days those were! It seemed as though we should never reach land. But we got in to-day, and you can imagine that I have not lost one moment in coming to you, sweetheart. But how my girl has changed. Grown so tall and womanly. I'm afraid I've lost my little Wildfire. But the girl I've found in her stead is a hundred times dearer."

Then Nan clung to him again and they were very happy, feeling how good God was, and how very blessed it felt to be together.

For a while they both stopped talking and sat quite still, holding hands, while each heart offered up a prayer of gratitude.

They did not hear an upper door open, nor did they notice a light footstep in the hall above. But at the sound of a gentle voice calling "Nan!" they both started up, and the girl's grasp of her father's hand tightened, for she felt him suddenly start and tremble. She tried to answer but could not for the joy she felt and the quick fear of this other loss she would have to suffer now.

"Nan!"

Still the girl could not reply, though she tried, and her father's face had grown rigid and white, as though it were carved in marble.

Then down the stairs and through the hall came Aunt Isabel, stopping at the threshold of the dining-room door for a moment to accustom her eyes to the dimness within.

There she stood—the bright light from the hall lamp falling full upon her

head and the ruddy glow of the fire illuminating her face.

Nan caught up her father's hand, for she felt him suddenly shrink and falter.

The little figure in the doorway neither stirred or moved.

For an instant there was perfect silence in the room, and then Nan saw her father stride forward with a look of the most wonderful happiness upon his face, and heard him utter one word in a tone that set her heart to beating.

"Bell!"

And somehow then she knew it all. In one brief flash she read the whole story, and she saw that it was to be completed at last, and that the loss she had feared she would not know at all, but something infinitely happier and more sweet.

THE END

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