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Author: Robert H. Rohrer

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PATTERN

By ROBERT H. ROHRER, JR.

Illustrated by ADKINS

Sometimes the only way to fight fire is with fire. One can hardly stop to consider what the second fire may destroy. Can one?

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Rahll floated, a dim pattern of electrical impulse in the void of space. He was vaguely aware that he was dying into nothingness, and that in a short time he would be a meaningless mass of aimless patterning, with no consciousness and no unity. But there was nothing that could be done about it; his flexible impulse had woven itself into millions upon millions of varying thought-forms, and no solution to his situation had presented itself.

His impulse writhed into remembrance of the Great Pattern of countless centuries before. There had been thousands of impulses similar to himself, all banded together into one huge, unified Form, standing in this wasteland of space; thousands of impulses, all twisting in the shaping and reshaping of their own thoughts and emotions, but all connected by the central Great Pattern so that they stood, impulse to impulse, in a huge, delicately crystal-like structure of electricity.

And they had given each other life, replenishing their powers within themselves, and existing in the contentment of peace, for millennium upon millennium.

Until the Cataclysm. There had been some impulses who tired of the old pattern of unification, and wished to form a new one; however, they were opposed by other, more content impulses, who stubbornly held to the old pattern. The rebels, as they were called, formed their carefully planned new pattern in spite of the opposition; the result being that the two different patterns intertwined each other, fell into antagonizing frequencies, and blew the community apart.

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Only Rahll's delicate impulse had escaped this Cataclysm. He had been badly wounded, unable to move in any direction; so for thousands of years after the explosion he had floated in darkness, waiting for a sign of another impulse with which to make contact and create mutual sustenance. But no sign had come, and Rahll's shape had slowly become warped with weakness and hunger into the jagged form of a pattern which had never been seen in the old community.

The pattern of a cannibal. The only central thought-form which activated him now was to Find Impulse and to Absorb Impulse; to absorb flexible impulse into his wavering frame and twist it to his own form, so he would live, so he could exist for a while longer, so he could

branch out and find more flexible impulse to eat and twist to his pattern.

But the long process of disintegration was now almost at an end; he could reshape his thought-patterns only with the greatest pain and difficulty, and branching out was out of the question. He realized this, and slowly prepared himself for the final pattern to come; the pattern of death.

As his faint, blue shape of line-impulse reformed within itself, however, he became conscious of a weak, almost nonexistent impulse beating against the outer fringe of his pattern. He stopped his reforming process and, summoning all the power he could, glided toward the impulse.

When he did this, the impulse became definitely stronger; slowly his delicate, crystalloid form became more and more conscious of it; its power rose and rose, until it reached an almost unbearable intensity.

Waves of hunger beat against Rahll, as they had for centuries; but here, here at last, was satisfaction. His jagged cannibal's pattern roused itself, waiting for the new impulse to come within striking distance. And then....

It stopped. It had been there for only a moment, and now it was gone. Rahll desperately sent out tendrils of a length he had thought he would never attain again in search of the huge impulse, and found....

Another. This one was smaller, although still one hundred times as powerful as Rahll's; and, oddly, it was channelled into five separate spokes of impulse which functioned around a large central hub-impulse. The impulses in the five channels were exactly alike, but they were interpreted differently by the central hub due to the different channels through which they came. Rahll sorted and distinguished these five interpretations, his pattern weaving into one of curiosity and vague dismay as he did.

One channel of impulse was evidently devoted to the sensing of forms and colors, something which Rahll found unnecessary; a second was one which sensed vibrations in--in something, a substance Rahll was unfamiliar with, one with more substance than the void he lived in and yet unsolid enough to carry vibrations easily; a third existed to sense odors in this unsolid substance; a fourth to sense some things which Rahll did not recognize, bitter, salt, sweet, and sour; and a fifth

to sense heat and cold. All these impulses transmitted their sensings to the central hub, which seemed to be a completely flexible mass of unpatterned, vari-frequencied electrical impulses that was almost overpoweringly strong.

Yes, these were food for Rahll; but two factors held him from consuming all six branches of impulse together.

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The first was that he was so weak that any more than one of the spoke-impulses absorbed at a time would have shattered his frail form.

The second was that this collective impulse operated on a frequency altogether different from Rahll's. Try as he might, Rahll could not emulate this frequency; it was too alien, too far removed from his own, and he was too weak. But this impulse's frequency was flexible; if he could make it become harmonious with his own frequency, then he could easily absorb it, branch by branch.

It would be a relatively simple matter to make the impulse harmonize with him, Rahll knew; all he had to do was make the flexible-frequencied impulse accept his own impulse as something un-alien and natural, by taking a form the impulse would not suspect; something which blended with the impulse's environment. As soon as a branch of the alien impulse accepted Rahll's own impulse as natural, Rahll would move blocks into the channels of that branch and absorb it.

First he examined the branch devoted to sensing odors. Yes, it would be child's play to cause an impulse to transmit through the odor channels to the central hub, where it would be interpreted as an odor....

* * * * *

Brenner sat hunched over the controls of the spaceship. Damm! How had he gotten so far away from Base? There weren't any planets here for millions of miles in all directions; only blackness. He couldn't make connection with Base; he couldn't make connection with anything.

His small, three-compartmented ship sped swiftly along toward nothing. In the tail compartment, the atomic and the electrical generators hummed serenely; in the nose compartment, Brenner continued to curse.

Something in the mechanism of his directional equipment was fouled up.

That must be it. He decided to cut power and think for a while.

He closed off the atomic generator, stopping the rockets, and, as an afterthought, shut off the electrical generator also. Sitting in the darkness, he tried vainly to make out some light in the void beyond the nose observation window. But he could see nothing. No stars, no planets. Nothing at all. Base had been built in deep space; all light from other suns was cut off here by time and distance.

He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. Hale at Base was probably tearing his hair out. Brenner could hear the old man now: "That blasted Brenner! Here we are, a space station a million miles from anywhere, and he has to lose our best craft for us! I knew that blinkety-blank halfwit would pull some lame-brained stunt like this. I knew it, I knew it, I...."

Brenner cut Hale off and began to think about Earth. And home. And Barbara. And the nameless little thing who must have come months ago, and whom he would have seen within a year if he hadn't been so Godawful stupid as to lose himself out here.

Well, at least he had the radio. And a good supply of food. And the knowledge that Hale would be keeping all channels clear for a call from him.

He frowned. He should have been able to make radio contact with Base long before this. Perhaps his trouble was in the radio....

Suddenly a strange odor touched his senses. Brenner frowned, sniffing. He'd never smelled anything like that before. It was rather metallic--almost like a short circuit. But not quite.

And then, gradually, the odor became that of coffee. Hot Coffee, percolating somewhere in the ship. He had put some coffee on, hadn't he? He frowned, and then went back to his former thoughts of self-disparagement, accepting the odor as normal, as part of his natural environment, "forgetting" about it.

The first block moved in.

Brenner hardly noticed that he had lost his sense of smell.

* * * * *

Rahll exulted. This was the first impulse he had ever tasted--his jagged cannibal's pattern contracted itself in ecstacy as he twisted the absorbed impulse into his own thought-form. He was still hungry, yes--and that hunger was hardly on the way to being satisfied--but at least this was a beginning. It fired him on--he must have more impulse, more, until he could branch out and find even more....

The hunger rushed over him in waves, deep, welling up from the pit of his thought-pattern, almost overcoming his form with its intensity. Yes, he would have more. Taking the first impulse had been simple; as soon as this other being had accepted the bogus odor as being normal, his frequency had become harmonious with Rahll's, and Rahll had moved a block into the channels through which the impulse flowed and absorbed the impulse. Now the block remained in those odor-channels, preventing other impulses from travelling in them.

Rahll turned his attention to the satisfaction of his hunger.

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Brenner sniffed. That's funny--hadn't he smelled coffee a minute ago?

Wait a minute--he couldn't have smelled coffee. There wasn't any coffee on. But there must have been, because he'd smelled it.

He sniffed again. He couldn't smell anything now. Odd. He leaned back in his chair and listened as the atomic and electric generators hummed in the background....

The second block moved in.

The sound of the generators disappeared.

Brenner started. But he couldn't have heard the generators--they were off! He rose. All was silent in the ship. He banged on the control panel with his fist.

He heard no sound.

Panic set in.

* * * * *

Rahll's cannibal-pattern contracted and protracted in the black void.

The faint blue lines of his form glowed a bit more strongly now than they had before, although the great hunger still shook his frame.

His thought-forms wove in and out in visions of power, a power he had never thought of possessing back in the time of the Great Pattern, a power with which he could absorb everything, every--

And then Rahll's thought-form twisted into a totally unfamiliar shape. And he thought of Hale.

He could picture Hale only vaguely; a big man--man; that was a new term--a big man, whatever a man was, with a deep voice--voice, another new term--and a great temper--temper....

Rahll slowed his pattern in confusion. Man, voice, temper, Hale--all of these; he had never been aware of them before, nor of things like them. Why was he aware of them now?

* * * * *

And then he realized why.

This alien being's patterns, even though scattered and unmethodical, were influencing Rahll's patterns as Rahll came into close contact with them during the process of absorption. Just as Rahll's patterns must be influencing this alien being's.

Rahll formed and reformed thoughts for a moment, and then decided that this was a good thing. For now he would have new weapons with which to trick this other electrical impulse; new and better weapons. Hale, man, voice, temper.

At that moment, Brenner was experiencing much the same phenomenon as Rahll was.

Brenner's panic died suddenly as he searched his thoughts and found, with a shock, that he knew why he could not hear. He could see the answer only dimly, but it was there; something completely alien to him, something outside the ship, a crystal-like pattern of electricity--of electrical impulse--was--was doing something else alien to him which had caused him to lose his sense of sound.

He sat down and concentrated on this answer. There must be more to it, he thought, more to it than.... Yes, there was more to it. He

received jumbled thoughts concerning frequencies alien to each other, and then pulled out the one totally clear impression he had. Illusions were being used to dupe him. He wasn't quite sure of exactly how they were being used--something to do with alien frequencies cropped up again--but he did know that the alien being outside his ship was using illusion to slowly destroy him. But wasn't there a way out?

Yes, there was. If he didn't _accept_ the illusion, whatever it was, as being normal, he could not be touched by this creature outside. If he did not accept the illusion as being normal....

Brenner turned on the electric generator. The room flooded with light.

Rahll tensed when he felt the other, larger impulse that he had first felt rise up again. The impulse was far too huge to absorb; and, furthermore, there was something about it that almost repelled Rahll. It was impulse, yes, but it was a different kind of impulse, of a type Rahll had not run across before. If he had been strong enough he could have consumed it, but he was not sure that he would have wanted to.

He steeled himself against the overpowering sense of the presence of that impulse, and carefully searched out the other, smaller one. When he found it, he began to think. Certainly this being's impulse had picked up the pattern which Rahll was following; therefore this being would be on his guard against Rahll's simulations of his environment. Rahll had to sneak under that guard, carefully, subtly, in as unnoticeable a way as possible.

He felt that he could absorb two channels of impulse this time. He picked the two, and began to weave rhythmically in thought.

* * * * *

Brenner sat back in his chair. He was ready for the thing, whatever it was. It would not creep under his defenses. Nothing it could do, no illusion it could form, would take him in. He would not allow it to. He could not allow it to; for patterns had been invoked in his mind that suggested what the creature would do with the power derived from Brenner's impulse if it ever absorbed it all; patterns which pictured the absorption of all life on other worlds, and a single great pattern of electrical current crisscrossing in spiderweb fashion throughout the universe; a strong, unbreakable chain of intelligence, sated with the impulse of every fish, bird, insect, and man in existence. Brenner suppressed a shudder. What he was up against might be too much for him

to handle....

No. He had to handle it. For Barbara's sake. For Hale's sake. For the sake of all those men back at Base, who would be the creature's next prey if it destroyed Brenner.

Suddenly there was a clanking noise. Brenner stiffened, for he did not hear the sound with his useless ears; it formed within his mind. The gruff, temper-tinged voice he heard came from within his mind, too; "Brenner, you damned fool. I knew you'd get yourself into a fix like this. Our best craft, too." Brenner whirled around.

The tall, heavy-set figure of Hale stood by the airlock, smiling.

Brenner frowned. The alien must be a complete fool; Brenner would never accept a bogus Captain Hale where Captain Hale could not be.

Hale's figure strode forward, saying, with that fixed smile on its face, "I always thought you'd wind up like this: lost in deep space, with nothing around you. Have you looked at that radio? Sure _it_'s not what's on the blink? Oh, that's right, you wouldn't be able to hear it even if it was in good shape," the words flowed through Brenner's head, "wouldn't be able to. Have a cigar, while you stand there thinking. You're going to have to think hard to get out of this one, Brenner. Mighty blasted hard." And a deep chuckle shook Brenner's skull as the figure of Hale opened its mouth to laugh--and opened it, grotesquely, a trifle too far for a genuine human mouth to go.

* * * * *

Brenner puffed at the proffered cigar. Something was wrong here--the alien could not be this obvious in his working. Brenner's mind steadily refused to accept the thing that stood before him.

The figure cocked an eye at him. "If you don't get back to the station," it said, "you'll never see Barbara again. Or the kid. You know that, don't you? And you want to see Barbara don't you? Don't you?"

Brenner did not answer.

The figure smiled. "Well, you can see her, if you want to. Right now." And the figure's body and face grew smaller, softened in their lines, and the clothing it wore changed from a severe blue uniform to a light blue dress. "Hello, Will," said Barbara's figure.

Brenner still kept silent, staring at the woman's form before him. It was so _like_ her--and in its arms it held a small bundle, which gurgled softly. Brenner's eyes fell to this bundle.

Barbara's figure saw the direction of his glance. "You haven't seen the baby yet, have you, Will?" she said, moving toward him. "Look." She held the small bundle out toward him.

But as she did, one of her hands dug into the blankets wrapped around the tiny form, wrenched the form from those blankets, and threw it to the floor. Barbara's face, now covered with a too-wide grin, looked up at Brenner as her feet stamped the small figure to a red pulp. "Look, Will," she said, and laughed, stretching her mouth wider, wider, until her face was distorted completely out of shape, and her black hair streamed wildly in the air.

Brenner stood paralyzed. The laughter was filling his mind, overcrowding everything else, becoming louder, and louder, and....

It stopped. The red pulp on the floor disappeared, as did the other gnarled figure. All was silent, as it had been before.

Gone. The creature was gone, and it had not hurt him at all. Brenner, still rooted in shock, took a few more thoughtless puffs on the cigar the alien had handed him.

The third and fourth blocks moved into place.

The cigar disappeared.

Brenner could no longer feel or taste.

* * * * *

Rahll rolled in the darkness, his blue line-form glowing more strongly than before. His cannibal-pattern flowed into the thought of all the impulse in the universe around him; of the time when he would be able to branch out, find the stars which were concealed here by distance and time, and absorb the many life-impulses living around those stars, satisfying completely the burning hunger within him.

His third plan had worked admirably. He had shocked the other being with obtrusive actions into a state in which he did not notice

inobtrusive actions. That would work again.

He was still bothered by the other, huge impulse which throbbed against his pattern; it seemed strangely adamant and.... But he couldn't find the exact word for what repelled him.

He pushed the pattern aside. Enough time to worry about that after he had absorbed the fifth branch of impulse of the alien being nearby.

Again, Rahll's thoughts turned to a method of operation. What illusion to form now...?

* * * * *

Brenner sat in the nose section of the ship, his head throbbing. The alien's visions of power were now perfectly clear in his mind, but for some reason they did not bother him any more. He had been tricked by that thing outside; he had to fight back somehow. That and that alone mattered now.

And a way to fight back was slowly creeping into his thoughts; some formless fear the being had of the impulses formed by the electric generator. Perhaps if he could trick the alien into....

Whang! A loud noise cut through his mind.

He jumped up and turned toward the back of the compartment; just in time to see a shadow flick through and close the door there.

He ran to the back, turned the wheel in the center of the door, pulled the door open, and staggered into the second compartment. Whang! Something hit him across the back of his neck. He jerked and crashed to the floor, fighting to maintain consciousness.

With a desperate lunge, he grabbed at the wall and pulled himself to his feet. Then he looked to the back of the second compartment, just in time to see the shadow flick through the door.

He dashed through the doorway into the third compartment. For a second Barbara's face grinned impishly at him from the door at the end of the room, and then disappeared. Brenner plunged to the doorway through which she had gone and jumped into the fourth compartment.

For a moment he stood looking around the completely empty room.

Then the fifth block moved into place.

Brenner could not see.

It was then that he remembered that his ship had only three compartments.

* * * * *

Somehow he made his way back to the nose compartment. He was completely cut off from the rest of his body by Rahll's five blocks; only his seat of thought remained. And if that were taken away....

He seemed to be able to _sense_ objects about him, although he could neither see nor feel them; but he did not stop to try to understand this. Instead, he sat down and began to concentrate. To concentrate on further scraps of information that had been left with him by this last close contact with Rahll; information which pointed toward a possible way of stopping the thing outside.

He had received before the impression of Rahll's half-fear of the electrical impulses formed by the generator of the ship; now he was fairly certain of the reasons for Rahll's reluctance to absorb these impulses.

In the first place, they were too strong for Rahll's thus far under-developed body.

In the second, they were inflexible. True, if Brenner turned a dial he could change their amperage, but they were formed on a basis of friction, not of chemical reaction, as Brenner's and Rahll's impulses were. The generator's impulses were not stimulated by certain stimuli at certain times, but flew from the generator in a continuous, hard, stable stream, inflexible, unable to be woven about into thought patterns, unable to be twisted by Rahll.

And this told Brenner how to stop the alien.

Sensing his way, he reached a medicine cabinet, and sensed out a bottle of morphine; carefully he measured out the right amount, and set it on a table beside the equipment that controlled the electrical generator.

Then Brenner began to slow the generator down. The lights dimmed,

becoming lower and lower....

He knew that Rahll was waiting outside, waiting to consume the last weak impulse in Brenner's body; he also knew that Rahll would probably automatically consume any electrical impulse of a frequency harmonious with the creature's that was of the same level as Brenner's without noticing that it came from a generator instead of Brenner, because of the hunger that threatened to overpower Rahll and render him insensible in the lust for food.

Brenner continued to lower the speed of the generator. He also knew that Rahll would not be deceived if there were two separate impulses on the same level to distinguish between. In that case, Rahll would undoubtedly pick out Brenner's because of Brenner's alien frequency. So Brenner had to lower his own impulse. He had to lower it to its most basic function; that of causing the heart to beat.

He took a glass of water and swallowed the morphine.

As the haze began to blot out his thoughts, he continued to turn the generator down, down....

* * * * *

Rahll sensed the drop in the larger electrical impulse; he followed it as it dropped, until it was on the same level as the other impulse was. Wait! What other impulse?

Rahll's thought-patterns stopped in confusion. This current was the _only_ impulse on the same level as the alien one. Rahll pondered for a moment; if this was the only impulse on the right level, then he must have confused the two impulses for a moment, and this was actually the right one. Yes, that had to be it.

He examined the impulse, sensing around it--and his crystal-shaped form jumped in surprise. The alien frequency which he had had to trick by illusions into becoming harmonious with his own was gone from this impulse. He would be able to absorb this impulse at his will. True, there was something familiarly repulsive about it, but he was hungry, and....

After only a short hesitation, Rahll's electric jaws opened, widened to full size, and closed greedily on the impulse.

Too late he realized his mistake. His puny blocks were unable to hold up against the continuous, non-chemically produced stream of electricity from the generator. More and more impulse flowed into his body, more and more _inflexible_ impulse, which he could not twist into his cannibal's thought-pattern, torrents of perfectly stable electricity, slowly influencing his own pattern as he had expected to influence the impulse, influencing his into a frozen, stable, inflexible pattern of continuous hunger-satisfaction.

His crystalloid jaws spread wide, Rahll floated in the black void of space, motionless, unable to move, unable to twist into new thought-patterns, and therefore unable to think. The inflexible current of electricity poured steadily into his body....

* * * * *

Slowly the effects of the morphine wore off, and the haze lifted from Brenner's mind. As his power to think returned, he began to realize that his plan had worked, and that the alien had been overcome; and he was glad of this only because it removed him, Brenner, from danger. He no longer cared that the creature might have absorbed the impulses of every living being in existence; the thing was frozen, and he was safe from it--that was all that mattered to him.

Of course he could not see, or feel, or hear the motionless crystalloid pattern outside. But he knew it was there. He could _sense_ it.

He could _sense_ it because his heretofore unmethodical hub-impulse pattern, in its close association with Rahll's, had been slowly twisted and molded into a form very much like the alien's, giving him Rahll's powers of sightless observation of other impulses and objects. Brenner no longer had any need for his lost powers of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.

He groped his way back to the nose seat, sensing his way as he could not feel it. He would find Base--he would be able to sense the way back to it as soon as it was close enough. He would go back to Base, because, naturally, his _basic_ thought-form had also been molded into the shape of Rahll's; and Brenner was hungry, and he knew he could find food at Base.

Food. He pictured Hale, and the other men at the station.

Food. His jagged cannibal's pattern contracted in ecstacy at the

thought of it.

He activated the atomic generator and whirled the ship around.

THE END

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND ***

LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

Illustrated by SCHELLING

Men were tortured ... men were killed ... and the Earth Scientists chatted pleasantly with the Tareeg. Were they traitors or were they waiting for The Ice Men?

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Amazing Stories November 1962.
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Jerry Newland was sitting up on the side of his bunk, frowning at the floor, when Troy Gordon came quietly into the room and stopped at the entrance to watch him. Not too good, Troy thought after a moment, studying Newland's loose mouth, the slow blinking of the eyes and the slumped immobility of position. Not too bad either--not for a man who, in most practical respects, had been dead for the better part of three years and come awake again only the day before.

But the question was whether Newland was going to recover quickly enough now to be of any use as an ally.

Troy moved forward a few steps into the room, stopped again as Newland raised his head in a sluggish motion to stare at him. For a few seconds, the man's face remained blank. Then he grinned. A strained, unpleasant-looking grin, but a grin.

Troy waited. Newland cleared his throat, said, "I ... I recognized you almost immediately this time! And ... I remembered that this same thing had happened before."

Troy grinned, too, guardedly. "My coming into the room this way?"

Newland nodded.

"It happened yesterday," Troy said. "What's my name?"

"Troy Gordon."

"And yours?"

"Jerry Franklin Newland."

"What do you do?"

"Do?... Oh!" Newland drew a deep breath. "I'm courier pilot for the ... for the...." He stopped, looking first surprised, then dismayed. Then his face wrinkled up slowly, like that of a child about to cry.

"That part's gone again, eh?" Troy asked, watching him.

"Yes. There's some ... there's...."

"You are--or you were--courier pilot for the Cassa Expedition," Troy said. He thumped his heel on the floor. "That's Cassa One, underneath us. We've been away from Earth for three years and eight months." He paused. "Does that help?"

Newland reflected, frowned. "Not much. I ... it seems to be true when you say it." He hesitated. "We're prisoners, aren't we?"

"Uh-huh," he answered, flatly.

"I had that feeling. And you're hiding me here?"

"That's right," Troy agreed.

"Why?"

"Because nobody else knows you're still alive. It's better if they don't, right now."

Newland shook his head, indicated a sign fastened to the ceiling above the bunk in such a way that a man lying in the bunk on his back would catch sight of it as soon as he opened his eyes. "That," he said, "made sense as soon as I saw it just now! I remembered having read it before and what it meant. But otherwise everything's still badly blurred."

* * * * *

Troy glanced up at the sign. It read:

RELAX AND TAKE IT EASY, JERRY! YOU WERE IN A BAD SMASH-UP, AND YOU'VE JUST FINISHED A LONG STRETCH IN THE EMERGENCY TANK OF YOUR SHIP. EVERYTHING'S BOUND TO SEEM A LITTLE FOGGY, BUT YOU'RE GOING TO BE OKAY. DON'T TRY TO LEAVE THE ROOM. IT HAS TO BE KEPT LOCKED, BUT SOMEONE WILL

BE ALONG TO SEE YOU IN TWO OR THREE HOURS AT THE MOST.

Troy said, "Your memory will start coming back fast enough. You've made a good start." He sat down, took his cigarette case from his pocket. "I'll go over some of the things that have happened with you. That tends to bring them ... and other things ... back to mind. Care to smoke?"

"Yes, I'd like to smoke."

Troy tossed the cigarette case over to the bunk, watched the pilot reach for and miss it, then bend forward awkwardly to fumble for it on the floor. Reflexes still very bad, he thought. But when Newland had the case in his hand, he flicked it open without hesitation, took out a cigarette and closed the case, then turned it over and pressed the button which snapped on the concealed light. The day before, he had stared at the case helplessly until Troy showed him what to do. So his body had begun to recall more of its learned motion patterns.

Troy said, "I told you the main parts twice yesterday. Don't let that worry you ... you've retained more than most would be likely to do after a quarter of the time you spent in the tank. You weren't in very good shape after the smash-up, Jerry!"

Newland said wryly, "I can imagine that." He drew on the cigarette, coughed, then tossed the case back to Troy who caught it and put it in his pocket.

"Have you got back any recollection at all of what the aliens that caught us are like?" Troy asked.

Newland shook his head.

"Well," Troy said, "they're downright cute, in a way. More like big penguins than anything else. Short little legs. The heads aren't so cute ... a hammerhead shark would be the closest thing there, which is why we call them Hammerheads--though not when we think some of them might be listening.

"They don't belong here any more than we do. They came from another system which is a lot closer than Sol but still a long way off. Now, we aren't the first Earth people to get to Cassa. There was an Earth survey ship poking around the system about twenty years ago, and it seems that the Hammerheads also had an expedition here at the time.

They spotted our survey ship but weren't spotted themselves, and the survey ship eventually went back to Earth short two of its men. Those two were supposed to have got lost in the deserts on Cassa. Actually, the Hammerheads picked them up ... Jerry?"

The pilot's head was beginning to nod. He straightened now and took a puff on the cigarette, grinning embarrassedly. "S'all right, Troy!" he muttered. "Seemed to get ... sort of absent-minded there for a moment."

Which was, Troy knew, one of the symptoms of the re-awakening period. Newland's mind had been shut away from reality for a long time, wrapped in soothing, vaguely pleasant dreams while the emergency tank went about the business of repairing his broken body. The habit of unconscious retreat from his surroundings could not be immediately discarded, and particularly not when the surroundings were as undesirable as those in which Newland now found himself. It would be better, Troy thought, to skip some of the uglier details ... and yet he had to tell the man enough to make him willing to cooperate in what would be, at the very least, a desperately dangerous undertaking.

* * * * *

He said, "You're still only three-quarters awake, Jerry. We have to expect that. But the closer you listen and the more information you can absorb, the faster you'll shake off the cobwebs. And that's important. These Hammerheads are a tough breed, and we're in a bad spot."

Newland nodded. "I understand that much. Go ahead."

"Well," Troy said, "whatever that first Earth survey ship had to report about the Cassa system looked good enough so that the administration put Cassa down for a major expedition some day. Twenty years later, we got here again--the interstellar exploration carrier _Atlas_ with eight hundred men on board. I'm one of her engineers. And we found the Tareegs--that's what the Hammerheads call themselves--waiting for us. Not another bunch of scientists and assistants but a war-party. They'd learned enough from the two survey ship men they'd caught to figure out we'd be coming back and how to handle us when we got here.

"Now get straight on a few things about the Hammerheads, Jerry. Their weapons systems are as good or better than ours. In other ways, they're behind us. They've got a fair interstellar drive but can't make the same use of it we do, because they've still a lot to learn about inertial shielding. They have a couple of robot-directed interstellar

drones standing in a hangar a few hundred yards from here which can hit half the speed of your courier, but no Hammerhead or human being could ride 'em up and live. The two big carriers that brought them to Cassa One are dead-slow boats compared to the _Atlas_. And that's about the best they have at present.

"Just the same, they're out to get us. War is the best part of living as far as they're concerned, and they're plenty good at it. So far they've only been fighting among themselves but they're itching for a chance at another race, and now we're it. Capturing an Earth expedition in the Cassa System was only part of the plan to take Earth by surprise."

Newland blinked, said slowly, "How's that? You'd think that might tip their hand. We'll be missed, won't we?"

"Sure we'll be missed," Troy said. "But when? We were to stay here eight years ... don't remember that either, eh? The Hammerheads will have all the time they need to be set for whoever comes looking for us eventually."

"But would they know that?"

Troy said bitterly, "They know everything about Earth that our top brass scientists of the Cassa Expedition were able to tell them. Pearson and Andrews--those names mean anything? They were the Expedition Chiefs when we were captured. One of the first things the Hammerheads did was to have the science staff and other department heads look on while they tortured those two men to death. As a result, they've had all the cooperation they could ask for--more than any decent human being would think of giving them--from our present leadership, the senior scientists Dr. Chris Dexter and Dr. Victor Clingman. They're a couple of lousy traitors, Jerry, and I'm not sure they're even capable of realizing it. Clingman's in charge here at the ground base, and he acts as if he doesn't see anything wrong in helping the Hammerheads."

"Helping the...." Vacancy showed for a moment in the pilot's expression; he frowned uncertainly.

* * * * *

"Try to stay awake, Jerry! There're just a few other things you should try to get nailed down in your memory this time. The Hammerheads are

water animals. They can waddle around on land as long as they keep themselves moist, but they don't like it. They've got a religion based on a universal struggle between water and land. Cassa One's nothing but hot desert and rock and big salt beds, so it's no good to them. And the other two planets in the system have no oxygen to speak of.

"Now here's the thing that's hard to swallow. There's a huge lumped-up asteroid swarm in the system. The _Atlas_ stopped for a few days on the way in to look around in it. Dexter and Clingman, after we'd been captured, volunteered the information to the Hammerheads that a lot of that stuff was solid H_{2}O and that if they wanted Cassa One fixed up the way they'd like it--wet--the _Atlas_ could ferry enough asteroid ice over here in billion-ton loads to turn most of the surface of the planet into a sea.

"You understand it wasn't the Hammerheads who had the idea. They don't have anything resembling the ship power and equipment to handle such a job; it hadn't even occurred to them that it could be possible. But you can bet they bought it when it was handed to them. It will give them a base a third of the way between their own system and Sol. That's what's been going on since we landed and were grabbed off ... almost three years ago now.

"And these last weeks there've been, for the first time since we got here, a few clouds in the sky. It means the boys on the _Atlas_ have as many of those mountains of ice riding on orbit as are needed, and they've started shoving them down into the atmosphere to break up and melt. So we ... Jerry, wake up!"

Troy Gordon paused, watching Newland, then shrugged, stood up and went over to take the butt of the cigarette from the pilot's slack fingers. Newland had slid back into catatonic immobility; he offered no resistance as Troy swung his legs up on the bunk and straightened him out on his back.

How much would he remember the next time he awoke? Troy didn't know; he had no medical experience and was working on the basis of remembered scraps of information about the treatment given men recovering from an experience such as Newland's. There were people on the ground station who could have told him what to do, but he hadn't dared ask questions.

It was chiefly a matter of time now. Or of lack of time. What would happen when the giant hauling operation was concluded, when the water which had been carried in from space came creeping across the vast

desert plateaus about the station, was something he didn't know. But it was almost certain that if his own plans hadn't been carried out by that time, they never would be.

* * * * *

"Jerry," he addressed the sleeping pilot softly, "if you've wondered why I'm risking my neck to bring you back to life and keep you hidden away from the Hammerheads and Clingman, it's because you're the one man I still can trust in this lousy expeditionary group. It's because you tried to do something about the situation on your own. You don't remember it yet, but when the Hammerheads took over the _Atlas_ you made a break for it in the courier boat. You tried to get away and warn Earth. They shot you down before you could clear atmosphere; but then they couldn't find the wreck. They thought it was down in one of the salt beds and gave up looking for it.

"But I found it in the desert a couple of months later. You'd dropped through into the emergency tank and you were still more or less alive. I smuggled the tank into the station here as soon as I'd rigged up a place where I could keep it. I can use some help, and you'll be the best possible man for the job...."

He stopped, surprised to see that Newland's mouth had begun to work awkwardly as if he were trying to speak. Then a few words came, slow and slurred, but indicating that the pilot's mind had not sunk nearly as far from full wakefulness as during his previous relapses.

"Wha ... want me ... do?"

Troy didn't answer. Not yet, he thought. Not until Newland was no longer helpless. Because, in spite of all precautions, he might be discovered here at any hour; and if that should happen, Troy's secret must still be his own. He could act without Newland's help if necessary.

He waited a few seconds longer, while the pilot's face slowly smoothed out again into comatose blankness. Then Troy turned around quietly and left the room.

* * * * *

Troy Gordon's personal living quarters were on the lowest of the station's three underground levels, behind the central power plant and utilities section. Considerable privacy was their only attraction; and

since the arrangement kept Troy, during his off-duty hours, close to his responsibilities as the station's maintenance engineer, neither Dr. Clingman nor the Hammerheads had objected to it. He was a useful man; and to the useful, minor privileges could be extended.

Troy had been able to take advantage of that circumstance. The room in which Newland was hidden lay behind his own quarters, forming an extension to them. The entrance to it was concealed, and while a careful search should have disclosed it, Troy--so far as he knew--had as yet given no one a reason to initiate such a search. The back room was not part of the station's original design; he had cut it secretly out of the rock. With the equipment at his disposal, it had been a relatively minor job.

But it involved a very ugly risk. Discovery would have meant death, and no easy one. With the exception of the cooperating chief scientists, the Hammerheads' attitude towards their captives was largely one of watchful indifference, so long as no one got out of line. But they had taken one measure which insured that, after a short time, there was very little inclination left among the prisoners to get out of line knowingly. At intervals of about a month, whether or not an overt offense had been committed, one more member of Earth's Cassa Expedition was methodically tortured to death by the aliens; and a group of his fellows, selected apparently at random, was obliged to witness the matter while fastened to a device which allowed them to experience the victim's sensations in modified form.

Troy had been included twice in the observing group. He hadn't known whether it implied a personal warning or not. In the Hammerheads' eyes, he was a useful servant; it might be that he was also a suspected one. Nevertheless, it had been necessary to construct the back room. One day, he was returning through the desert from one of the outlying automatic stations under his care when he caught the momentary whisper of a distress signal in his groundcar's receiver. The slight sound had put his hair on end. It was an Earth signal, on an Earth band; and with the _Atlas_ off-planet it could have only one possible source. In seconds, it wavered out and was lost, but Troy already had established the direction.

* * * * *

A week passed before he had the opportunity to obtain a second fix; then, hours later, he was standing beside the wreck of the courier ship. It had plunged into a deep cleft in the rocks and was now half

covered by sand; it began to seem less of a miracle that the Hammerhead fliers had not found it. Troy shut off the quavering signal projector, discovered next that the emergency tank had a living occupant, but left Newland where he was while he hurriedly examined the rest of the ship. The courier was hopelessly damaged, but before Troy concluded the examination, his plan against the Hammerheads had been born, at least as a possibility. It took more than two and a half years then to convert the possibility into an operation which seemed at last to have something better than a fighting chance to succeed. For, of course, Troy had told no one of the discovery. A few words might have gained him eager helpers, but might also have reached a man paralyzed by the fear of torture to the extent that he would reveal everything to safeguard himself.

Troy left his rooms, locking the outer door behind him. Moving thirty feet down the narrow steel-floored passage behind the power plant, he entered one of the tool rooms, again closing and locking the door as he went through. It had been a much more difficult and lengthy undertaking to drill a tunnel from the station's lowest level up to the force-screened Hammerhead hangar outside than to carve an additional room out of the rock, but it had been completed months before. The tunnel's hidden station entrance was beneath the tool room floor, the other opening out of the polished rock base of the hangar twenty feet from one of the interstellar drones. The most careful human scrutiny would hardly have read any significance there into the hairline crack which formed an irregular oval on the rock; and since Troy hadn't been found out, he could assume that the Hammerheads' powers of observation were no more acute.

It had been night in the surrounding desert for some hours by now, but the hangar was brightly lit--a very unusual occurrence at such a time. Troy paused, momentarily disconcerted, studying the scene in the hangar through the vision screen installed in the tunnel just below the exit. If the Hammerheads--there were only Hammerheads--present--were initiating some major new activity in the next day or two, his plans might be, if not ruined, at least very dangerously delayed. He counted over a hundred of the creatures, mostly assembled near the far end of the hangar in three orderly groups. A few officers stood together, somewhat closer to him.

Troy chewed his lip anxiously, the moisture-conserving suits they wore for outside duty on Cassa One, which concealed the two sets of swim flippers along their sides and left the top pair of upper limbs ... short, sturdy brown arms with hands larger than human hands, quite

as capable and rather unpleasantly human in appearance ... free for use. The transparent, inverted-triangle helmets were clamped down. As he looked on, one of their big atmospheric personnel carriers came gliding into sight behind the immobile ranks. There were commands, and the Tareegs turned and filed into the vehicle, moving with the rapid, awkward little waddle which was their method of progress on land. A minute or two later, the loaded carrier moved out of the hangar, and the lights in the vast structure slowly faded away.

* * * * *

Where were they going? They were carrying the usual weapons, but this was not some dryland drill. Troy could not remember seeing so large a group leave the station before. The uneasy conviction returned that the move must be connected with the fact that clouds had begun to show in Cassa One's skies, that the mile-thick boulders of ice which had been brought across space already were falling through the atmosphere of the desiccated world.

One or two more undisturbed days, Troy thought. In that time it would become clear whether Newland was going to recover sufficiently to be able to play a part in his plans. Only two sections of the shattered courier ship, the inertial shielding and the autonav, had been needed to transform the Hammerheads' interstellar drone twenty feet from the tunnel exit into a spaceship which men could ride and direct. Both those sections had been repairable, and everything else Troy had been able to steal or build in the station. Month after month passed as he brought it all together in the tunnel, familiarized himself with every necessary detail of the drones' mechanisms and fitted in the new installations ... first in theory, then in actual fact. A part of almost every night was spent in the darkened hangar, assembling, checking and testing one section or another, then disassembling everything and taking it back down into the tunnel before the moment came when the Tareeg watch-beams would sweep again through the hangar.

The beam-search was repeated each three hours and twenty-seven minutes throughout the night. Within that period of time, Troy would have to carry out a final complete assembly, let the drone roar into life and send it flashing up through the force-screen and into space.

By now, he knew he could do it. And if he had calculated the drone's capacity correctly, he would then be less than six months from Earth. The Hammerheads had nothing they could send after him.

But once in space, he needed Newland's experience. Everything else would be on board to get them to Earth, but without a trained pilot the probability of arriving only on autonav was something Troy couldn't calculate. With a great deal of luck, he thought, it still should be possible. Newland's skills, on the other hand, would give them something considerably better than an even chance.

But Newland would have to be recovered first. He was still under the ministrations of the emergency tank, embedded now in the wall of the back room beyond the bunk. The tank had to stay there; no amount of planning had shown a way it could be fitted into the drone besides everything else; there simply was no room left for it. And what Troy had learned made it clear that if he lifted into space with Newland before the pilot's behavior was very nearly normal, he would have a half-dead zombie on his hands before the trip was well begun.

That had been his reason for waiting. But the question was now whether he mightn't already have waited a little too long....

* * * * *

Troy checked his watch. Take a chance and begin the final installation at once? It would be an hour before the search-beams came back. The interior of the ships was inspected at irregular periods; he hadn't been able to establish any pattern for that. But to leave his equipment in place in the drone for one day, or two at the most, might not be stretching his luck too far. Then, if Newland shaped up, there would be that much less delay in leaving, that much less time to spend in the Tareeg hangar finishing the job at the end. And no one could tell what new developments the next few days might bring, or how much time they would find that they had left....

He twisted the direction dials on the vision screen, swinging it slowly once more about the darkened hangar. Then he unlocked and shifted the exit switch, and the irregularly carved section of rock above him moved on its lifting rods out of the hangar floor. Troy swung up and out behind it, got to his feet and started over to the drone.

There was a thin, burring noise close to his ear.

Troy stopped in mid-stride, his face tight and wary. The noise meant that his room communicator was being called. Probably some minor technical emergency on the station, but.... He counted off twenty seconds, then turned on the relay mike under his coat collar. Trying to

make his voice thick with drowsiness, he said, "Gordon speaking. Who's it?"

"Reese," a carefully uninflected voice told him from the speaker. "Dr. Clingman wants you to come up to his office immediately, Gordon."

Troy felt a sudden sharp prickling of fear.

"At this time of night?" he demanded petulantly. "It's the middle of my sleep period! What's gone wrong now?"

"I wouldn't know," Reese said. "Our senior scientist"--he made the two words sound like a worn, habitual curse--"didn't go into details."

* * * * *

Dr. Victor Clingman was a large, untidy man inclined to plumpness, with stringy blond hair and protuberant pale eyes. His office adjoined that of the Tareeg station commandant--a Low Dsala, in Hammerhead terms--and it was permeated from there with a slightly salty, vaguely perfumed moistness. Rank had its privileges; only the Low Dsala enjoyed the luxury of keeping his station work quarters damp enough to make the wearing of a suit unnecessary. The other Hammerheads waddled about the cold, dry halls completely covered, breathing through humidifiers, and were only occasionally permitted, and then after much ceremony, to enter an area in their section called the Water Room and linger there for several hours.

Troy came into Clingman's office with his tool kit through the double doors designed to prevent moisture from escaping, shivering slightly as the sudden clamminess touched his skin. Clingman, engaged as usual in pecking out something on a writer, shirt sleeves rolled up on his plump arms, ranked piles of notes on the table beside him, turned a pale, unhealthy-looking face towards the door.

"Mister Gordon," he said mildly, dragging the "mister" out a little as was his habit. He nodded at the wall to Troy's left. "Our recording mechanisms became inoperative again ... and just as I was in the process of noting down some very interesting fresh clues as to the probable origin of the Tareeg coup system. Will you try to attend to it?"

"Right away," Troy said, his vague fears dispelled. Clingman's recorders were a standard problem; the repair parts for such items were

on the _Atlas_ which had not come down into atmosphere for almost a year. There probably had been no reason to feel apprehensive about a night call to the office. It had happened on such occasions before.

* * * * *

He went to work, glancing over from time to time at the senior scientist who was frowning down pensively at the writer. Before the Hammerheads executed his predecessors, Dr. Victor Clingman had been head of the Biology Department on the Cassa Expedition, and his interest in the subject had not changed, though it was now centered exclusively on the life habits of their captors. The Tareegs did not seem to object to his preoccupation with them. Possibly it amused them; though Clingman had told Troy once, rather complacently, that his research already had proved to be of some usefulness to the Tareegs in answering certain questions they had had about themselves. That might also be true. On several occasions, at any rate, Troy had found either the Low Dsala or another Hammerhead officer in Clingman's office, answering the scientist's questions in high-pitched, reedy voices which always had the suggestion of a whistle in them. All of them apparently had been taught human speech, though they rarely chose to use it.

Clingman cleared his throat, asked without turning his head, "Did I tell you, Gordon, that the Tareegs' known history goes back to considerably less than a thousand years, by human time reckoning?"

"Yes, you did, doctor," Troy said. It had become almost impossible for him to do work for Clingman--and Clingman invariably called on him personally when he had some mechanical chore on hand--without listening to a lengthy, rambling discourse on the scientist's latest discoveries about the Tareegs. It was an indication, he thought, that Clingman had grown increasingly hungry for human companionship of any kind. He could hardly fail to know that the majority of the station's human component was aware he had originated the suggestion made by the leading scientific group to the Hammerheads concerning the possibility of turning Cassa One into a Tareeg water world, and that he was generally despised for it. Troy's noncommittal attitude might have led him to believe that Troy either had not been informed of the fact or happened to be a man who saw nothing very objectionable in such an act.

Troy was, as it happened, less certain than some of the others that Clingman and the men like Dr. Chris Dexter, who had been directing the ice-hauling operations of the _Atlas_, had come to a deliberate,

cold-blooded agreement among themselves to save their own skins by offering to help the Hammerheads against mankind. It was perhaps more likely that they had acted in unthinking panic, following the gruesome executions the Hammerheads had forced them to witness. That would be more forgivable, if only slightly so. It was difficult to be sure about Clingman in any way. He might be unpardonably guilty in his own mind and still no less frightened than before--for who knew, after all, what the Tareegs ultimately intended with their prisoners? On the other hand, he might actually have buried all such considerations beneath the absorbed, objective interest he appeared to take in them.

* * * * *

Troy had paid no more attention than he could help at first to Clingman's scholarly monologues on his favorite theme. His own thoughts avoided the Hammerheads as far as possible. But as his personal plans began to develop and the chance that he might reach Earth grew into something more than a wildly improbable hope, he realized that the more he learned about the new enemy, the more valuable an eventual report would be. Thereafter he listened carefully, memorizing all of Clingman's speculations, and gradually developed some degree of detached interest of his own in the creatures. They had a curious history, short though it was, a history of merciless strife on twin water worlds of the same system in which any records of a common background had been long lost or destroyed. Then had come the shock of mutual discovery and renewed battling, now on an interplanetary scale, which ended in a truce of carefully guarded equality between the rival worlds.

"That situation, it seems possible," Clingman had said once, "may have led to the legend of the lost home-world of the Tareegs." It was a cautious reference to the obvious fact that neither Tareeg planet would have been willing to admit that it might be no more than an ancient colony of its twin. A remote and glorious ancestral world which had brought both colonies forth as equals was a much more acceptable theory. "And yet," Clingman went on, "the legend might well be based in fact. And it may be that we, with our skills, will enable the Tareegs to rediscover that world...."

It sounded, Troy had thought, with something like amused disgust, as if the scientific brass had prudently worked out a new scheme to preserve itself after the Cassa One operation closed out.

"There also, of course," Clingman continued, blinking his pale eyes

reflectively at Troy, "we have the origin of the parallel legend of the Terrible Enemy. What except the conquest of the home-world by a monstrous foe could have caused it to forget its colonies? In that light, it becomes a little easier to understand the ... ah, well ... the ... cautious distrust the Tareegs have shown towards the first intelligent species they encountered in interstellar space."

And _that_ sounded like an attempted apology--not so much for the Tareegs and their manner of expressing cautious distrust as for Dr. Victor Clingman's collaboration with them. But Troy said nothing. By then he was very eager to hear more.

He did. Almost week by week, something new was added to the Hammerhead data filed away in his mind. Much of it might be unimportant detail, but Earth's strategists could decide that for themselves. The Tareeg coup system Clingman was mulling over again tonight had been of significance at least to the prisoners; for it probably was the reason the majority of them were still alive. The two High Dsalas who, each representing one of the twin worlds, were in joint command of the Tareeg forces here would have gained great honor merely by returning to their system at once with the captured Earth expedition. But to have stayed instead, silently to have assumed personal responsibility for the creation of a new world fit for Tareeg use--_that_ assured them honor and power beyond belief when the giant task was over and the announcement went out....

* * * * *

The awareness that Clingman was speaking again broke into Troy's thoughts.

"Almost everything they do," the scientist observed musingly, "is filled with profound ceremonial meaning. It was a long while before we really understood that. You've heard, I suppose, that cloud formations have appeared on this side of the planet?"

Troy was about to answer, then checked himself, frowning down at the cleanly severed end of the lead he had been tracing. Severed? What....

"Gordon?"

"Uh ... why, yes, I've seen them myself, doctor." Troy's mind began to race. The lead had been deliberately cut, no question of that. But why? He might have spent another hour checking over the recording equipment

before discovering it--

"It means, of course," he heard Clingman saying, "that the dry sea basins of Cassa One gradually are filling with water. Now, we know the vital importance to the Tareegs of being able to immerse themselves in the--to them--sacred fluid, and how severely they have been rationed in that respect here. One might have thought that, from the High Dsalas down, all of them would have plunged eagerly into the first bodies of water to appear on the planet. But, no ... so great a thing must not be approached in that manner! A day was set, months in advance, when it could be calculated that the water level would reach a certain point. At that hour, every Tareeg who can be spared from essential duty will be standing at the shore of the new sea. And together...."

Abruptly, the meaning of Clingman's words faded out of Troy's mind.

The sudden nighttime summons to Clingman's office--had it been no accident after all? Had he done something in the past few hours to arouse suspicion, and was he being detained here now while his rooms were searched? Troy felt sweat start out on his face. Should he say anything? He hesitated, then reached quietly into the tool kit.

"... and only then"--Clingman's voice returned suddenly to his consciousness--"will the word be prepared to go back, and the messenger ships filled with the sacred water so that it can be blended at the same moment with the twin worlds' oceans, to show that Cassa One has become jointly a part of each...."

Messenger ships--the interstellar drones, of course. And the big troop of Hammerheads which had been taken from the station in the personnel carrier less than an hour ago.... His hands trembling a little, Troy quickly closed the recorder, picked up the tool kit.

Clingman checked himself. "Oh ... you've finished, Gordon?" He sounded startled.

Troy managed to work a grin on his face. "Yes, doctor. Just a broken lead. And now, if you'll excuse me...." He started to turn away.

"Ah, one moment!" Clingman said sharply. "There was ... I ... now where...." He gazed about the table, pushing fretfully at the piles of notes. "Oh, yes! Dr. Rojas ... Room 72. You were on your way up here when he attempted to reach you. Something that needed ... well, I forget now what he said. Would you mind going over there immediately?"

"Not at all." Troy's heart was pounding. If there had been any doubt he was being deliberately delayed, it would have vanished now. Dr. Rojas, of course, _would_ have something waiting that "needed" Troy's attention before he got to Room 72. A call from Clingman would arrange for it.

But if they were suspicious of him, why hadn't he been placed under arrest? They don't want to scare me off, Troy thought. They're not sure, and if I'm up to something they don't want to scare me off before they know just what it is....

* * * * *

He'd swung around to the hall, mind reaching ahead through the next few minutes, outlining quickly the immediate steps he would have to take--and so he was almost past the Hammerhead before he saw it. The door to the Low Dsala's offices had opened quietly, and the Low Dsala stood there five feet away, the horizontally stalked eyes fixed on Troy.

Troy started involuntarily. He might be very close to death now. To approach a Hammerhead ... let alone the station's ranking officer ... unbidden within a dozen steps was a dangerous thing for a prisoner to do. The Dsala's left hand hung beside the ornament-encrusted bolt-gun all the officers carried--and those broad torturers' hands could move with flashing speed. But the creature remained immobile. Troy averted his eyes from it, keeping his face expressionless, walked on with carefully unhurried steps, conscious of the Dsala's stare following him.

It was one of the comparatively few times he had seen a Hammerhead without its suit. If one knew nothing about them, they would have looked almost comical--there was a decided resemblance to the penguins, the clown-birds of Earth, in the rotund, muscular bodies and the double set of swimming flippers. The odd head with its thick protruding eyelobes and the small, constantly moving crimson triangle of the mouth were less funny, as were the dark, human-shaped hands. Troy felt a chill on his back when he heard the Dsala break into sudden speech behind him: a high, quick gabble in its own language. Was it expressing anger? Drawing the door quietly shut, he heard Clingman begin to reply in the same tongue.

* * * * *

Reese looked briefly up from the intercom desk as Troy stopped before

it. "Finished with Clingman?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Troy said. "Any other little jobs waiting before I can get back to sleep?"

"Not so far," Reese told him sourly. "Pleasant dreams." He returned his attention to the panels before him.

So Dr. Rojas, as had seemed almost certain, had put in no call for him. But if he didn't show up at Room 72, how long before they began to wonder where he was? Perhaps four or five minutes....

Troy stepped out of the elevator on the maintenance level forty seconds after leaving Reese, went quickly on into the engine room. One Hammerhead guard stood watching him from the far end. As a rule, three of them were stationed here. They were accustomed to Troy's appearances, and he had been careful to establish as irregular a pattern as was practicable in attending to routine chores, so that in an emergency his motions would draw a minimum of attention. Ignoring the guard now, he carried out a desultory inspection of a set of wall controls, paused four times to remove four minor sections of machinery and drop them into his tool kit, and was leaving the big room again a minute and a half later.

Out in the passage, he re-opened the kit, quickly snapped three of the small steel parts together. The carrying of firearms naturally was not a privilege the Tareegs extended to human beings; but the newly assembled device was a quite functional gun. Troy thumbed three dozen hand-made shells out of the fourth piece removed from the control equipment, loaded the gun and shoved it into his pocket.

The door to his quarters was locked, and there were no immediate signs inside that an inspection might have been carried out during his absence. Troy moved over to the rarely used intercom view-screen, changed some settings behind it, and switched it on. The hidden back room appeared in the screen, and--in spite of his near-certainty about Clingman's purpose in detaining him--Troy felt his face whiten slowly with shock.

Jerry Newland was no longer lying on his bunk, was nowhere in the room. A gaping opening in the wall behind the bunk showed where the emergency tank Troy had brought in from the crashed courier ship had been installed. So they not only had the pilot in their hands--they already were aware of his identity and of the condition he was in.

Troy felt a surge of physical sickness. Left to himself, Newland would have died in the desert without regaining consciousness as the tank's independent power source began to fail. Troy had saved him from that; but very probably it was the Tareeg death the pilot faced now. Troy switched off the screen, started back to the door, fighting down his nausea. Self-blame was a luxury for which he had no time. He couldn't help Newland, and there was not an instant to lose. Within a few hours, he could still be in space and take his chances alone at getting the warning to Earth.

But first the search for him must be directed away from the Tareeg hangar. And that, very fortunately, was an action for which he had long been thoroughly prepared....

* * * * *

The Hammerhead guard at the station's ground-level exit also had been reduced to one soldier. And here the appearance of the maintenance engineer's groundcar on its way to one of the automatic installations out in the desert was as familiar an occurrence as Troy's irregular inspection visits in the engine room. The guard watched him roll past without moving and without indication of interest. Troy glanced at his watch as the exit closed behind him. Not quite six minutes since he'd left Clingman's office ... they should already have begun to check on his whereabouts, and the fact that he alone of all the humans at the station had access to a groundcar would then be one of the first things to come to their minds.

He slowed the car near a tiny inspection door in the outer wall of the station, cut its lights, jumped out and watched it roll on, picking up speed as it swerved away to the east and rushed down into the dark desert. Months before he had installed the automatic guidance devices which would keep the car hurrying steadily eastwards now, changing direction only to avoid impassable obstacles. It might be that, at a time of such importance to the Tareegs, they would not attempt to follow the car. If a flier did discover it from the air, the vehicle would be destroyed ... and it was rigged to disintegrate with sufficient violence then to conceal the fact that it had lacked a driver.

* * * * *

Troy opened the inspection door, then stopped for a moment, staring

back at the Tareeg hangar beyond the station. Light had been glowing through its screens again when he came out; now the hazy translucence of the screens was drawing sideways and up from the great entrance rectangle. Another of the big personnel carriers nosed slowly out, moved up into the air and vanished against the night sky. If it was loaded as close to capacity as the one he had watched from inside the tunnel, almost two thirds of the Hammerhead force at the station had gone by now to attend the rites at Cassa One's new sea.

He waited while the force-screen restored itself over the entrance. Immediately afterwards, the lights in the hangar turned dim and faded away. Troy climbed in through the inspection door, locked it and started back down to the maintenance level.

With a little luck, he thought, he might even be able to work undisturbed now inside the interstellar drone he had selected for his escape. He would have to be back in the tunnel when the search-beams came through again ... he suspected they might be quite sensitive enough to detect the presence of a living being inside one of the ships. But the Hammerheads themselves might not show up again until he was prepared to leave. And then it wouldn't matter. If they did appear--well, he would get some warning from the fact that the hangar lights would begin to come on first. Not very much warning, but it might be enough.

The passage leading past his quarters was empty and quiet. Troy remained behind a corner for a minute or two listening. If Dr. Rojas had reported his failure to arrive at Room 72, the Tareegs must also have learned by now that he had left the station, and the last place they would think of hunting for him was here. But somebody--Hammerhead or human stooge--might be in his rooms, making a second and more thorough investigation there.

* * * * *

Everything remained still. Troy came quietly out into the passage, went down it to the tool room next to his quarters, opened the door, taking the gun from his pocket, and slipped inside. With the door locked, he stood still a moment, then turned on the lights.

A glance around showed that nobody was lurking for him here. He darkened the room again, crossed it, removed the floor section over the tunnel entrance and slipped down into the tunnel. Working by touch, he pulled the floor section back across the opening, snapped it into

place and started up the familiar narrow passage he had cut through the desert rock.

He couldn't have said exactly what warned him. It might have been the tiny click of a black-light beam going on. But he knew suddenly that something alive and breathing stood farther up the passage waiting for him, and the gun came quickly from his pocket again.

His forehead was struck with almost paralyzing force. Stungun ... they wanted him alive. Troy found himself on his knees, dizzy and sick, while a voice yelled at him. _Human_, he thought, with a blaze of hatred beyond anything he'd ever felt for the Tareegs. _Traitor human!_ The gun, still somehow in his hand, snarled its answer.

Then the stungun found him again, in three quick, hammering blows, and consciousness was gone.

* * * * *

There came presently an extended period of foggy, groping thoughts interspersed with sleep and vivid nightmares. After a time, Troy was aware that he was in a section of the sick bay on the _Atlas_, and that the great carrier was in interstellar flight. So the operation on Cassa One was over.

He wondered how long he had been knocked out. Days perhaps. It was the shrill, rapid-fire voice of a Tareeg which had first jolted him back into partial awareness. For confused seconds, Troy thought the creature was addressing him; then came the click of a speaker and the sounds ended, and he realized he had heard the Tareeg's voice over the ship's intercom system. A little later, it occurred to him that it had been using its own language and therefore could not have been speaking to him.

During that first muddled period, Troy knew now and then that he was still almost completely paralyzed. Gradually, very gradually, his mind began to clear and the intervals of sleep which always ended with terrifying nightmares grew shorter. Simultaneously he found he was acquiring a limited ability to move. And that, too, increased.

It might have been three or four hours after his first awakening before he began to plan what he might do. He had made a number of observations. There were three other men in this section with him. All seemed to be unconscious. He thought the one lying in the bed next to

his own was Newland, but the room was dim and he had been careful to avoid motions which might have been observed, so he wasn't certain. There was a single human attendant in the small room beyond the open doorspace opposite his bed. Troy didn't recall the man's face. He was in the uniform of a medical corpsman; but whatever else the fellow might be, he was here primarily in the role of a guard because he had a gun fastened to his belt. It classed him as a human being whose subservience to the Hammerheads was not in question. Twice, when the man in the bed at the far end of the room had begun to groan and move about, the guard came in and did something that left the restless one quiet again. Troy couldn't see what he used, but the probability was that it had been a drug administered with a hypodermic spray.

Getting his hands on the gun, Troy decided, shouldn't be too difficult if he made no mistakes. His life was forfeit, and to lie and wait until the Tareeg inquisitors were ready for him wasn't to his taste. Neither ... though somewhat preferable ... was personal suicide. A ship, even as great a ship as the _Atlas_, had certain vulnerabilities in interstellar flight--and who knew them better than one of the ship's own engineers? The prime nerve centers were the bridge and the sections immediately surrounding it. It might be, Troy thought, it just might be that the Hammerheads never would bring their prize in to the twin worlds to have its treasures of technological information pried out of it. And that in itself would be a major gain for Earth.

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He turned various possibilities over in his mind with the detachment of a man who has acknowledged the inevitable fact of his own death. And he felt his strength flowing back into him.

The guard in the other room presently heard renewed groans and the slurred muttering of a half-conscious man. As he came in through the doorspace with the drug spray he walked into Troy's fist. It didn't quite put him to sleep, but the spray did thirty seconds later, and shortly he was resting, carefully bound and gagged since Troy didn't know how long the drug would retain its effect, in the back of a large clothes locker.

The man in the next bed was Newland. He seemed uninjured but was unconscious, presumably drugged like the other two. Troy left the section in the corpsman's uniform, the gun concealed in his pocket. It was improbable that the guard's authority to carry it extended beyond the sick bay area. In another pocket--it might come in handy--was the

refilled drug spray.

He was two decks closer to the bridge section when it struck him how deserted the _Atlas_ seemed. Of course, he had avoided areas where he would be likely to run into sizable groups of either men or Tareegs. But he had seen only six humans so far, only two of the Hammerheads. These last had come out of a cross-passage ahead of him and vanished into another, two men following quietly behind, the high-pitched alien voices continuing to make a thin, complaining clamor in the otherwise empty hall seconds after they had disappeared. And the thought came to Troy: suppose most of the ship's complement was down in the sleepers?

It wasn't impossible. The _Atlas_ must still be provisioned for years to come, but an excellent way to avoid human mutiny on the approach to the Hammerhead worlds would be to put any captives not needed for essential duty to sleep. And the _Atlas_ hadn't been built for the convenience of water-creatures. To control a human skeleton crew would require a correspondingly small number of Tareegs. Most of their force, he thought, very well might be making the return in their own vessels.

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The reflection literally stopped Troy in his tracks. Because that could change everything he'd had in mind, opened up possibilities he hadn't thought existed ... including the one, still remote though it might be, of returning the _Atlas_ to Earth. Perhaps the men now in charge of the ship would be almost as unwilling to allow that to happen as the Hammerheads; they had too much to answer for. But if the situation he had imagined did exist, his thoughts raced on ... why then....

Troy's mind swam briefly with a wild premonition of triumph. There _were_ ways in which it might be done! But because of that, there was also now the sudden need for much more caution than he had intended to use. What he needed first was somebody who could tell him exactly how things stood on board--preferably somebody in a position of authority who could be persuaded or forced to fall in then with Troy's subsequent moves.

* * * * *

The bridge deck was as quiet as the others. On the old _Atlas_, most of this area had been officers' country, reserved for the expedition heads and top ship personnel; and presumably that arrangement had been changed only by the addition of Tareeg commanders and guards. Troy kept

to the maintenance passages, encountered no one but presently found unused crew quarters and exchanged the corpsman uniform there for less conspicuous shipboard clothes. This would make a satisfactory temporary base of operations. And now to get the information he wanted....

The voice was coming out of the only door open on the dim hall. There were six staterooms on either side, and Troy remembered that the room beyond the open door had been occupied by Dr. Clingman on the trip out from Earth. The voice--preoccupied, mild, a little tired--was unmistakably Dr. Victor Clingman's.

Was he alone? Troy thought so. He couldn't make out the words, but it was a monologue, not a conversation. He had the impression of Clingman dictating another rambling dissertation on Tareeg ways into a recorder; and the conviction came to him, not for the first time, that the man was in some essential manner no longer sane, that he had come to believe that his observations on these deadly enemies some day really could be compiled into an orderly and valuable addition to human knowledge.

Sane or not, he was a frightened man, the perfect quarry for Troy's present purpose. With a gun on him, he would talk. And once having assisted Troy to any degree, he would be too terrified of Tareeg reprisals to do anything but switch sides again and go along with Troy, hoping that thereby the worst--once more--could be avoided. The worst for Victor Clingman. It would be impossible, Troy thought, to trust Clingman, but he could make very good use of him in spite of that.

He came quietly along the passage, his attention as much on the closed doors about him as on the one which was open. The guard's gun unfortunately wasn't a noiseless type, but he had wrapped a small cushion around its muzzle and across it, which should muffle reports satisfactorily if it came to that. Words became distinguishable.

"It is not a parasite in the ordinary sense," Clingman's tired voice said. "It is a weapon. It kills and moves on. A biological weapon limited to attack one species: the enemy. It is insidious. There is no warning and no defense. Unconsciousness and death occur painlessly within an hour after contact, and the victim has not realized he is being destroyed. The radius of infection moves out indetectably and with incredible swiftness. And yet there was a method of containing this agent. That knowledge, however, is now lost.

"As an achievement of the Tareeg genius for warfare, the weapon seems

matched--in some respects surpassed--only by the one used to counteract it. And in that, obviously, there were serious faults. They...."

The man, Troy decided, was quite close, perhaps twelve feet to the right side of the door. He glanced back along the silent hall, slipped the cover from the gun--with Clingman, he would only need to show it--then came into the room in two quick strides, turning to the right and drawing the door shut behind him.

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There was no one in sight. The voice continued:

"... desperate, with no time to complete essential testing. A terrible gamble, but one which inevitably...." The meaning faded from Troy's mind as he discovered the wall-speaker from which the words were coming. His eyes darted across the room to a comfortable chair drawn up beside a table, to a familiar picture of untidily arrayed piles of notes on the table, a thread of smoke still rising from a cigarette in the tray among them. Clingman had been in the room within minutes, listening to one of his previous recordings as he worked. Troy's glance shifted to a closed door on his right. Bedroom and bath of the suite lay behind it. Clingman might be there. He might also ... Troy reached back, quietly opened the door to the hall again, moved on and slipped out of sight behind an ornamental screen on the other side of the speaker.

Clingman could have left his quarters for some reason. In any event, it was obvious that he had intended to return to the room very shortly. If he brought someone with him, the situation might be more difficult. But hardly too difficult to be handled.

Troy worked the improvised silencer back over the gun muzzle, senses straining to catch either the opening of the door on his right or the sound of an approach down the hall.

"So it was possible," he heard the wall-speaker say, "to reconstruct, in almost every essential detail, what the concluding situation must have been on the world where the Tareeg species had its origin. The attacking section was safely screened, presumably by a form of energy barrier, against the deadly agent it had released. The section under attack had no defense against an agent so nearly indestructible that it subsequently survived for over a thousand years in its inert, frozen condition without losing effectiveness in the least--"

Troy thought: What ... WHAT HAD IT SAID?

He stepped out from behind the screen as the door on his right opened. Dr. Clingman stood in the door, mouth open, eyes bulging in surprise and alarm at the gun in Troy's hand. Then his gaze shifted to Troy's face, and his expression slowly changed.

"Mister Gordon," he murmured, smiling very cautiously, "you are really the most difficult man to keep stopped!"

Troy pointed a shaking finger at the speaker. "That!" he cried. "That ... it said _a thousand years in the ice_!"

Clingman nodded. "Yes." His eyes returned, still rather warily, to the gun. "And I'm rather glad, you know, you happened to catch that particular part before I appeared."

Troy was staring at him. "That was their lost home-world--the one you've kept talking about. That great asteroid cloud here...."

"No, not here." Clingman came forward more confidently into the room, and Troy saw now that the left side of the scientist's face and head was covered with medical plastic. "The Cassa system is a long way behind us, Gordon," Clingman said. "We've been on our way back to Earth for more than two days."

"To Earth," Troy muttered. "And I...."

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Clingman jabbed a stubby finger down on a control switch at the table, and the wall-speaker went silent. "It will be easier to tell you directly," he said. "You've already grasped the essential fact--our Tareeg captors, for the most part, are dead. They were killed, with some careful assistance from the men in charge of this expedition, by a weapon developed approximately twelve centuries ago on their ancestral world. A world which still circles today, though in a rather badly disintegrated condition, about the Cassa sun....

"But let's be seated, if you will. You gave me a very unpleasant fright just now." Dr. Clingman touched the side of his face. "I had an ear shot off recently by a man who didn't wait to have the situation explained to him. His aim, fortunately, was imperfect. And there is

still a minor war in progress on the _Atlas_. Oh, nothing to worry about now--it's almost over. I heard less than twenty minutes ago that the last of the Tareeg guards on board had surrendered. About fifty of them have become our prisoners. Then there is a rather large group of armed men in spacesuits in one section of the ship with whom we have been unable to communicate. They regard us as traitors to the race, Dr. Dexter and myself in particular. But we have worked out a system of light signals which should tell them enough to make them willing to parlay...."

He settled himself carefully into the big chair, turning a white, fatigued face back to Troy. "That," he said, waving his pudgy hand at the wall-speaker, "is a talk I made up to explain what actually has happened to the main body of the mutineers. They comprised a large majority of the crew and of the expedition members, of course, but fortunately we were able to gas most of them into unconsciousness almost at once, so that no further lives have been lost. We have begun to arouse them again in small groups who are told immediately that the space ice we were bringing in to Cassa One carried a component which has resulted in the destruction of the Tareeg force, and who are then given as much additional information as is needed to answer their general questions and convince them that we are still qualified to command the Cassa Expedition. I believe that in a few more days normal conditions on the ship will have been restored...."

Clingman glanced over at the smoldering cigarette in the tray, stubbed it out and lit another. "We had been aware for some time of your plan to escape back to Earth in one of the Tareeg drones," he said. "It was an audacious and ingenious scheme which might very well have succeeded. We decided to let you go ahead with it, since it was by no means certain until the very last day that our own plans would be an unqualified success. On the other hand, we couldn't let you leave too early because the Tareegs certainly would have taken the _Atlas_ to the twin worlds then without completing the Cassa One operation. And we didn't care to let you in on our secret, for reasons I'm sure you understand."

Troy nodded. "If they'd got on to me, I might have spilled that, too."

"Exactly," Clingman said. "There was no question of your loyalty or determination but the Tareegs' methods of persuasion might cause the most stubborn man to tell more than he should. So no one who was not essential to the work was given any information whatever. Dr. Rojas applied certain medical measures which prevented Mr. Newland from

recovering prematurely ... prematurely from our point of view, that is. It did not keep you from completing your other preparations but ensured that you would not actually leave unless we believed the move had become necessary, as a last resort."

* * * * *

Troy shook his head. He'd been working against something there had been no way of knowing about. "Was that Rojas waiting for me in the tunnel?"

"Yes. At that point, we knew we would win, and it had become safe enough to tell you. Unfortunately, you believed it was a trap."

Troy chewed his lip. "On that home-world of the Tareegs when the two factions were fighting--the losing side did something which blasted the whole planet apart?"

"Not exactly," Clingman said. "The appearance of it is rather that the home-world came apart in an almost gentle manner, section separating from section. How that could be done is something no one on Earth had worked out at the time we left. The original survey group brought back samples of the asteroid swarm for analysis. A good deal was learned from them."

He paused, frowning at his cigarette, said slowly, "The twin worlds have developed a new scientific Tareeg caste which was considered--or considered itself--too valuable to be risked on the interstellar expedition to the Cassa system. I think that was a very fortunate circumstance for us. Even before we left Earth, even when it was believed they were all dead, what had been deduced of the Tareeg genius for destruction was more than a little disturbing. The apparent purpose of that last defensive action on the home-world was to strip the surface oceans from the hostile sections of the planet. Obviously, the process got out of hand; the entire planet was broken up instead. But one can't really doubt that--given more time--they would have learned to master the weapon.

"The killing agent developed by the opposing side evidently had been very thoroughly mastered. And again we can't say how they did it. It can be described as a large protein molecule, but its properties can be imagined only as arising out of a very complex organization, theoretically impossible at that level of life. It is confined to water, but its method of dispersion within that medium is not understood at all. At one instant, it is here; at the next, it

apparently will have moved to a point perhaps several hundred miles away. It is life which has no existence, and cannot exist, except as a weapon. Unlike a parasite, its purpose is simply to kill, quickly and efficiently, and go on at once to another victim. Having exhausted the store of victims--a short process, obviously, even in an area of planetary dimensions--it dies of something like starvation within days.

"That, of course, was as practical a limitation to those employing it as the one that it attacks only Tareegs. They did not want to be barred indefinitely from an area which had been cleansed of their enemies, and neither did they want food animals in that area to be destroyed. They...."

His voice trailed off, and Troy stirred restlessly. Dr. Clingman was slumped farther down in his chair now, and the pale, protruding eyes had begun to blink drowsily. He seemed about to go to sleep. Troy said, "If the thing killed the Tareegs on Cassa One inside an hour after they'd gone into the sea, then they couldn't have had the time to start the interstellar drones back towards the twin worlds."

Clingman's head turned to him again. "No," Clingman said. "Of course not."

"And even," Troy went on, "if they had been able to ship a couple of loads of infected water back, it would have been harmless long before it reached their worlds."

* * * * *

Clingman nodded. "Quite harmless. As harmless as the new ocean on Cassa One would be by this time to Tareegs who entered it." He paused. "We'd thought, Gordon ... as you might be thinking now ... of sending the drones back instead with a load of asteroid ice containing the inert agent. That, of course, would not have reduced its effectiveness. Nevertheless, the scheme wouldn't have worked."

"Why not?" Troy asked.

"Because the drones, in the Tareeg view, were sacred messengers. They could be used only to announce in a certain prescribed manner that the Tareeg interstellar expeditionary force had discovered a water planet and taken possession of it, again with the required ceremony, for the twin worlds. The transmission of lumps of interplanetary ice would never have fitted that picture, would, in fact, have been an immediate

warning that something very much out of order had occurred.

"That Tareeg insistence on exact ritualistic procedure--essentially a defensive measure in their dealings with one another--also happened to delay our own plans here very badly. Except for it, we would have been ready at least a year ago to flood Cassa One and entrap our captors."

Troy repeated, stunned, "You would have been ready...."

"Yes, but consider what might have resulted from that over-hasty action. The Cassa system is much more readily accessible from the twin worlds than it is from Earth, and if we made some mistake with the drones, or if the Tareegs began to suspect for any other reason that their expeditionary force had met with disaster, they would be certain to establish themselves at once in a very strong manner here, leaving Earth confronted with a dangerously talented and implacable new enemy. No, we had to retain the appearance of helplessness until we had acquired an exact understanding of the manner in which the water-message must be prepared, and had discovered some substitute for the freezing effect on the lethal agent. That took an extra year."

Troy said carefully, "And during that year, as you knew would happen, another dozen or so men died very slow and painful deaths on the Tareeg execution benches. Any one of those men might have been you or I...."

"That is quite true," Clingman said. "But it was something that could not be avoided. In that time, we _did_ learn the necessary ritual and we _did_ find a numbing catalyst which will hold the protein agent inert until it loses its effect by being sufficiently diluted again.
So now the drones have been dispatched. Long before this ship reaches Earth again, the agent will have been introduced to the twin worlds, and except for the specimens we carry on board, the Tareeg species will be extinct. It may not be a pleasant thing to have a pair of ghost worlds forever a little on our conscience--but one does not have to fight uncertain wars with ghosts."

Troy studied him in silence for some seconds.

"And I thought you were soft," he said at last. "I thought you were weak and soft...."

THE END

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[Illustration: "YOU ARE NOT AFRAID OF MY DOG?"]

A SONG-BIRD

BY

ELEANORA H. STOOKE

Author of "Angel's Brother," "Little Maid Marigold,"
"The Bottom of the Bread Pan," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALFRED PEARSE

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A SONG-BIRD

CHAPTER I

MAVIS AND HER MOTHER

"THERE, I've finished. How the days are drawing in, to be sure! I declare it's getting dark already, though it's only six o'clock."

The scene was an upstairs sitting-room in a dingy London lodging-house, on a September evening. And the speaker—Mrs. Grey—rose from her seat at the table as she spoke, and laid aside her writing materials with an air of relief, afterwards placing the letter, over the composition of which she had spent fully half an hour, on the mantelpiece. She then took an easy-chair by the window, whilst the other occupant of the room—her little daughter, Mavis, who had been watching the passers-by in the street—settled herself on a stool at her feet.

"Now we can have a nice chat, mother," Mavis said. "I've been longing to talk, but I haven't liked to disturb you. You've been writing a very particular letter, haven't you?"

"Yes, dear; but how did you guess that?"

"You looked so grave, and, I thought, sad. There's nothing very much amiss, is there, mother? Are you worrying because you haven't had any nursing to do lately? We've money left to go on with, haven't we?"

Mavis was a pretty little girl of ten years, with beautiful hazel eyes, and a quantity of soft brown hair which curled naturally and could never be kept tidy. Her expression was one of great anxiety, as she looked up into her mother's face and waited for her response.

Mrs. Grey did not answer immediately. She was a tall, handsome woman, with a self-reliant manner, and a countenance which inspired trust. She had been left a widow several years previously, since when she had had a hard battle to fight. For her husband, who had held a curacy in the East End of London, had had no private means, and at his death she had found herself nearly penniless.

Before her marriage, however, she had been fully qualified as a nurse, so she had taken up her old profession again, and had earned sufficient by private nursing to support herself and her child. Of late, she had been out of work, and things had looked dark altogether; but she owned a brave heart and was not easily cast down. So that it had been with awe as well as with surprise, that Mavis had observed her shedding tears over the letter she had been writing.

"As a matter of fact, we've very little money left," Mrs. Grey admitted, at length. "But I'm not troubled about that now, for I have been asked and have engaged to nurse a rich young lady who is threatened with consumption, and—and it is likely to be a long engagement."

"Oh, mother! You said you felt sure God would provide for us, and you were right. Who is the young lady? Does she live near here? Will you be away at night? How shall you manage?"

On previous occasions, when Mrs. Grey had been absent, Mavis had boarded with the lodging-house keeper, Miss Tompkins. And she thought very likely it would be arranged for her to do so again. She would have no objection to raise to the plan, for Miss Tompkins, a kind-hearted, elderly spinster, who had seen better days, was a great favourite of hers.

"I-I hardly know," Mrs. Grey answered, somewhat hesitatingly. "I don't like the idea of being separated from you, child, but I feel it must be."

"Oh, I shall be all right, mother!" Mavis declared, reassuringly.

"You don't understand, dear; I must explain. Miss Dawson—the young lady I have engaged to nurse—is the only child of a very rich man, and I do not think my duties will be arduous, but—but I shall have to go abroad with her—to Australia."

"To Australia!" echoed Mavis, aghast, the colour fading from her 'cheeks, a look of dismay in her hazel eyes. "Why, Australia's ever so far away—right at the other side of the world!"

"Yes. I shall be gone months, perhaps even a year or longer, it will depend upon the patient."

"Oh, mother," gasped Mavis, "you don't mean it! Say you don't."

"But I do mean it, my dear. I am to have a splendid salary, and shall be able to provide for you well during my absence. It would have been madness to have refused this post. Suppose nothing else offered? Then we should be face to face with want, and with the winter coming on, too. Don't look at me so reproachfully, Mavis."

"Mother, how can you leave me?" cried the little girl. "I don't mind

living with Miss Tompkins for a few weeks, but for months, perhaps years—" She completed the sentence with a sob.

"It is not my intention to leave you with Miss Tompkins, my dear. I am thinking of sending you to your father's relations, if they will have you, and I expect they will. You know you've an uncle and aunt living at W—, near Oxford, and they have children about your age, a girl and a boy. Wouldn't you like to know them? I've written to your uncle to-night. You remember him, don't you? He came to your father's funeral, and once afterwards, he called to see us, when he was in town on business."

"Yes," replied Mavis, dolefully. She had a somewhat hazy remembrance of a tall, stout man, with stooping shoulders, who had presented her with a big box of chocolates. She had the box still, it was one of her few treasures.

"He is a miller at W—, and is a very prosperous man, I believe. I have written to ask him to take you into his home, and I am sure he will. Come, my dear, don't cry. We ought to be very, very thankful that I have succeeded in obtaining such a good post."

In spite of her brave words, there were tears in Mrs. Grey's own eyes as she spoke. Her little daughter leaned against her knees and wept heart-brokenly, and she smoothed her tangled brown locks with a gentle, caressing hand.

Mavis knew by experience, that when her mother had quite made up her mind that a certain course of action was right, she would certainly pursue it. So by-and-by, she dried her eyes and tried to compose herself, but her heart was dreadfully sore. Mrs. Grey went on to explain that Miss Dawson was very young—only seventeen—and that the doctors hoped the long voyage and a few months' sojourn in Australia might do much for her health.

"I am very, very sorry for her, for she is terribly delicate," she said, pityingly. "She is motherless, too, poor girl! Her father has business engagements to keep him in England, or he would make the trip to Australia with her, himself. She will be completely in my charge, so mine will be a responsible position. It is very sad to see one so young, so weak and ill. Don't you feel sorry for her, Mavis?"

"Yes, of course I do," Mavis answered.

Then she added, with a touch of jealousy in her tone, "She will have you all to herself; but you won't forget your own little girl, will you?"

"Do you think that is likely?" Mrs. Grey asked, seriously.

"No, mother, indeed I don't," Mavis replied, feeling rather ashamed of herself; "but it is so very hard that we should be parted."

"It does appear so, dear; but, depend upon it, God knows best. You don't realize how worried I've been lately, wondering how we should manage, if I didn't get an engagement soon. Of course, I ought not to have felt like that. I ought to have remembered that 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' And now it seems to me, that this work is the answer to my prayers, and that therefore it is the work God wishes me to do. It has come like light in darkness, and I want you to rejoice with me. Come, little song-bird, it grieves me to look at your gloomy face; let me see you smile."

Mavis tried to obey, but it was a sorry attempt. Her dead father had chosen her somewhat fanciful name, and it suited her well. For she was the possessor of a voice as sweet and clear as the bird—the song-thrush—after which she had been named. She was a healthy, bright, happy child who had never had a real trouble in her life till now. She remembered her father quite well, but he had died when she had been too young to realize her loss. She had certainly cried when, on inquiring for him, she had been told he had gone a long journey to a far country. But she had soon dried her eyes, and been consoled by the assurance that if she was a good girl, she would go to him some day.

Mavis had never thought much about her relatives. She knew her mother was an orphan who had been brought up at a charitable institution. And she had frequently heard her remark that she did not think she had any one near akin to her in the world, and that, but for her husband's brother, who wrote to her very kindly from time to time, there was no one to whom she could go for assistance or advice.

Now, as she sat at her mother's feet and tried to reconcile herself to the parting which seemed inevitable, the little girl reflected that it would be rather nice to have companions of her own age, and that it would be pleasant to live in the country. By-and-by, she looked up with a smile, and her mother saw that she meant to make the best of things.

"That's right, my dear," Mrs. Grey said cordially, "you're my sensible

little daughter again, I see. We shall not be separated quite yet—"

"When will it be, mother?" Mavis broke in.

"In about a fortnight, I think. Mr. Dawson asked me if I could be ready by then, and I told him I could. Of course, if your uncle and aunt decline to have you at W—, I must arrange for you to remain with Miss Tompkins, but I would rather leave you with relatives. I've never been to W—, but I believe it's a very pretty place; the nearest railway-station is Oxford. Perhaps I may take you to W— myself."

"Oh, mother, I hope you will."

"We shall see."

Mrs. Grey rose as she spoke, lit the gas, and pulled down the blind. Then she took up the letter she had written, and remarked, "It may as well go to-night. I will put on my bonnet and cloak and post it. You may come with me, if you like, Mavis, and we will have a look at the shops."

"Oh yes," Mavis agreed, readily.

Accordingly, mother and daughter went out together. Mrs. Grey posted her letter at the first pillar-box they passed. And a few minutes later, they turned from the dingy street in which their home was situated, into a wider thoroughfare lined on either side with fine shops, brilliantly illuminated with electric light.

Mavis amused herself, for a while, by pointing out to her mother the various articles she would like to buy, and it did not trouble her that she could not purchase any of them, for she was a contented little soul who had never fretted at poverty. But by-and-by, she grew silent, and her interest in her surroundings commenced to flag.

"Shall we go home, now?" suggested Mrs. Grey, thinking the child was getting tired.

"Yes, if you like, mother," Mavis answered, in a dispirited tone.

She did not explain that she had become suddenly depressed by the thought that she and her mother might never thus gaze into the shop windows together again. Who could tell what might happen in the months to come? Her mother might be shipwrecked and drowned. Oh, there were

scores of accidents which might happen to prevent her return. A panic of fear, such as she had never experienced before, had taken possession of her. But she kept her self-control until she went to bed and her mother came to kiss her good night. Then, as she felt the clasp of her mother's loving arms, she broke into tears and wailed piteously.

"Oh, don't, don't leave me! Don't go to Australia! What shall I do without you? Oh, mother, I've only you—only you! Oh, I feel so frightened!"

"Hush, hush, dear," Mrs. Grey whispered tenderly, as she pressed the little quivering form to her breast. "You must not be frightened. You must trust in God, and never forget that if I am far away from you, He will be always near—caring for you, protecting you, and loving you all the time. Jesus said, 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.' Often we can't help being troubled and fearful, but if we had more faith in our Saviour, we should never be either. The thought of separation is as distressing to me as it is to you, Mavis, but I believe God has willed it for the good of both of us. Won't you try to believe it, too?"

"Indeed I will try," Mavis returned, checking her sobs. "I want to be brave, for I know it hurts you to see me like this, mother. But, oh, I never once dreamed you would go away from me—so far, far away, right to the other side of the world!"

CHAPTER II

CONCERNING MISS DAWSON

MRS. GREY received a letter from her brother-in-law by return of post, in which, as she had anticipated would be the case, he expressed his willingness to make a home for Mavis for as long as she should need it.

"My wife bids me say she will do her best for your little girl," he wrote, "and I am sure she will not be lonely with Rose and Bob for playfellows. Bob goes to the village school; but Rose attends a private school for girls, kept by a Miss Matthews, and I suggest that Mavis should accompany her. Why not come and spend a few days with Mavis at W— before you leave England? It would give us much pleasure to welcome you to the Mill House."

"I should like to go," Mrs. Grey said, smiling at her little daughter, to whom she had been reading extracts from her brother-in-law's letter, "and I will try to manage it. I think I must go and see Miss Dawson to-day, and ascertain if her father has decided by which vessel she is to travel. Would you like to accompany me—to Camden Square, I mean, where the Dawsons live?"

"Indeed I should, mother," Mavis answered.

"I have told Miss Dawson about you, and she expressed a desire to see you. I think she will like to talk to you, Mavis, and you must try not to be shy with her, for she is little more than a child herself. She is exceedingly low-spirited at the prospect of leaving her father, to whom she is most devotedly attached."

"She's very rich, didn't you say, mother?" said Mavis.

"Rich as far as money goes, but she cannot enjoy life, like most girls of her age, because she is in such poor health."

"I suppose she'll get well, won't she?"

"I cannot say, my dear. God alone knows that."

Mavis' interest in Miss Dawson was increasing, and she was now all eagerness to see her. She and her mother started for Camden Square shortly after their midday dinner, but it was nearly four o'clock by the time they reached their destination.

Never before had the little girl been in such a luxuriously furnished house as Mr. Dawson's, and she made good use of her eyes as she crossed the hall in the wake of the servant who ushered her mother and herself into a large, lofty drawing-room. How soft was the thick velvet pile carpet, with its pattern of moss and pale pink rosebuds! It was almost too handsome to step on, Mavis thought, and she looked at her boots anxiously, to make sure they were not muddy.

"Oh, mother, this is a lovely room," she whispered as the servant, who had informed them that her master was not at home, but that he was expected shortly, went to tell Miss Dawson of their arrival; "but if it was mine I should be afraid to use it, I am sure. It is far, far handsomer than Miss Tompkins' front drawing-room."

Miss Tompkins' front drawing-room, which that worthy lady let at half

a guinea a week, had hitherto been Mavis' idea of what a drawing-room should be, but now she relegated it to a second place in her estimation.

In a very short while, the servant returned, and said that Miss Dawson was ready to receive them, and they were shown upstairs. The servant drew back a heavy crimson plush curtain hanging before a door which she opened, and announced—"Mrs. Grey, if you please, Miss Laura."

"I'm so glad to see you've brought your little girl with you, Mrs. Grey," said a soft musical voice. "How do you do? It's rather chilly, isn't it? At least, I find it so."

Mavis looked at the speaker with an interest she did not strive to conceal. Miss Dawson lay on a sofa, but she certainly did not appear ill to an inexperienced observer, for there was a beautiful flush in her cheeks, and her blue eyes were extremely brilliant. Mrs. Grey would not permit her to rise, but drew a chair near to her sofa, and, having duly introduced Mavis to her, questioned her concerning her health.

"Oh, I don't believe I'm half so bad as the doctors try to make out," the young girl declared, "and I wouldn't consent to go to Australia but for father. He was so unhappy when, at first, I refused to go. And you, you poor little thing," she proceeded, turning her attention to Mavis, "you greatly dislike the idea of parting from your mother, do you not?"

"Yes," Mavis was obliged to admit.

"How you must hate me, because I'm going to be the cause of your separation! But, since the doctors are bent on exiling me from England, I'm glad your mother is going with me, because—Oh, come in!" she cried, as there was a tap at the door.

It was the servant who had shown Mavis and her mother upstairs, come to say that Mr. Dawson had returned, and would like to see Mrs. Grey.

"There, now everything will be settled," Miss Dawson remarked, as Mrs. Grey left the room. "I consider you and I are companions in misfortune, in one way, for you are to be separated from your mother and I from my father. It's a great nuisance my lungs are so delicate."

"I am very sorry," Mavis said gently.

"But I won't believe that I am very bad; sometimes I don't feel ill at all. Where are you going to live whilst your mother is away?"

Mavis told her, adding that she did not know her aunt and cousins, and that she would miss her mother dreadfully. Her brown eyes filled with tears as she spoke.

"Poor little thing!" murmured Miss Dawson, in a tone of such deep sympathy, that the tears overflowed and ran down her companion's cheeks. "I have no doubt you begrudge your mother to me," she continued, after a brief pause, "but please do try not to. I really am ill, you know, though I like to pretend I'm not sometimes, and—by the way, you have not told me your name?"

"It is Mavis."

"Mavis?"

"Yes. My father chose it for me. A mavis is a thrush—a bird which sings."

"And do you sing?" Miss Dawson inquired, with a smile.

"Yes," Mavis replied, drying her eyes and smiling too. "I used to sing when I was quite a little girl."

Miss Dawson laughed; but the laugh brought on a fit of coughing which lasted several minutes. When it had passed, she seemed quite exhausted, and lay back on the sofa with her eyes shut, panting. Mavis was rather frightened, and wished her mother would return, but presently Miss Dawson opened her eyes and smiled at her, remarking apologetically—

"I hope I have not alarmed you; this wretched cough takes all my strength away. There, I'm all right again. I wish you would sing to me."

"Do you mean now?" Mavis inquired, dubiously.

"Yes, unless you would rather not."

The little girl coloured nervously; but she feared to appear disobliging, so she sang one or two simple ditties very prettily. Miss Dawson was charmed, and Mavis felt gratified at being able to give her pleasure.

"You have a very sweet voice," Miss Dawson said by-and-by, at the conclusion of the last song. "Do—please do sing something more."

"I'm afraid I don't know any more songs," Mavis replied, "but I will sing a hymn, if you like. I know! I will give you mother's favourite psalm."

She commenced forthwith to sing an old version of the twenty-third psalm—

"The Lord is only my support, and He that doth me feed;
How can I then lack anything whereof I stand in need?
In pastures green He feedeth me, where I do safely lie;
And after leads me to the streams which run most pleasantly."

"And when I find myself near lost, then doth He me home take;
Conducting me in His right paths, e'en for His own Name's sake.
And though I were e'en at death's door, yet would I fear no ill;
For both Thy rod and shepherd's crook afford me comfort still."

"Thou hast my table richly spread in presence of my foe,
Thou hast my head with balm refresht, my cup doth overflow—"

Mavis stopped suddenly, for, much to her consternation, she saw that Miss Dawson was struggling to subdue an emotion which threatened to overpower her, and that her blue eyes were swimming in tears. There was silence for a few minutes.

"I am very foolish," the sick girl said, at length, in a tremulous tone, "and you mustn't think I don't like your singing, for I do, especially that psalm, it's—it's so comforting—"

"And when I find myself near lost, then doth He me home take."

"I shall think of that when I'm ever so far away from England, and—and I shall try to fear no ill, and remember that the Good Shepherd is with me. I am so glad you came with your mother to-day, Mavis; I would not have missed knowing you for a great deal. You must come to see me again."

Mavis, immensely flattered, flushed rosy red. After that, they talked quite confidentially, until Mrs. Grey re-entered the room. Miss Dawson told her in what manner Mavis had been entertaining her, and that her company had done her a vast deal of good.

"I must see more of her," she declared.

Then, with a sudden change of tone, she asked anxiously, "What has been decided?"

"That we are to sail from Plymouth, by the 'Nineveh,' on Thursday week," Mrs. Grey replied. "So we have only a short while in which to make our final arrangements. I am afraid I shall have no opportunity of bringing Mavis to see you again."

"Oh, mother!" cried Mavis, regretfully.

"I am sorry," said Miss Dawson, with a disappointed sigh. She took a fine gold chain, from which was suspended a little heart-shaped locket, from her neck as she spoke and called Mavis to her. "There, dear," she said, as she clasped the chain around the little girl's neck, "I give you that as a keepsake, for I want you to remember me, and—pray for me. You need not mind taking it, for I bought it with my own money."

"Oh!" cried Mavis, delightedly. "Oh, how kind of you! Mother, may I have it? Yes. Oh, thank you, thank you!" She threw her arms around Miss Dawson's neck and kissed her warmly. "I shall never forget you," she proceeded, her voice very earnest; "and I will pray for you, be very sure of that. I hope you will soon get quite, quite well, and come home again. Mother will take great care of you; she really is a capital nurse. Oh, she is ready to go, and I must say good-bye."

"Good-bye," Miss Dawson said, with a bright smile. "We shall meet again some day. I am glad you like the locket and chain."

"How I wish I had something to give you!" Mavis exclaimed.

"You have given me a great deal," Miss Dawson replied, in a low tone.

Then, as Mavis regarded her with wondering, questioning eyes, she said, "You have given me comfort, and reminded me that I am not setting out on a long journey without support from God. I shall remember that, I hope, now, and I'd nearly forgotten it. Good-bye, Mavis—little song-bird."

"Good-bye," Mavis responded, quite huskily.

She was surprised that she should feel so sad at saying good-bye to one who had been a stranger to her a short hour before; but it was so, and her eyes were dim with unshed tears as she followed her mother out

of the room. In the hall, they met Mr. Dawson—a gentleman with rather an anxious-looking face—who spoke to Mavis very kindly and accompanied them to the door, where his private carriage was waiting to take them home.

"Remember Thursday week," he said impressively, as he closed the carriage door upon Mrs. Grey and Mavis.

Then he stood back, and the carriage moved off.

"Oh, mother!" cried Mavis. "Thursday week! And it's Tuesday now! Oh, it will be dreadfully soon!"

CHAPTER III

THE ARRIVAL AT THE MILL HOUSE

IT was a fine afternoon at the end of September, on one of those golden days which frequently come when summer is ended, and the Mill House at W— was looking its best. It was an old stone house, close to the river, with lattice windows, around which creepers, now gorgeous with autumn's brilliant colouring, crept and twined whilst over the porch, which faced the southwest, clambered a monthly rose, on which a few pink blossoms bloomed, though it was so late in the season. Before the house was a well-kept plot of grass, surrounded by flower-beds and intersected by the path which led to the wicket-gate in the privet hedge which separated the garden from the high-road. And at the back of the house was a large yard, and a kitchen-garden reaching to the river's brink.

The mill wheel was silent on this perfect autumn afternoon, as it usually was on Saturday afternoons, and everything was very still within the house, where all was in apple-pie order. For visitors were expected, and a substantial meal was awaiting them in the parlour. Whilst in the kitchen, the kettle was singing merrily, and Jane, the capable middle-aged maid-of-all-work, in a spotless gown and clean cap and apron, was moving noiselessly about, duster in hand, in search of a speck of dust which might have escaped her notice.

"Everything's as clean as a new pin, and so it ought to be, seeing how I've slaved this day," she mused, her eyes wandering over the well-scrubbed table, the various shining tin and copper articles on the

mantelpiece, and resting at length on the tall brass-faced clock which stood near the door. "Half-past four!" she exclaimed. "They ought to be here by this time."

She opened the door as she spoke, and walked along a dark, narrow passage which led her into a stone-paved hall, flooded with sunshine which found entrance through a window at the right of the front door. Outside the front door, beneath the porch, stood a very little woman—the Mistress of the Mill House—shading her eyes with her hand, as she looked for the expected approach of a vehicle on the road which stretched before the house and led to Oxford.

"Are they coming, ma'am?" Jane inquired, as she crossed the hall and joined her mistress.

"The gig is not in sight yet," replied Mrs. Grey—or Mrs. John Grey, as we must call her, to distinguish her from Mavis' mother. In fact, she was generally known as Mrs. John.

"The children are outside the gate; they are as excited as they usually are when we expect any one. I wonder what our visitors will be like. I don't think Mrs. Grey can have much heart, or she wouldn't have accepted this engagement to go to Australia. I know I could not endure to be parted from my children—and she has only one child. John has asked her to visit us on several occasions, but she has always found an excuse—generally that of work—for declining our invitations. Now she wants to make use of us, she can came to see us fast enough."

Mrs. John spoke in an aggrieved tone. She was a fair-haired, blue-eyed little woman, who had held the post of useful help to a neighbouring farmer's wife previous to her marriage. She owned rather a sharp tongue and a jealous temper, but she was an affectionate wife and mother, and her husband and children loved her dearly. And it was she who, by her thrifty ways and good management, had helped to make the miller the well-to-do man he was to-day. Her unreserved manner of speaking to her servant was to be accounted for by the fact that Jane had lived at the Mill House before Mr. Grey had married, in his parents' lifetime, and was regarded more as a friend than a dependent.

"I expect Mrs. Grey hasn't had opportunities for visiting," Jane said thoughtfully. "She must have had to work very hard since her husband's death."

"He ought not to have been a clergyman," observed Mrs. John. "Gentlemen

with private means can afford to do as they please, but he came of working stock. How much wiser it would have been, if he had been brought up to some business!"

"I don't know about that, ma'am," Jane responded. "Christ's disciples came from working stock, anyway. Master Rupert was just the man to be a clergyman, his heart was in his work."

"He should not have married, to leave his wife and child unprovided for."

"He could not foresee his life would be cut short as it was, ma'am. I've always wondered why God took him—but, there, He knows best, and all things will be made plain to us some day. Isn't that the gig I see in the distance?"

At that moment the wicket-gate swung open, and a little girl, blue-eyed and fair-haired like her mother, ran up the garden path, crying excitedly—

"They're coming! They'll be here in a few minutes now! Do come to the gate to meet them, mother, and you, too, Jane."

[Illustration: ALL THE HOUSEHOLD THERE TO MEET THEM.]

They willingly complied, so that when the gig, in which were seated Mr. Grey and his sister-in-law, with Mavis between them, drew up before the Mill House, the strangers were gratified to find all the household there to meet them.

The miller was the first to get down from the conveyance. He was a tall, stout man, whose stooping shoulders proclaimed his trade, for they looked as though they were accustomed to bear heavy burdens such as sacks of flour. He had a loud, hearty voice, and his plain, somewhat heavy countenance, usually wore an expression of great kindliness. Having lifted Mavis from the gig, he helped his sister-in-law to alight, and then, addressing her by her Christian name—Margaret—he commenced a round of introductions.

"Margaret, let me introduce you to my wife—Lizzie. Lizzie, this is poor Rupert's wife, and here's his little girl, who's his living image. Rose and Bob, come here and speak to your aunt and cousin. Yes, that's right, Rose, kiss Mavis and make her welcome."

"And here's Jane! You've heard of Jane, haven't you, Margaret? Yes, I thought Rupert must have spoken of her to you; he and Jane were always good friends. Now go into the house, all of you—I'm sure the travellers must want their tea—and I'll be in as soon as I have taken out the horse. The luggage is coming by the carrier."

The miller's wife led the way into the house with Mrs. Grey, whilst the children followed with Jane, who told Mavis she ought to feel at home at the Mill House because her father and grandfather had been born there. The visitors were taken upstairs by their hostess, to the room which was to belong to Mavis.

"I thought you would like to occupy the same bedroom," said Mrs. John, glancing from mother to daughter, "more especially as you are to be parted so soon."

"Very, very soon!" sighed Mavis, mournfully.

"What a pretty room this is!" exclaimed mother, looking around with an appreciative smile. "I like that old-fashioned mahogany bed, and the window-seat; and how nice to be able to indulge in a white counterpane and white curtains! In London, in the part where we have been living, they would be drab in no time. It is very kind of you to spare Mavis such a beautiful room."

"Yes, indeed," Mavis said earnestly; "I shall put my desk on that table by the window, and there I shall write my letters to you, mother, and—" Her voice faltered, and the sentence ended in an involuntary sob.

"I hope you will be happy with us, I'm sure," said Mrs. John, her heart touched by the little girl's emotion. "You must call me 'Aunt Lizzie,'" she added.

"Yes, Aunt Lizzie," Mavis replied, her face brightening. "Oh," she cried, as her gaze wandered out of the window, "what a lovely view!"

It was, indeed. For in the distance lay Oxford in the mellow autumn sunshine. The spires and towers of the grand old university town standing out against a background of pale-blue sky. Whilst nearer was a green stretch of meadow-lands through which the river made its way.

"Yes, it is very lovely," her mother agreed. Then, as their hostess left the room, she continued, "I am so very glad I could come with you, for now I shall be able to picture everything as it really is. It seems

a dear old house, and I am sure we have been given a hearty welcome. Now let us be quick and remove the traces of our journey; your aunt said tea would be ready in a few minutes."

Mavis was a trifle shy with her cousins at first, and greatly disappointed them, after tea, by saying that she would prefer to remain with her mother in the parlour to going into the garden with them. Bob, who was her junior by a year, regarded her rather scornfully; but Rose, being older, was better able to understand her cousin's feelings, and whispered to her brother—

"Never mind, Bobbie, she'll like to play with us when her mother's gone; of course she wants to stay with Aunt Margaret now. Wouldn't you want to stay with mother if she was going away next week for months and months?"

So Mavis remained with her mother till bedtime. She was in exceedingly low spirits, and on retiring to rest, she bedewed her pillow with tears before she fell asleep. She slept well, however; and when she was awakened by her mother's kiss, she opened her eyes to find another fine day had dawned.

That was a never-to-be-forgotten Sunday, and, oh, how very quickly to two of the inmates of the Mill House it slipped away! To Mavis and Mrs. Grey, the hours seemed to fly. They attended the services in the village church in the morning and evening, and the little girl, as she knelt between her mother and aunt at the latter service, felt that her heart must surely break, for it was aching so painfully. And when the Vicar ascended the pulpit to preach, she was glad that the light from the oil lamps with which the church was lit was so inferior, because she did not want any one to notice the misery which she was sure was depicted on her face.

The Vicar, Mr. Moseley, was quite an old man, and Mavis had heard her uncle tell her mother at dinner-time that he had had a very troublous life, that his best years had been spent in hard work in the metropolis, and that he had been presented with the living of W— five years previously. In a corner of the yard outside the church, he had laid his wife quite lately. She had been his faithful helpmeet for more than forty years, and yet there was no sign of trouble on his face as Mavis saw it by the light of the wax candles in the pulpit, but rather was its expression one of contentment. In a voice which, without being loud, was deep and distinct, he gave out his text—

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you:
not as the world giveth, give I unto you.
Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

It was a sermon about loneliness. The words of his text, the preacher reminded his congregation, were the words with which Jesus had consoled His disciples after He had told them He was going to leave them. He had promised them the Comforter, the Holy Ghost, even the Spirit of truth, to abide with them for ever. Jesus had not left the world comfortless, He had left His peace, not such peace as the world gives, it was something higher, mightier than that, something all-satisfying, for its root was faith in God. They were not to be troubled, neither were they to be afraid.

Mavis listened with rapt attention as the Vicar proceeded in such simple language that she found no difficulty in following him. It seemed to her that he was preaching to her alone, for all he said fitted in with her mood. Perhaps God had told him what to say, she reflected; yes, she was sure He had. She slipped her hand into her mother's and kept it there, and the sigh she gave at the conclusion of the sermon was one of contentment. Then the Vicar gave out the number of a hymn, which was a favourite of hers, and she joined in singing it heartily.

"'Saviour, again to Thy dear Name we raise
With one accord our parting hymn of praise;
We stand to bless Thee ere our worship cease;
Then, lowly kneeling, wait Thy word of peace.'"

Many a one in the congregation turned to look at the little girl with the beautiful voice which rang out so clearly and unfalteringly. And her aunt wondered that the child should have the heart to sing with such evident enjoyment on the eve of separation from her mother, as though she had not a trouble in the world.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. GREY'S DEPARTURE

MRS. GREY was to leave the Mill House soon after breakfast on Monday morning. Accordingly, she arose at daybreak, and was fully dressed and had packed her travelling-bag before Mavis awoke. She was standing by

the window looking out, when the little girl opened her eyes, and, seeing her there, addressed her.

"Good morning, mother. Have I overslept myself?"

"No, dear," Mrs. Grey answered. She crossed to the bedside and kissed Mavis as she spoke. "Get up now, though," she proceeded. "I want to have a talk with you before breakfast. We shall have no time together afterwards."

Mavis jumped out of bed at once. And, whilst she was dressing, her mother told her that it had been arranged for her to accompany Rose to school, and that she was to go to-morrow.

"To-morrow!" Mavis echoed. "Oh, I am sorry for that! It is such lovely weather, and the country looks so beautiful, and it's so nice in the garden, and—"

"And, in short, you consider you ought to have a holiday before you commence work," said Mrs. Grey, smiling.

She did not agree with her little daughter, for she knew it would be better for her mind to be fully occupied during the first days of their separation.

"You will have a whole holiday every Saturday," she went on to explain. "And your school hours are not long—from half-past nine to twelve o'clock in the morning, and from two to four o'clock in the afternoon. I am sure Rose does not look overworked."

"No," agreed Mavis. "I think I shall like Rose, mother."

"I am glad of that. She and her brother seem nice children. Your aunt has promised to write to me frequently, Mavis; I believe she will be very kind to you. And your uncle—"

"Oh, I love Uncle John already!" Mavis broke in. "He has promised to take me for some drives, and Rose says he's certain to, for he always keeps his word. What is that noise I hear, mother?"

"The mill wheel. You will soon grow accustomed to the sound. Do you know that this used to be your father's bedroom? Yes, so your uncle said. Think how often your father must have looked across those meadows to Oxford! Ah, I shall picture this view when I am far away, and be

glad that I was able to leave you in your father's home."

Mavis had finished dressing by this time, and was standing by her mother's side, her mother's arm around her shoulder.

"You will be a good girl during my absence, I know," Mrs. Grey remarked by-and-by. "Do your best at school, and always obey your aunt, will you not?"

"Of course, mother," Mavis replied. "I hope you will not be gone very long, though. Perhaps Miss Dawson will got well quickly."

"I trust she will."

"I wish I had something to give her in return for the locket and chain she gave me, mother, or that there was something I could do to show her how grateful I am."

"You can pray for her, my dear, as she asked you. If you and I, who are well and strong, dread separation, what must she, who is weak and ill, feel about leaving her father? She knows it is not unlikely that she will never see him again in this world. It is very sad for her."

"She will have you, mother," Mavis said, with a little sob.

"Yes; but I am merely a stranger to her. You will miss me dreadfully, I know, darling, but your sense of loneliness will not equal Miss Dawson's."

"I am glad, yes, I am really glad you are going with her—glad for her sake, you know."

"It pleases me to hear you say that. Come, dear, let us kneel down and say our prayers together, and ask God's blessing."

Accordingly, mother and daughter knelt side by side and poured out their hearts to God. The tears rose to Mavis' eyes, but she resolutely blinked them away and would not let them overflow, for she was most anxious not to distress her mother more than she could help.

Shortly after they had arisen from their knees, the breakfast-bell rang, and they went downstairs. Mavis perceived that every one was looking at her very sympathetically, and no remarks were made when her appetite failed her and she left her breakfast almost untasted on her

plate.

As soon as the meal was over, Rose and Bob said good-bye to their aunt, and betook themselves to school. And not long afterwards, Mr. Grey strolled out into the yard to order the horse to be put in the gig to convoy his sister-in-law to Oxford.

It had been previously arranged that Mavis was to say good-bye to her mother at the Mill House. She would have liked to accompany her to the railway-station, but Mrs. Grey herself had negatived that idea.

We will not linger over the moments of farewell when the mother and daughter clung to each other in grief too deep for words. The last good-bye kisses were exchanged, and Mrs. Grey took her place in the gig by her brother-in-law's side, whilst Mavis, between her aunt and Jane, stood outside the wicket-gate, struggling to keep calm.

"Good-bye," Mrs. John said. "We shall hear from you before you sail."

"Good-bye, ma'am," said Jane. "God bless you!"

"Good-bye, mother, dear, dear mother!" cried Mavis, trying to smile.

Then, as the gig moved off, she waved her hand, and continued to do so till it was out of sight. After that, she found it impossible to keep her composure any longer, and burst into a flood of tears. Her aunt and Jane were both very kind and sympathetic, but she begged them to let her be by herself. And, running into the house, she sought refuge in her own room, where she sobbed out her grief undisturbed for some time. By-and-by, however, Jane arrived, duster in hand. And Mavis, who had now passed the first keen pangs of sorrow, bathed her tear-stained face, and inquired where she would find her aunt.

"She's downstairs, miss; you'll find her either in the kitchen or the back garden. Monday's always a busy day with us, for it's washing-day. A woman from the village, Mrs. Long, comes to wash. She's worked for Mrs. John for years."

"You mean Aunt Lizzie when you speak of Mrs. John, don't you, Jane?"

"Yes; most folks call her Mrs. John, for master's mother was living when he married. Your mother is Mrs. Grey now, you know, for your father was the elder son. He might have had the mill, if he had liked, but he preferred to be a clergyman. I knew both your father and your

uncle when they were boys. I lived here as servant when they were growing up, so you see I've been with the family a great many years."

Mavis went downstairs and found her way to the kitchen, beyond which was a big scullery, and outside that a wash-house, where a stout, rosy-cheeked woman was hard at work at a wash-tub, up to elbows in soapsuds, and enveloped in a cloud of steam.

"Good morning, missie," she said to Mavis, smiling at her good-temperedly, and with sympathy in her glance; for she knew the little girl's mother had left that morning, and guessed that was the cause of her sorrowful face.

"Good morning," Mavis replied, returning her smile.

She went out into the kitchen-garden, where she found her aunt hanging various garments on the clothes lines, which extended the whole length of the garden.

"Do let me help you, Aunt Lizzie," she said. "Isn't there something I can do?"

"You might spread these handkerchiefs on the hedge to bleach, they're Bob's. See what a dreadful colour they are, and no wonder, for I caught him dusting his boots with one of them and cleaning his slate with another! Boys make no end of work."

Mavis did as she was desired.

But her aunt had nothing more for her to do, so she found her way out of the garden by a gate in the hedge into the meadow beyond, and strolled along the bank of the river.

She was still within sight of the house, when she was startled by a big, black, formidable-looking dog, which came up and sniffed at her more out of curiosity—as she was quick enough to discern—than with any idea of intimidating her. Mavis was unaccustomed to dogs, but she was no coward, so she extended her hand to the great animal and spoke to him, whereupon he was so overcome with her condescension that he quite lost his head, and circled around her in delight, whilst she laughed heartily.

"Well, little maiden!"

Mavis turned at the sound of an amused voice addressing her, and found herself face to face with the Vicar. She recognized his elderly, clean-shaven countenance, with its sweet-tempered mouth and clear grey eyes, immediately.

"You are not afraid of my dog, I perceive," he proceeded, with a smile. "You need not be, for he is very quiet. His name is Max. I do not know you, do I?" he asked doubtfully, as he saw recognition in her glance.

"Oh no!" she responded, quickly.

"I think you must be the miller's little niece," he said, after a minute's reflection, during which he had noticed the traces of recent tears on her face. "Mr. Grey told me he expected you, and explained the circumstances under which you were to be left with him. Is your mother gone?"

"She went this morning, not long ago," Mavis replied, with quivering lips. "But she does not sail till Thursday. She is going ever so far away—to Australia—and I shan't see her for months and months," she added, mournfully.

"Meanwhile, I hope you will be very happy at the Mill House with your relatives. Come here, Max."

The dog obeyed his master's call, and allowed Mavis to pat his great head, after which, he licked her hand, and she felt she had made a friend.

"He is a Newfoundland," Mr. Moseley said, "and he will fetch anything out of the water. See!"

He picked up a stone, showed it to the dog, and flung it into the river. Max dived after it immediately, and presently, reappearing, swam ashore and laid the same stone at his master's feet. Mavis was delighted, and the performance was repeated several times for her benefit.

"What a clever dog he is!" she cried, enthusiastically. "Aren't you very fond of him?"

"Yes," the Vicar replied, "Max and I are great friends; we understand each other. How do you think you will like life in the country?" he inquired.

"I should like it, if mother was here, but I don't think I can be happy anywhere without her," was the doleful response.

"Oh yes, you can," he said decidedly; "you must try to be happy; that is the duty of every one. Life is hard for most of us at some time or other; it brings pain and separation. But we ought not to become gloomy and sad. If there were no partings, there would be no happy meetings. What is your name, my dear?"

"Mavis Grey."

"Mavis is a very pretty name. A little girl with that name should be as happy as a bird!"

Mavis smiled. She thought she would like to tell him how much she had enjoyed his sermon last night. And, after a brief hesitation, she did so.

He appeared greatly pleased.

"It was just as though you knew how lonely I was feeling," she said eagerly, "just as though you were preaching to me. I shall remember all you said—always, I hope. I'm not going to let my heart be troubled—not more than I can help. And I'm going to try not to be afraid, though there are so many things which might happen to mother!"

"There are many things which might happen to all of us. But we must trust ourselves and those we love to our Father in Heaven." Mr. Moseley paused for a minute, then proceeded, "I did not know my sermon last night was appropriate to any one in particular, but God knew, we may be sure of that."

"Did He tell you what to say?" Mavis inquired. "Oh," she cried, as her companion assented, "I was certain He did."

Mavis lingered a short while longer in conversation with her new acquaintance. Then she remembered that her aunt might be wondering where she was, and, having said good-bye to Mr. Moseley and bestowed a farewell pat on Max, she retraced her footsteps the way she had come. Her drooping spirits were reviving, for her talk with the Vicar had done her good. She looked up into the clear, blue sky overhead, and a glow of happiness crept into her heart. Then she glanced across the sweep of meadow-lands, and began to sing in a soft undertone—

"The Lord is only my support, and He that doth me feed;
How can I then lack anything whereof I stand in need?
In pastures green He feedeth me, where I do safely lie;
And after leads me to the streams which run most pleasantly."

Meanwhile, Mr. Grey had returned from Oxford, and was in the kitchen-garden talking to his wife, who had brought out another basket of clothes. He was telling her, that he had seen his sister-in-law off from the railway-station, and was inquiring what had become of Mavis, when the little girl appeared at the garden gate.

"Why, she's singing!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"I don't understand her," his wife replied, looking puzzled. "She seemed very cut up after her mother had gone, and wept most bitterly, but I think her feelings must be all on the surface—they can't go very deep."

At that moment Mavis caught sight of them. Her voice suddenly ceased, and she ran up to her uncle, to learn that her mother had really gone.

"What was that you were singing, Mavis?" he inquired, curiously.

"The twenty-third psalm, Uncle John," she answered; "seeing the green meadows put me in mind of it."

Then, observing he looked bewildered, she continued eagerly, "Don't you understand? 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.'"

"Oh, now I follow your train of thought," he replied, with a smile, glancing at his wife. "Fancy a child like you thinking of that!"

CHAPTER V

PETTY JEALOUSY

THE morning following Mrs. Grey's departure from the Mill House, Mavis accompanied Rose to school. Their way led past the church and the vicarage, and through the village. And as they went, Mavis looked about her with interested eyes, admiring the picturesque creeper-covered cottages with their trim gardens and thatched roofs.

"They seem to sell everything here," she remarked, with an amused smile, as she paused before the one shop of the place, which was also the post-office, "groceries, brushes, notepaper, and medicines too, I declare!"

"We must not dawdle," said Rose, as her cousin lingered, peering into the shop window, "or we shall be late, and that won't do.'

"Would Miss Matthews be angry?" inquired Mavis. "Is she very strict?"

"Yes," nodded Rose; "mother says it's right she should be. If we were late, she would keep us in after twelve o'clock, and most likely give us each an imposition—though perhaps you would go unpunished, as it is your first day. You have never been to school before, have you?"

"Never. Mother taught me to read and write. And then a young lady, a governess who lodged at the same house that we did, used to teach me in the evenings. How many girls are there at Miss Matthews' school?"

"About a dozen—most of them are boarders. Here we are. You see it takes us quite a quarter of an hour to walk to school."

Miss Matthews' house was at the far end of the village. It was a modern red-brick villa with bow windows, over the under-blinds of one of which Mavis saw the heads of several girls. Rose led the way into the house by a side door. And, having shown her cousin where to leave her hat and jacket on one of a row of pegs in the passage, piloted her to the schoolroom, and introduced her to her schoolfellows. A few minutes later, Miss Matthews herself appeared upon the scene, followed by a young governess called Miss Forbes.

"So this is my new pupil," observed Miss Matthews, her eyes scrutinizing Mavis very kindly as she shook hands with her. "You are called Mavis, I hear," she proceeded; "it is an uncommon name and a very pretty one."

Miss Matthews was a dark, middle-aged woman with a plain, clever face, and Mavis' first impression of her was that she was very ugly, but the moment a smile lit up her countenance, she decided that she was really quite good-looking.

By-and-by, the new pupil was handed over to the governess, who classed her with several little girls varying from ten to twelve years of age.

And so her school life began.

It was soon discovered that though Mavis' education had been carried on in a somewhat desultory fashion, she was by no means backward. She owned an excellent memory, and was quick to learn, taking after her father, as her uncle remarked when Rose told him how easily her cousin mastered her lessons.

"She has inherited Rupert's clever brain," he said to his wife. "You can look in her face and see she's as sharp as a needle. I hope she'll brisk up our Rose, who's one of the slow, plodding sort—like myself," he added, with a laugh.

This speech did not please his hearer, though she recognized its truth. Rose had many excellent qualities, but she was not in the least clever, as far as book-learning was concerned, and found lessons great drudgery.

Mavis was very soon on the best of terms with all the inmates of the Mill House, with the exception of her aunt, whom she found it impossible to like as well as the others, though she could not have told why she did not feel at home with her, if she had been asked for a reason. The fact was, Mrs. John failed to understand Mavis, who was naturally of a light-hearted, joyous disposition, and she was confirmed in her impression, as time went on, that the child's nature was a superficial one. When, on the morning subsequent to the day on which the 'Nineveh' had sailed from Plymouth, Mavis had received a farewell letter from her mother, over which she had shed tears, she had had her aunt's full sympathy. But when, a few hours later, she had returned from school with Rose, apparently in good spirits, her aunt had privately dubbed her a heartless little thing, being quite unaware of the brave fight the child had made against depression.

"I advise you not to make too much of Mavis," Mrs. John remarked to her husband on one occasion, after he had taken the little girl for a drive. "You will spoil her if you're not careful."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear," he replied; "there's small danger of my doing that. She's had few pleasures in her life, poor child, and our young folks have had a great many. Bob wanted to accompany me to-day—he said it was his turn—but I told him he must give up his place in the gig to his cousin."

"That was hard on the boy, John."

"Not at all. I don't see it."

But Bob himself considered that it had been very hard, for he was unaccustomed to self-sacrifice, and he liked nothing so well as driving with his father. So when, after tea, Mavis commenced telling him and Rose of the delightful time she had had, he listened in somewhat sullen silence.

"It was so kind of Uncle John to take me to Oxford," Mavis said happily. "I think it is such a lovely place, with those beautiful virginian creepers growing all over the colleges."

"The leaves will soon be off the creepers after the first frost," remarked Rose. "I'm glad you've seen them, Mavis. Some people think Oxford prettier in the autumn than at any time, but I like it in the spring, when the hawthorn and lilacs and laburnums are in flower."

"Uncle put up the horse at an inn, and took me to see T—, that was father's college, you know, and he pointed out the rooms that were father's once, and I saw the chapel and the lime-walk, and he told me such a lot about father, how clever he was, and that he won scholarships, and in that way more than half paid for his own education. Oh, how I wish mother could have been with me to-day!"

"You'll be able to tell her all about it some time," said Rose, as she noticed a shade of sadness cross her cousin's face.

"Oh yes; but not for a long, long time. How did you and Bob spend the afternoon?" Mavis asked, glancing from the sister to the brother.

"We went blackberry gathering," answered Rose.

"It was slow work," observed Bob, joining in the conversation at last. "You had the best of it, Mavis," he added, grudgingly.

"Indeed I think I did," Mavis agreed, with a smile. Then, becoming aware by the expression of Bob's face that he was displeased, she inquired, "Would you have liked to have gone to Oxford instead of me this afternoon?"

"Rather!" he exclaimed. "Father took you for a drive last Saturday, too!" he reminded her, in a way which showed he resented the fact.

"Bob!" exclaimed Rose, in an expostulating tone.

"Well, it's not fair that father should make more of Mavis than of us," he grumbled, "I know mother thinks so too."

"For shame!" cried Rose, her kind heart touched by the hurt expression on her cousin's face. "Don't take any notice of what he says, Mavis."

"I didn't know he wanted to go this afternoon," murmured Mavis, looking distressed, "but I suppose one of you would have gone, if I had not been here. I—I am very sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry about," Rose replied. "There, I believe you've made her cry," she said, turning upon her brother with indignation, as Mavis slipped quietly out of the room. "I saw tears in her eyes. You are very selfish, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bob. If father makes much of Mavis, it's only because he wants her to be happy with us. It's so sad that her mother should have had to go away and leave her."

"I didn't mean to make her cry," Bob answered. "I call her a great baby!"

"She's quite a little girl, of course," said Rose, who, being two years her cousin's senior, felt almost grown up in comparison to her, "but I don't consider her at all babyish. See how little fuss she made when her mother left!"

"I don't believe she cared—not much, heard mother say so to Jane; she said Mavis was singing a few hours after Aunt Margaret had gone, and people don't sing if they're sad."

Rose did not argue the point. Instead, she went upstairs in search of Mavis, whom she found in her bedroom, sitting on a chair by the window in the dark.

"What are you doing, Mavis?" she asked.

"Nothing," Mavis answered, "only thinking, and—and wishing that mother had left me in London with Miss Tompkins. I never guessed Bob wanted to go this afternoon, I never thought that I was taking his place!"

"It was very selfish and unkind of him to speak as he did, and father would be very angry if he knew he had done so. Think no more of it, Mavis. You haven't been crying, have you?"

"No," Mavis answered. "I've been praying," she added, after a minute's pause.

"Praying?" Rose was surprised. "But it isn't bedtime," she said, "I always say my prayers night and morning, don't you?"

"Yes, and odd times besides, whenever I feel I want to. It—it comforts me. It's so nice to think Jesus is always near to hear one, isn't it, and to remember He understands what other people can't? I expect Bob thinks it was very selfish of me to go to Oxford with Uncle John—"

"I shall tell father how he spoke to you!" Rose broke in, impetuously.

"Oh, don't, please don't!" implored Mavis. "Don't let us say any more about it. Promise you won't."

Rose gave the required promise, and the two little girls went downstairs together. Bob, who was now ashamed of the jealous spirit he had exhibited, found an opportunity during the evening of telling Mavis he was sorry if he had seemed unkind, and that he was really glad that she had enjoyed the afternoon.

September was nearly out now, but the fine weather continued, so that the young folks were able to spend their spare time out-of-doors. They had several blackberrying expeditions, from which they returned laden with luscious fruit, which Jane converted into bramble jelly. Mavis soon knew the prettiest walks around W—, and learnt the dangerous places in the river, where the water was deep and swift.

Sometimes in their rambles, the children came upon Mr. Moseley, who generally stopped and talked to them. Rose and Bob, like many country children, were shy, and had little to say for themselves. But Mavis, on the contrary, was always ready to further a conversation.

"You should have heard Mavis chattering to the Vicar this afternoon," said Bob to his mother, one Saturday evening. "I should think she talked to him for quite half an hour."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Mavis.

"I hope he did not think you a forward little girl, Mavis," said her aunt gravely, with a note of rebuke in her voice.

Mavis coloured indignantly, and a quick retort rose to her lips, but she refrained from uttering it, and kept silence.

"Mr. Moseley asked Mavis what she thought of Oxford, and she told him," explained Rose. "And then he questioned her about Aunt Margaret, and when the 'Nineveh' was due to arrive at Sydney, and of course, she had to answer him."

"Yes," assented her mother, "that was quite right. But little girls must not be too ready with their tongues."

"Rose isn't," said Bob, with a mischievous glance at his sister. "She scarcely spoke a word to Mr. Moseley this afternoon."

"I-I don't know Mr. Moseley very well," stammered poor Rose, "and I was shy, I suppose. So were you, Bob, for that matter."

"Bob is three years your junior, Rose," said her mother. "At your age, you ought not to be shy. Why could you not talk to the Vicar as well as Mavis?"

Rose hung her head and made no response, whilst her cousin felt very uncomfortable. Mavis was fully conscious, by this time, that her aunt did not approve of her, that she regarded her with critical eyes, and that she was always displeased if any one noticed her more than her cousins. And these facts prevented her from being as happy as she otherwise would have been at the Mill House. She was never quite at her ease in her aunt's presence, and certainly never at her best. And yet, Mrs. John had no intention of being otherwise than just and kind to her little niece, and was vexed when she observed that Mavis' affection for her uncle was deepening day by day, whilst she held more and more aloof from herself.

"Aunt Lizzie doesn't like me," Mavis thought frequently, and she would wonder if she could have possibly done anything to evoke her aunt's displeasure. "I try to please her, but I see she doesn't care for me, and I'm afraid I don't care for her—much."

CHAPTER VI

ROSE IN TROUBLE

AUTUMN had given place to winter, a wet, depressing winter with rain and westerly gales, and the flat country between W— and Oxford was flooded. There had been almost incessant rain for weeks now. And Mavis, as she sat at the little table by her bedroom window engaged in writing a letter to her mother, which she was taking great pains to spell correctly, considering every word, glanced at the leaden sky every now and again, in the hope of seeing a break in the clouds.

"I don't think we ever had such bad weather in London," she reflected. "But perhaps I didn't notice it so much there. What will happen, I wonder, if the floods go on increasing? We seem almost surrounded by water as it is."

By-and-by, Rose came to the door, wanting to know if her cousin had nearly finished her letter.

"Yes," Mavis replied, "I'm ending up now. Come in, Rosie."

So Rose came in. The two little girls had become very friendly by this time, for, though there was a difference of two years in their ages, in many ways Mavis appeared as old if not older than her cousin, no doubt because she had always been to a great extent in her mother's confidence. Rose had lived her twelve years in a home where she had had every comfort. Whilst Mavis had known times when she and her mother could not have told from what source the wherewithal was to come to provide them with the necessaries of life, and yet God had never allowed them to want, He had given them always sufficient for their needs.

"What is the matter, Rose?" said Mavis, as, having put away her writing materials, she turned her attention to her cousin, who stood at the window with an expression of gloom on her face.

"Nothing more than usual," Rose answered, in a tone which implied that she generally had much to bear. "Mother's been scolding me," she proceeded, as Mavis continued to look at her inquiringly. "She says she's most dissatisfied with the progress I'm making at school, that if I'm not careful you'll soon get ahead of me, and—and I can't help it, if you do. I try to learn, Mavis, but I'm so slow, and—oh, you mustn't think that I'm jealous of you, for I'm not!"

"Of course I don't think that, Rosie," Mavis replied, greatly distressed at the sight of her cousin's tearful eyes and quivering lips. "It wouldn't be true, if you did. I told mother that Miss

Matthews said it was quite likely you would be raised into my class next term. I thought she'd be pleased; but, instead, she was angry with me, and called me a dunce. Perhaps I am a dunce," Rose admitted, with a sob. "If I am, I can't help it."

Mavis did not know what to say. She was aware that Rose learnt with difficulty, and that her mother was frequently impatient with her for being so slow, which seemed to her very unkind. And she had looked forward to being in the same class as her cousin, because she thought it would be pleasant for them to do their lessons together.

"Miss Matthews knows that I try to get on," Rose continued, in the same aggrieved tone. "She never complains of me, and I don't consider mother ought to have scolded me, just because I'm not so sharp as other girls. She doesn't worry Bob about his lessons like she does me. Bob's her favourite, and he can do nothing amiss. I declare I won't try to learn any more, for mother's sure to find fault with me, anyway! It's most unjust."

"I don't suppose Aunt Lizzie understands how hard you try to learn," Mavis said, putting her arms around Rose and kissing her flushed cheek. "Don't be unhappy about it, dear. You do your best, I'm sure."

"That's why I feel it's so hard mother should be cross with me, Mavis. I don't idle my time away, like some of the girls at school do, and—and she says I must, or I shouldn't be so backward." Rose brushed away an angry tear, and choked back a sob. "Let us talk of something else," she said. "You've been writing to Aunt Margaret, haven't you?"

"Yes. Aunt Lizzie said I might enclose a letter with one she has written. I wonder how long this rainy weather will last, Rosie."

"Father thinks we shall have a change soon, for the wind is getting more northerly; it's been due west for weeks. If we get frost now the floods are out, we shall have fine skating; you will like that, Mavis?"

"I can't skate," Mavis answered. "I never tried."

"Oh, we will soon teach you. I am looking forward to a long spell of frost, like we had last winter."

"Are you? We thought that frost was dreadful in London, because it made things so hard for the poor—they don't feel the wet so much as long as it's mild, but when it's cold and frosty, the distress is terrible.

Last winter, not far from where we lived, a poor old woman was found dead on a doorstep; I couldn't sleep for nights afterwards for thinking of her."

"How shocking!" exclaimed Rose, in an awe-struck voice. "Had she no home?"

"No. There are hundreds and hundreds of people in London without homes. Mother knew a great many poor people, and it used to make her so sad when she couldn't help them. Often they'd come and tell her their troubles, because, you see, being poor herself, she could understand better than if she had been rich," Mavis explained, with a wisdom beyond her years.

"Were you, then, very poor, Mavis?" Rose inquired, wonderingly.

"Yes," nodded Mavis; "but we always had enough to eat, though sometimes it was only bread-and-butter. Once we couldn't pay our rent, and mother was in great trouble about that, but Miss Tompkins was very kind, and said she would willingly wait for it. And then, mother had a good engagement to nurse a rich old gentleman for a few weeks, so Miss Tompkins hadn't to wait long."

"Why didn't your mother write to father for some money, Mavis?" asked Rose. "I am sure he would have been very pleased to send her some."

"I am sure he would, too, now I know him. I don't know why she didn't write to him; perhaps she did not like to bother him, yes, that must have been it."

"Father says Aunt Margaret has been a wonderful woman to do as she has done, with no one to help her," remarked Rose.

"God helped her," said Mavis, simply; "mother says He helps all who trust in Him."

"You tell Him all your troubles, don't you, Mavis?" Rose asked. Then, as her cousin nodded assent, she said, "I don't mean only great troubles, but little ones?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, I don't. I just say my regular prayers twice a day, and that's all. I don't feel God's my Friend, like you do."

"Don't you? Oh, but you should. I'd tell Him everything, if I were you."

"What, that mother's vexed with me for being slow at school, for instance?"

"Yes. God knows you do your best, Rosie, if Aunt Lizzie doesn't. I'd ask Him to make her believe it, if I were you. Mother says when we've told God our trouble, we oughtn't to worry about it any more, but just leave it to Him, and He'll be sure to put it right."

"Do you really think that?"

"Of course I do. He has promised to bear our troubles, and you know it says in the Bible, 'there has not failed one word of all His good promise.' I'll show you the verse, if you like."

"It astonishes me that you should be so religious," Rose observed, after a few minutes' thought, "because you're such a merry little soul as a rule, always singing about the place and ready for any fun, and I thought religious people were generally very solemn."

"Oh, do you think so? Mother says religion ought to make people joyous and happy, and that it's mistrusting God to be gloomy and sad. That's why I've tried not to trouble about her leaving me; but sometimes I haven't been able to help crying when I've thought how far she's gone away, and then I've felt so bad about it afterwards."

At that moment heavy footsteps, easily recognizable as Mr. Grey's, were heard ascending the stairs, and a minute later came a knock at the door, and a voice outside called—

"Mavis, I've news for you, my dear."

"News?" Mavis sprang to the door and flung it open wide. "Oh, Uncle John," she cried, as she saw her uncle standing smiling at her, "do you mean that you have news of mother? But no, it cannot be that!"

"Yes, it is, child," Mr. Grey responded, "and good news, too. The 'Nineveh' has arrived at Sydney. Your mother's in first-rate health, and Miss Dawson is better. I've had a letter from Mr. Dawson, and he has had a cablegram from your mother. It seems, he promised her he would let us know as soon as he heard from her. It is very good news, isn't it?"

"Splendid!" cried Mavis, her face aglow with happiness. "How kind of Mr. Dawson to write to you, Uncle John! I never guessed we should get news so soon, did you?"

"Well, I thought it just possible," Mr. Grey admitted, "but I didn't say a word about it, for fear you should be disappointed. Mr. Dawson is evidently in high spirits, judging from the tone of his letter. And I don't believe your mother would raise his hopes about his daughter, if she had not good cause for doing so. The change of climate may really set up the poor young lady's health, after all, and I sincerely hope God may spare her life. Her father has my sympathy. I know how grieved I should feel if I had to send my little girl away from me, especially if she was ill."

And Mr. Grey smiled affectionately at Rose as he spoke.

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged and kissed him again and again, exclaiming the while—

"Oh, you dear father! You do love me, don't you, just as much as though I was clever?"

"Bless the child, yes," he replied, with his hearty laugh. "Why, Rosie, there are tears in your eyes. What's the meaning of that?"

She would not tell him, however, and he was wiser than to press the question.

Meanwhile, Mavis had gone in search of the other members of the household to impart her news to them. Her heart was singing with joy, and her aunt thought she had never seen a brighter, happier pair of eyes than those which peeped around the kitchen door to see if she was there.

"Such good news, Aunt Lizzie!" cried Mavis, and she proceeded to explain what it was.

"Thank God they have made the journey in safety!" exclaimed Jane, who had stopped in the midst of the important business of stove-cleaning when the little girl had appeared.

"I do thank Him," Mavis answered, softly.

"How relieved in mind Mr. Dawson must be!" exclaimed Mrs. John. She was rubbing the contents of the plate-basket with a piece of chamois leather, her usual task on a Saturday afternoon. "Poor man, I sympathize with him greatly," she continued, "especially as Miss Dawson is his only child. How grateful he will be to your mother, Mavis, if she brings him back her patient restored to health!"

"Mother will take good care of her," Mavis responded. "She's a capital nurse, every one who knows her says that; but only God can make Miss Dawson well."

"That's so," agreed Jane, with a nod, as she returned to her stove. "I don't believe that child ever forgets that God's above all," she remarked, as Mavis left the kitchen to look for Bob, to impart her news to him. "It's to be hoped she'll always remember it."

"She's a strange little thing," her mistress answered, "so very childish in some ways, and in others thoughtful beyond her years."

CHAPTER VII

A GREAT GIFT

THE heavy rains had ceased, and there had been several nights of hard frost, which had covered the flooded meadows surrounding W— with a thick coating of ice.

"The ice will bear to-day," remarked Mr. Grey, one morning at breakfast. "I believe we're in for a spell of dry weather. You must look to your skates, children, for, if all's well, you'll get some skating now."

By the following morning—a Saturday—the ice was in splendid condition, and the young people of the village spent nearly the whole day on it, as well as many of their elders.

Mavis had been supplied with an old pair of skates which had belonged to Rose, who had bought a new pair the previous season. And during the morning, her uncle gave her, her first lesson in skating; but he was called away on business in the afternoon, and she was left to her own resources. She got on by herself fairly well, and managed to keep her feet unaided; but it was slow work, and she grew tired and cold long

before her cousins were ready to leave the ice. By-and-by she divested herself of her skates, and declared to Rose her intention of going home.

[Illustration: SHE WAS LEFT TO HER OWN RESOURCES.]

"What, already?" cried Rose. "Why, how cold you look! I'm most beautifully warm. You don't want me to go with you, do you?" she asked.

"Oh no," Mavis replied, "certainly not. I don't think I've got on badly. But I can't skate fast enough to keep warm like you, and my feet are so cold, there's no feeling in them. Otherwise I should like to stay and look on."

Rose nodded, and skimmed away over the ice. Whilst Mavis left the meadow by the gateway, and turned into the road leading to the village, through which she had to pass on her way home, walking briskly to get herself warm.

It was a perfect winter afternoon. The sun was sinking rosily in the western sky, and the keen, frosty air was most invigorating. Mavis had enjoyed the day; but she sighed, and her pretty face grow grave as she thought of those to whom frost meant only added misery, and she felt glad that there were no extremely poor people in W—.

"I don't suppose there's any one in the place who hasn't enough to eat," she reflected. "For I heard uncle say last night that the villagers were very well looked after; they get coal-tickets, and they belong to blanket clubs, and they have good homes."

She had reached the village by this time, and was passing the post-office when the Vicar came out, followed by his dog. A smile lit up Mr. Moseley's kindly countenance as his eyes fell on the little girl.

"All alone?" he said. "How is that?"

"I got so very cold on the ice that I thought I'd go home," Mavis explained, as she patted Max. "I only began to learn to skate to-day, and I grew very tired."

"Naturally. You are warmer now?"

"Oh yes, thank you. I have been walking fast. Max is very pleased to see me, isn't he?"

"Very. He counts you as a friend, there is no doubt about that. I am glad to hear you have had good news of your mother. I saw your uncle a few days ago, and he mentioned that Mrs. Grey had arrived at Sydney safely."

"Oh yes. I shall be having a letter from her from Sydney before Christmas, I expect. Did uncle tell you that Miss Dawson is better, Mr. Moseley?"

"Miss Dawson is the young lady your mother is nursing, I suppose? No, your uncle did not tell me that; but I am very glad."

"She is such a pretty young lady, and so rich; but she is very delicate, though you wouldn't think it to look at her. I never saw her but once, and then she was very kind to me. She gave me a beautiful gold locket and chain for a keepsake. I had nothing of the kind before, and we got quite friendly, though we were only together for a little while. Isn't it odd how quickly one gets friendly with some people?"

He smiled and assented. They were walking in the direction of the vicarage, which Mavis had to pass on her way home.

"I think it's very strange," the little girl continued, knitting her brows thoughtfully. "Now, Rose and I are great friends, and, on the whole, I get on well with Bob, and I'm very fond of Uncle John; but, do you know—" she dropped her voice confidentially as she spoke—"I never can quite like Aunt Lizzie. I do hope it isn't very wrong of me."

"Why can't you like her?" the Vicar asked, looking surprised.

"I don't know," Mavis admitted, shaking her head.

"She's kind to you, I'm sure."

"Oh yes, yes!" The little girl grew red, and hesitated. "Please, Mr. Moseley, what is it to be superficial?" she asked, by-and-by. "Is it something one ought not to be?"

"To be superficial is to be all on the surface—shallow," he replied. "But why do you ask that?"

"Aunt Lizzie says I'm superficial," Mavis explained. "I heard her tell Uncle John so. But he said no, I was not. Indeed, I was not trying to listen," she proceeded quickly. "I was coming downstairs, and they

were in the hall. I didn't know they were talking about me. Then it's nothing very bad if one is superficial, Mr. Moseley?"

"No," he answered, with an involuntary smile; "and it's nothing for you to trouble about. But I agree with your uncle. I think, perhaps, your aunt is mistaken; she probably does not understand you, and you evidently do not understand her. No doubt you will get to know each other better by-and-by. I am coming to see your aunt about you one day soon."

"About me?" Mavis exclaimed, questioningly.

"Yes. I am going to get up a concert—not just yet, during Christmas week—and invite all the villagers to attend. It will be held in the schoolroom, and I think you can help me, if your aunt will permit it."

"I!" cried the little girl in amazement. "What can I do?"

"You can sing. I have heard you on several occasions when you have been with your cousins in the woods, though you have not known I have been listening. Once I heard you sing a most beautiful version of the twenty-third psalm, and that is what I should like you to sing at my concert."

"Oh, Mr. Moseley, I don't think I could—before a lot of strange people!"

"Not if it gave them pleasure?" he inquired, with a smile.

"I should be so nervous," faltered the little girl.

"Perhaps, at first, but you would very soon get over that."

"But I have never learnt to sing properly—not with music, I mean. I couldn't sing with a piano; it would put me out."

"I should like you to sing without an accompaniment, as you have been accustomed. God has given you a groat gift, my dear, don't you think He expects you to use it for the benefit of others?"

"Do you think that?" Mavis asked earnestly.

"Certainly I do. The poet Longfellow says that God sent His singers upon earth—"

"'That they might touch the hearts of men,
And bring them back to heaven again.'"

"Those lines recurred to my memory when I heard you sing that beautiful, comforting psalm."

Mavis' face broke into a sudden, radiant smile. In imagination, she heard Miss Dawson's well-remembered voice saying: "You have given me comfort, and reminded me that I am not setting out on a long journey without support from God." She knew the sick girl had referred to the words she had previously sung—

"The Lord is only my support, and He that doth me feed;
How can I then lack anything whereof I stand in need?"

Had God indeed given her a great gift, expecting her to use it for the benefit of others? She had never thought of her voice in that light before; she had sung instinctively, like the bird after which she had been named.

"Mr. Moseley, I will sing at your concert gladly, if Aunt Lizzie will let me," she said, at length.

"Thank you, my dear. I felt sure you would. Well, I shall call at the Mill House shortly. You will soon run home from here?"

"Oh yes," assented Mavis.

They had reached the vicarage gate, and, having shaken hands with her companion, and put her arms around Max's neck and given him an affectionate hug, she hastened on. She felt very light-hearted, and hummed a little tune happily to herself as she tripped along. But her voice suddenly ceased as she neared the Mill House and caught sight of a man's figure ahead of her, clad in a ragged suit of clothes. A pang of pity shot through her sympathetic heart.

"I suppose he's a tramp or a beggar," she thought, "he looks dreadfully poor."

The man turned at the sound of her light footsteps, and looked at her. She saw his face was pinched and blue with the cold, and that it wore a very wretched, dispirited expression. As she caught up to him, he spoke.

"Have you a penny you could spare me, missie?" he said, in a voice

which sounded weak, she thought. He was quite a young man, tall and broad-shouldered, but extremely thin.

"No, I haven't," she replied, regretfully. "Oh, I'm so sorry! You do look miserably cold."

"Aye, I'm cold," he agreed, with a short, bitter laugh, "cold and hungry, too."

"Hungry? Oh dear, how dreadful! Do you live here—at W— I mean?"

"No. I'm on the look-out for work—have been for weeks—but it's very scarce. I'm not a beggar from choice. I've been hanging around the mill in hopes of seeing the miller, thinking that he might give me a job. They told me in the village that he wanted a man to drive a waggon."

"I believe he does," said Mavis. "But he's not at home this afternoon. I live at the Mill House; Mr. Grey's my uncle. Go round to the back door, I'm sure my aunt will give you something to eat."

The man looked at her doubtfully, but he did as he was told.

Meanwhile Mavis passed through the wicket-gate, ran up the garden path, and entered the house by the front door. She found her aunt in the parlour, engaged in darning stockings, and immediately informed her that there was a poor starving man outside.

"Do give him some food, please, Aunt Lizzie, and let him warm himself by the kitchen fire," she said, pleadingly. "He wants to see Uncle John, to ask him if he can give him work. Mayn't he come in and wait? I have sent him around to the back door."

"Really, Mavis, you take too much upon yourself!" cried her aunt, irascibly. "I never encourage tramps; the workhouse is always open to them. I must send this man off at once."

"Aunt Lizzie, you don't mean it!" exclaimed Mavis, aghast. "Oh, you won't be so cruel! He is hungry, I am certain he is, and, oh, it will be unkind if you don't give him something to eat—if only a slice of bread!"

The little girl repented having spoken so hastily the moment after the words had passed her lips, and she hung her head and commenced a stammering apology. Her aunt did not stay to listen to it, however, but

hurried to the kitchen. The man was already at the back door, and Jane was speaking to him.

"I dare say missus will give you a bit of bread and meat," she was remarking, as Mrs. John, closely followed by Mavis, entered the kitchen.

"How often have I warned you not to encourage tramps, Jane!" said her mistress, severely. "Go away, or I'll report you to the police for begging," she declared, imperatively motioning to the man to depart.

"The little lady thought you'd give me something to eat, ma'am," he said. "She told me to come."

"Yes, I did," asserted Mavis, nearly weeping. "Oh, Aunt Lizzie, don't, don't send him away hungry."

Mrs. John wavered. She looked scrutinizingly at the man, and saw he was evidently wretchedly cold and inadequately clothed, and her heart was stirred with pity. So she went into the larder and cut some bread and meat, which she gave him.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, his tone evincing real gratitude. But though he addressed the donor of the food, his glance went past her to Mavis. He was not allowed to say more, however, for at that moment the door was shut in his face, and he had no choice but to go away.

"I am never knowingly unkind to any one, Mavis," Mrs. John said, as she turned her attention to her little niece, who was furtively wiping her eyes, "and I am greatly astonished that you should have spoken to me in such an unbecoming manner."

"It was very wrong of me, and I'll never do so again, Aunt Lizzie," Mavis responded, in a tremulous voice. "But you didn't seem to understand that the poor man was really hungry. Won't you forgive me? I did not mean to be rude. I spoke without thinking."

"Yes, I forgive you. But never presume to dictate to me again. Why have you returned before the others?"

Mavis explained, and went on to repeat the conversation she had held with the Vicar, to which her aunt listened with an expression of disapproval on her countenance, afterwards remarking—

"You are too young, in my opinion, to sing in public. However, I

will hear what Mr. Moseley has to say, and consult your uncle upon the matter. The idea of a child like you singing at a concert. It is preposterous to think of it!"

Mavis made no answer, for she saw Mrs. John was greatly displeased. She thought it was because of the manner in which she had addressed her in reference to the hungry stranger, and was quite unaware that, added to that, her aunt was jealous on her children's account. Truth to tell, Mrs. John was annoyed that the Vicar should seek to bring Mavis into notice. She would not admit, even to herself, that the little girl had a wonderfully beautiful voice.

CHAPTER VIII

LOOKING FORWARD TO CHRISTMAS

THE miller's thrifty wife was not by any means a hard woman, but she lacked that quick sympathy for others which is generally the outcome of a vivid imagination joined to a kindly heart. She never realized the sorrows of her fellow-creatures without they were set plainly before her. And though she was in many ways much shrewder than her husband, she often made mistakes of which he would have been incapable.

She had been a worker all her life, and consequently entertained a great contempt for idlers. And she believed that if people worked they always got on well, for that had been her own experience. She had lived rather a narrow life, with few interests outside her own family.

Had it been otherwise, doubtless she would have known that sometimes God denies success—as the world counts success—to those who do their best and work their hardest. Thus it was, that rarely did any one come to her for help or sympathy, whilst many were the tales of woe which were poured into her husband's ears.

When Mavis had hastened to her aunt requesting food for a hungry man, Mrs. John had immediately jumped to the conclusion that he must be a professional beggar, and therefore a dangerous character. Her eyes had shown her the real misery of his condition, however, so she had fed him. But she had not been possessed of sufficient discernment to notice that he was not an ordinary mendicant, so that when her husband informed her, a few days later, at dinner-time, that he had engaged the man she had so unwillingly assisted, to drive one of his waggons, she

was greatly astonished.

"You cannot mean it!" she explained. "Why, he was literally in rags! John, surely you are very unwise."

"That remains to be proved, my dear," responded her husband, gravely, "but I hope I am not. The man is accustomed to horses; he has been in the employ of a farmer living near Woodstock, and I see no reason why he should not suit me, if he keeps the promises he has made me to be honest and steady. His name is Richard Butt, and he's twenty-five years of age, and has a young wife, who is at present living with her parents at Woodstock."

"Then he doesn't support her? He has been out of work some time, I suppose? Why did he leave his last place?"

"Well, he got himself into trouble, my dear; he was very frank about it, and I have made inquiries, and find he told me the truth. Remember, children," Mr. Grey proceeded, addressing the three young folks, who were present and listening with great interest, "this is not to go beyond our own household, you are not to speak of it to outsiders."

"We will not!" they agreed eagerly.

"Well, he was caught poaching, and sent to prison for six weeks," Mr. Grey went on to explain. "No doubt he deserved his punishment. Of course, when he was released from jail, he found his master had filled his place and had no work for him. And his young wife, unable to pay the rent of their cottage, had been obliged to give it up and return to her own people. For several weeks now, he has been tramping the district for miles around in search of employment, without any success, ashamed to return to Woodstock, where he is well-known, to be a disgrace to his relations."

"On Saturday, he heard I wanted a waggoner, so he waited about the place till he could see me, which was on Monday. I believe he slept two nights in the cattle shed in Brimley meadow, and I'm certain he's been half starved."

"Oh, how terrible!" cried Rose.

Whilst Mavis, a little paler than usual, glanced at her aunt, who was listening with an impatient frown on her forehead.

"This cold, frosty weather, too!" exclaimed Bob. "To think of us all with plenty to eat, a fire to warm ourselves by, and comfortable beds to lie on, and some one close to our house in that old tumble-down shed!"

"You must look over my stock of clothes, Lizzie," said the miller, "and see if I can't spare the poor fellow a suit. You don't approve of my having engaged him to work for me, I see."

"How can I approve of your befriending a man of that class? Do you expect a poacher to be honest? He'll rob you for a certainty."

"I trust not; but if he does, I shall get rid of him at once. And at any rate, I shall have given him a chance to redeem his character. I've written to his late master, who informs me that Richard Butt is a strong, willing young fellow, and that he believes he took to poaching for the love of sport. I don't know about that, I'm sure; but I don't fancy he'll attempt anything of that kind again. Mind you, I'm not making excuses for him. As I've told him, a man who poaches a rabbit is as much a thief as a man who robs a poultry-yard, the principle is the same. But I can't help being sorry for him, and I wouldn't have it on my conscience for anything that I might have assisted a fellow-creature and hadn't done it. It's the right thing, I take it, to give a helping hand where one can."

"Perhaps God sent him to you on purpose, Uncle John," said Mavis; "because you could give him work, I mean."

"May be so, my dear," agreed the miller.

"When does he commence to work for you?" inquired his wife, still looking dubious.

"Next Monday. He has found lodgings in the village."

"How has he managed about money?"

"Well, I have advanced him a little," Mr. Grey admitted. "I offered to do so, and I believe he is very grateful to me."

"It is to be hoped he will keep faith with you, John," his wife remarked drily.

"You will look-out a suit of clothes for him, won't you, Lizzie?"

"I will, if he turns up on Monday as arranged. But it would not astonish me, if he does not. We shall see."

Richard Butt did keep faith with the kind man who had befriended him, however. And proved himself quite equal to the task he had undertaken, to drive the big waggon with its pair of fine horses.

Mrs. John duly presented him with a suit of her husband's clothes, and various other articles of clothing which she thought might be useful to him. And she took the opportunity to question him about his wife, whom he said he was going to send for as soon as he could make a home for her.

"She's been able to save a few bits of our furniture," he explained, "and if I give Mr. Grey satisfaction, and find he's willing to keep me on, I shall look-out for a cottage in the village. Meantime, my wife will stay with her parents, she's no expense to them, for she earns enough for herself by doing plain needlework."

The children, Mavis especially, took great interest in the new waggoner. And they were careful not to tell any one the circumstances which had brought him to the deplorable position he had been in when Mr. Grey had taken pity upon him. He had paid the penalty for his sin, and was starting life afresh.

The severe frost continued for more than a fortnight, and Mavis learnt to skate very nicely. Many happy hours did she spend with her cousins and her schoolfellows on the ice; and deeply regretful were the young people when a thaw set in, and weather-wise folks began to prophesy a mild Christmas.

Rose and Bob were looking forward to Christmas with much eagerness, for the season had always been a very happy one for them. But Mavis was anticipating the coming festival with very sober thoughts. Hitherto, she and her mother had been together at Christmas; now they were divided by thousands and thousands of miles of land and sea. She listened somewhat half-heartedly to her cousins' plans for making the most of the holidays, until Rose gave her a look of wonder and reproach, and said—

"What is the matter? You don't seem yourself, Mavis."

"I've been thinking of last Christmas, and that has made me rather

sad," Mavis answered. "Mother and I were together then," she added, the tears rushing to her hazel eyes as she spoke.

"Oh!" cried Rose, comprehendingly, whilst Bob inquired—

"Did you have a lot of presents?"

"No; I only had two—a work-basket from mother, and a story-book from Miss Tompkins. But it was a lovely Christmas! Mother and I were so happy together! On Christmas Eve, it was fine, and we went out and had a good look at the shops. We enjoyed seeing all the pretty things, and thinking what we would buy, if we were rich. We spent Christmas Day quite by ourselves. In the morning, we went to the service at a little mission church where father used to preach sometimes—the people who go there are mostly poor people, some of them so poor that they wouldn't like to go and sit with those who are well-dressed. And in the afternoon, after dinner, we sat by the fire and talked, and never, never dreamed that we should be so far apart from each other when Christmas came again."

And Mavis heaved a deep sigh.

"Oh, you mustn't get sad," said Rose, earnestly. "I'm sure your mother wouldn't like you to be that. We want you to have a very happy Christmas. We shall break up at school about the twentieth of December, and then we shall be very busy at home, making mincemeat and puddings, and preparing our Christmas presents."

The time had arrived now when Mavis might expect her mother's first letter from Sydney. It was delivered one afternoon whilst she was at school, and given to her immediately on her return. She ran upstairs to her bedroom to enjoy it undisturbed, and her heart throbbed with happiness as she read that her mother was well, and that Miss Dawson was continuing to improve in health.

"You are constantly in my thoughts and prayers, little daughter," Mrs. Grey had written, "and ever in my heart. God bless and keep you, my darling child. I enclose a money-order for a pound, for you to spend as you like; doubtless you will find it useful at Christmas."

"Oh, how nice!" exclaimed Mavis, delighted beyond measure. "Now I shall be able to give presents to every one! A whole pound! I never had more than half a crown in my life before!"

She finished reading her mother's letter, then went back to the beginning, and read it right through to the end again before she looked into the envelope for the money-order. There it was safe enough, and a half-sheet of notepaper, on which were written a few lines in an unfamiliar handwriting—

"DEAR LITTLE MAVIS,"

"This is to wish you a very happy Christmas. I am really better, and I believe God is going to allow me to get well. Often I have been very low-spirited and sad since we left England, but when I have thought of the Good Shepherd, of whom you sang to me so sweetly, I have felt better. 'The Lord is only my support,' dear Mavis, and I am learning to trust in Him more and more. Your mother is so good to me, so patient, so kind; we have become great friends."

"I have written to my father asking him to send you a present from London for me; you may expect to get it a few days before Christmas. It will be my Christmas-box to you, and please accept it with my love. Good-bye little song-bird. Some day I hope to hear you sing again. Don't forget—"

"LAURA DAWSON."

"That's not very likely," thought the little girl, "no, indeed. What can she be going to give me for a Christmas-box?"

"Rose, is that you?" she called out, as she heard light footsteps approaching the door.

"Oh, do come in and listen to all my news!"

Then, as Rose came in, her blue eyes fall of curiosity, she continued excitedly, "I've had such a dear, dear letter from mother, and she's sent me a pound for my very own, to spend as I like. You'll help me about getting Christmas presents for every one, won't you?"

"Of course I will," agreed her cousin. "How is Aunt Margaret?"

"Oh, very well; she has written so brightly. Miss Dawson is ever so much better, and I have had a little note from her. You shall hear what she says."

And Mavis read aloud the few lines Miss Dawson had sent her.

"I am wondering what the Christmas-box will be," she remarked afterwards.

"I expect it will be a nice present, and I hope it will be something you will like," said Rose. "By the way, I came up to tell you that Mr. Moseley has been here, and he has got mother to consent to your singing at his concert—it's not to be till New Year's Eve. Mother was against the idea at first, but father said he was certain Aunt Margaret would have no objection to it, and so she gave in. Mr. Moseley is very pleased, she says, and I think she's glad now that you're going to take part in the concert. We shall all go to hear you sing. I expect nearly every one in the village will be there. Shall you feel nervous?"

"I am afraid so, Rosie. I only hope I shall not break down."

"Oh, I don't fancy you'll do that. I envy you your voice, Mavis—at least, I don't envy it exactly, but I wish I had a talent of some sort. I'm so very stupid; I can't do anything to give people pleasure."

"Oh, Rosie, I am sure that is not true. Miss Matthews said the other day that you were the kindest girl in the school. I told Aunt Lizzie that; she was pleased, though she didn't say much. How can you be stupid, when you always manage to find out how to make people happier by doing little things to please them?"

"Oh, that's nothing," exclaimed Rose. The colour on her cheeks had deepened as she had listened to her cousin's words. "It would make me very unhappy to be unkind to any one," she added.

"I am certain it would."

"But I wish I had just one talent," Rose sighed. "If God had given me only one, I would have been content."

Mavis looked troubled for a minute; then her face brightened as she responded hopefully—

"I think you're sure to have one, Rosie, only you haven't found it out."

CHAPTER IX

CHRISTMAS TIME

"THERE, now I have all my presents ready," Mavis declared in a satisfied tone, one morning a few days before Christmas, as she dropped great splashes of red sealing-wax on the small parcel she had already secured firmly with cord. "I do hope Miss Tompkins will like the handkerchief sachet I'm sending her."

"I should think she will be sure to like it," said Rose, who was standing looking out of the parlour window at the birds she had been feeding with bread-crumbs. "I wonder when Miss Dawson's Christmas-box will arrive, Mavis."

"Soon, I expect. I should not be surprised if it came at any time now, for it's getting very near Christmas, isn't it?"

The little girls' holidays had commenced two days before, and since then, they had been very busy preparing for Christmas. Mr. Grey had kindly driven them into Oxford, one afternoon, to make their various purchases, and but a shilling or so remained of Mavis' pound, the rest having been spent in presents which were hidden in the bottom of her trunk in her bedroom, to be kept secret from every one but Rose, until Christmas Day. For kind Miss Tompkins she had bought a pink silk handkerchief sachet with birds painted on it, and this, with a carefully-written note, she had packed in readiness to send off that evening.

"I wonder what mother is doing in the kitchen," remarked Rose, presently. "She said at breakfast she would have a leisureable day, as the puddings are boiled and the mincemeat is made, and we're to have a cold dinner. But I've heard her bustling about as though she's very busy. Let us go and see what she's doing."

Accordingly, the little girls repaired to the kitchen, where they found Mrs. John in the midst of packing a hamper with Christmas cheer.

"I dare say I'm very foolish to do this," she was remarking to Jane, who was watching her with a half-smile on her countenance, "but it's your master's wish, and I won't go against him in the matter. There'll be ten shillings' worth in this hamper, if a penny, what with that nice plump chicken, the pudding, a jar of mincemeat, a pound of tea, a pound of butter, and—well children?" she said inquiringly, as the little girls came forward.

"Who is that hamper for, mother?" asked Rose, her curiosity alive in a moment.

"For Richard Butt's wife," was the brief answer.

"Oh, how kind of you, Aunt Lizzie!" cried Mavis. "How pleased she will be, won't she?"

"It's to be hoped so, and I dare say she will. But the kindness is not mine, child, it's your uncle's. 'Fill in the corners of the hamper, Lizzie,' he said, and you see I'm doing it."

"I should like to be looking on when that hamper's opened," observed Jane, as her mistress placed down the cover and began to cord it. "It'll arrive as a blessing, I reckon. Butt was talking to me about his wife and child yesterday, and—"

"His child, Jane? I didn't know he had one," broke in Mrs. John, greatly astonished.

"The baby's only a fortnight old, ma'am. I didn't know there was one myself till yesterday."

"Is it a girl or a boy?"

"A boy, a fine healthy little chap, so Butt's mother-in-law has written to tell him."

"How he must wish to see the baby!" exclaimed Mrs. John, with a softening countenance.

"He's hoping to, before long, ma'am, for there'll be a cottage vacant in the village at Christmas, and he means to take it. Then, as soon as he possibly can, he's going to ask master to allow him a couple of days' holiday to fetch his wife and baby."

"He appears to have taken you into his confidence, Jane."

Jane nodded. The hamper was corded by this time, and all that remained to be done was to address a label.

Mrs. John glanced out of the window, then turned to Rose.

"There's Butt in the yard now; he's going into Oxford with the waggon

presently, so he can send off the hamper himself from the station. Tell him I want him."

Rose went to do her mother's bidding, and a few minutes later returned, followed by Richard Butt, who had greatly improved in appearance since the afternoon he had begged from Mavis, and she had impulsively sent him around to the back door. Then he had looked ragged, cold, and dispirited; now he was comfortably clad, and held his head erect once more.

"What is your wife's address, Butt?" inquired Mrs. John.

"My wife's address, ma'am!" the man exclaimed, in amazement.

"Yes. This hamper is to go to her; it contains a chicken, and a pudding, and a few other things, and you're to send it off from Oxford. Here's the money to pay the carriage. Tell me the address."

He did so, and Mrs. John wrote it on the label, which she proceeded to affix to the hamper.

"Ma'am, I can never thank you properly," the young man stammered, quite overcome with gratitude and surprise. He looked at the shilling Mrs. John had given him, then at the hamper. "God bless you for your goodness!" he added fervently.

"It's your master's doing. It's nothing to do with me. There, take the hamper away with you. By-the-by, I hear you've a little son, Butt; I hope his father will be a good example to him."

The tone in which this was said was more cordial than the words, and Butt carried off the hamper with a radiant countenance.

"I think I never saw any one look more pleased," observed Jane. "Who comes now?" she exclaimed, as there was a loud knock at the back door.

She went to see, and reappeared bearing a large wooden box which she deposited on the kitchen table, saying—

"It's come by the railway van, and it's directed to you, Miss Mavis. There's nothing to pay, but you must please sign this book, to show it's been delivered safely."

"Oh, it's Miss Dawson's Christmas-box, for certain!" cried Rose.

Whilst Mavis, feeling very important and excited, signed the delivery book under Jane's directions.

"Oh, Mavis, open it quickly and see what's inside! Here's a knife to cut the cord."

"Not too fast, Rose," said her mother. "Better untie the knots, then the cord will come to use again—it's a good strong piece. Here, let me help," and she effected the task herself. "There, Mavis, now you can set to work and unpack."

Mavis lifted the lid of the box, her hands trembling with excitement, and drew out several packages, which, upon examination, proved to contain preserved fruits and sweetmeats in pretty boxes, such as she had often seen in the shops at Christmas-time, but had never dreamed of possessing. Then came a beautifully bound and illustrated story-book, and several new games, at the sight of which Rose expressed much gratification, and, last of all, a cardboard box, which, upon being opened, revealed to sight a seal-skin cap and a muff to match.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mavis, quite incapable of finding words in which to express her delight.

"Put on the cap, Miss Mavis," said Jane. "Let us see how you look in it."

So Mavis placed the cap on her curly head, and glanced from one to the other with the happiest of smiles on her pretty, flushed countenance.

"Yes, it suits you capitally," declared Jane. "Doesn't it, ma'am?" she questioned, turning to her mistress.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Mrs. John. "I think, Mavis, that you are a very fortunate little girl," she proceeded, as she took up and examined the muff. "It is real seal-skin, I see, and must have cost a pretty penny."

"There's Bob!" cried Rose, catching the sound of her brother's footsteps in the passage. "Come and see Mavis' Christmas-box," she said, as he opened the door and entered the kitchen. "Look at her seal-skin cap and muff, and all the rest of the presents she has had sent her."

"What will you do with them all, Mavis?" asked Bob, as he came to the

table and stood with his hands behind his back, not liking to touch anything.

"We'll share all the sweeties, Bob," said Mavis; "of course we shall do that. I only want one box of preserved fruit for myself, to give to Mrs. Long, and the rest I should like Aunt Lizzie to put with the nice things she has bought for Christmas."

"Very well," Mrs. John agreed, pleased at the suggestion, "I will do so. You shall have some of the fruit on Christmas Day and the rest later on, or we shall be having all the good things at once. By the way, what makes you wish to give a present to Mrs. Long, Mavis?"

Mrs. Long was the stout, rosy-cheeked washerwoman Mavis had first seen on the day she had said good-bye to her mother. On subsequent occasions, the little girl had held conversations with her, but Mrs. John did not know that.

"She has been very kind to me, Aunt Lizzie," Mavis answered.

"Oh, I don't mean that she's done anything for me, you know," she continued, as she met her aunt's glance of surprise, "but she's spoken to me so nicely about mother that I quite love her. She says she knows what it is to be separated from some one, one loves very dearly, for her only daughter married and went to New Zealand, and her husband's dead, so that now she's all alone. I should like to give her a little present for Christmas, if you do not mind."

"Of course I do not mind, child. All these things are your own, to do as you like with."

"I want other people to enjoy them too," Mavis said earnestly. "I never had anything to give away before this Christmas."

She selected one of the prettiest of the boxes of preserved fruits, and, later in the day, she and her cousins called at Mrs. Long's cottage in the village and presented it to the kind-hearted washerwoman, who, needless to say, was exceedingly pleased.

What a happy Christmas that was, and yet how Mavis had dreaded it! It brought her nothing but joy from the moment she opened her eyes on Christmas morning till, wearied out, she closed them at night.

Afterwards, she wrote to her mother all about it, and told her how rich

she was in presents, for, besides Miss Dawson's Christmas-box, she had received remembrances from every member of the household at the Mill House, and from Miss Tompkins too, as well as Christmas cards from several of her schoolfellows.

"I have so many friends now," she wrote, "and last Christmas I had so few. When we meet I shall have such a lot to tell you, dear mother. I can't write everything. I believe Aunt Lizzie has written and told you that I am to sing at a concert on New Year's Eve; I am to sing your favourite psalm. Mr. Moseley says my voice is a great gift. He is a very nice man, and has been very kind to me—I think there are a great many kind people in the world."

Mavis had never so much as hinted to her mother that she was not on such cordial terms with her aunt as with her other relations, for she could not explain why that was the case, and, lately, she had got on with her rather better. Mrs. John had been obliged to admit to herself that Mavis was not selfish, that she did not try to put herself before her cousins in any way, and that she was quick to show gratitude for a kindness, and to respond to affection. But what she did not understand in the child, was her capability of laying aside trouble.

"She has just the nature of a song-bird," she would think, when Mavis' voice, lilting some simple ditty, would fall upon her ears. "She's such a light-hearted little thing."

The concert, which was held in the village schoolroom on New Year's Eve, proved a very great success. The performers were all well-known inhabitants of the parish, in whom the audience—composed mostly of the labouring classes—took great interest.

Mavis' part of the programme did not come till nearly the conclusion of the concert, and when the Vicar took her by the hand and led her on the platform, she felt it would be quite impossible for her to keep her promise, and she was inclined to run away and hide. But, a moment later, she had overcome the impulse which had prompted her to go from her word, and looking above the many faces which were smiling up at her encouragingly, she summoned up her courage and commenced to sing. Her voice was rather tremulous at first, but it gained strength as it proceeded. She forgot the people watching her, forgot her fear of breaking down, and thought only of what she was singing, of "pastures green" and the Good Shepherd leading His flock by streams "which run most pleasantly." As her sweet, clear voice ceased, there was a murmur of gratification from the audience, which swelled into rounds of

applause.

"Sing us something else, do, missie!" she heard some one shout from the back of the schoolroom, and, looking in the direction from whence the voice came, she recognized Richard Butt.

The rest took up the cry, and from all sides came the demand, "Sing us something else!"

"What else do you know, Mavis?" the Vicar hastened to inquire, when he saw she was willing to comply with the general request.

"I know some carols," she replied. "Shall I sing one of those?"

"Yes, do," he said, as he moved away.

She was not feeling in the least nervous now. Her heart throbbed with happiness, as she realized her capability of giving pleasure, and a brilliant colour glowed in her cheeks, whilst her hazel eyes shone brightly.

The carol she sang was one she had heard in the little mission church in London during the previous Christmas season, but it was new to her audience.

"'When shepherds were abiding,
In Beth'lem's lonely field,
They heard the joyful tidings
By the heavenly host revealed.
At first they were affrighted,
But they soon forgot their fear,
While the angel sang of Christmas,
And proclaimed a bright new year.'"

That was the first verse; several others followed, concluding thus—

"'When he who came to Bethlehem
Returns to earth again,
Ten thousand thousand angels
Shall follow in His train:
Then saints shall sing in triumph,
Till heaven and earth shall hear;
The year of His redeemed shall come,
A bright immortal year.'"

The carol was as successful in pleasing as had been the psalm, and Mavis stepped from the platform and returned to her seat with the Mill House party, hearing commendatory remarks on all sides.

"Oh, Mavis," whispered Rose, "you sang beautifully, you did indeed!"

And she expressed the opinion of the whole room, including Mrs. John, who, for the first time, acknowledged that really Mavis owned a very sympathetic voice, and that the words she had sung had seemed to have come from her heart.

CHAPTER X

SICKNESS AT THE MILL HOUSE

"OH, Mavis! Oh, Bob! Mother's very ill! Oh, isn't it dreadful? The doctor's going to send a hospital nurse to take care of her, for he says she'll be ill for weeks, if—if she recovers!" And Rose finished her sentence with a burst of tears.

The scene was the parlour at the Mill House one afternoon during the first week of the new year. Rose had crept quietly into the room with a scared look on her face, having overheard a conversation between her father and the village doctor, the latter of whom had been called in to prescribe for Mrs. John, who had been ailing since the night of the concert, when she had taken a chill.

No one had thought her seriously ill until that morning, when she had declared herself too unwell to rise, and had been unable to touch the breakfast which her little daughter had carried upstairs to her. Then it was that her husband had become alarmed, and the doctor had been sent for. The medical man's face had worn a grave expression as he had left the sick-room, and he had immediately informed Mr. Grey that his wife was seriously ill with pneumonia, the result of a neglected cold.

"If she recovers?" echoed Bob, questioningly. "What do you mean, Rose? It's only a cold that mother has, isn't it?"

"No, it's something much worse than that—pneumonia. Mrs. Long's husband died from pneumonia." And poor Rose's tears and sobs increased at the remembrance.

"Oh, don't cry so dreadfully, Rosie," implored Mavis. "People often recover from pneumonia, indeed they do! Mother has nursed several pneumonia patients since I can remember, and not one of them died. You mustn't think Aunt Lizzie won't recover."

"But she's very ill—the doctor said so," returned Rose, nevertheless checking her sobs, and regarding Mavis with an expression of dawning hope in her blue eyes. "He said she would require most careful nursing, and he couldn't tell how it would go with her."

"Doctors never can tell," said Mavis, sagely. "Mother says they can only do their best, and leave the result to God. Poor Aunt Lizzie! How sorry I am she should be so ill!"

"The doctor says we are not to go into her room again," sighed Rose. "I heard him say to father, 'Don't let the children into her room to worry her; she must be kept very quiet.'"

"As though we would worry her!" cried Bob, in much indignation. He felt inclined to follow his sister's example and burst into tears. But he manfully, though with much difficulty, retained his composure.

Before night, a trained nurse from a nursing institution at Oxford was installed at the Mill House, and took possession of the sick-room. And during the anxious days which followed, the miller's wife approached very near the valley of the shadow of death, so that those who loved her went in fear and trembling, and stole about the house with noiseless footsteps and hushed voices.

But at length, a day arrived when the patient was pronounced to have taken a turn for the better. And after that, she continued to progress favourably until, one never-to-be-forgotten morning, the doctor pronounced her life out of danger.

"We shall be allowed to see her soon now, father, shan't we?" Rose inquired eagerly, after she had heard the good news from her father's lips.

"I hope so, my dear," he answered. "It will not be long before she will be asking for you, if I'm not mistaken. But she's been too ill to notice anything or any one. You won't forget to thank God for His goodness in sparing your mother's precious life, will you, Rosie?"

"No, indeed, father," she responded, earnestly. "We prayed—Bob, and Mavis, and I—that God would make dear mother well again, and you see He is going to do it. I felt so—so helpless and despairing, and there was only God who could do anything, and so—and so—"

"And so you were driven to Him for help and consolation? Ah, that's the way with many folks! They forget Him when things go smooth, but they're glad to turn to Him when their path in life is rough. But His love never fails. You found Him a true Friend, eh, my Rose?"

"Yes, father, I did. Mavis said I should; she said I must remember that Jesus Himself said, 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,' and that I must trust in Him. And I tried not to be afraid. I couldn't do anything but pray; and after a while I began to feel that God really did hear my prayers, and I don't believe He'll ever seem quite so far off again."

Mr. Grey had guessed rightly in thinking his wife would soon desire to see her children, for the day following the one on which the doctor had pronounced her life out of danger, she asked for them, and they were allowed into the sick-room long enough for each to kiss her and be assured, in a weak whisper from her own lips, that she was really better.

The next day, they saw her again for a longer time, but she did not inquire for Mavis, a fact which hurt the little girl, though she did not say so, and strengthened her previous impression that her aunt did not like her.

Before very long, Rose was allowed in and out of the sick-room as she pleased, and was several times left in charge of the invalid. She proved herself to be so helpful and reliable that, on one occasion, the nurse complimented her upon those points, and she subsequently sought her cousin in unusually high spirits.

"Mavis, what do you think?" she cried, in great excitement. "Nurse says she is sure I have a real talent for nursing! Fancy that! But for mother's illness, I should never have found it out, should I? Oh, I'm so glad to know that I really have a talent for something, after all!"

Meanwhile, Mrs. John was gaining strength daily. Although she had not expressed a wish to see Mavis, she thought of her a good deal, and she missed the sound of her voice about the house.

"Where is Mavis?" she asked Rose, at length. Then, on being informed that the little girl was downstairs in the parlour, she inquired, "How is it I never hear her singing now?"

"Oh, mother, she would not sing now you are ill," Rose replied.

"She would not disturb me—I think I should like to hear her. It must be a privation to her not to sing."

"I don't think she has felt much like singing lately. We've all been so troubled about you—Mavis too. Oh, I don't know how I could have borne it whilst you were so dreadfully ill, if it had not been for Mavis!"

"What do you mean, Rose?"

"She kept up my heart about you, mother. And she's been so good to us all—helping Jane with the housework, lending Bob her games and keeping him amused, and doing everything she could to cheer us up. Wouldn't you like to see her?"

"Yes," assented Mrs. John, "to-morrow, perhaps."

So the following day found Mavis by her aunt's bedside, looking with sympathetic eyes at the wan face on the pillow.

"I'm so glad you're so much better, Aunt Lizzie," she whispered softly. "You'll soon get strong now."

"I hope so, Mavis. My illness has spoiled your holidays, I fear. You must have had a very dull time."

"A very sad, anxious time," Mavis said gravely; "but never mind—that's past."

"And you will soon forget it," her aunt remarked, with a faint smile.

"Oh no, Aunt Lizzie, I'm not likely to do that! But I'd so much rather look forward to your being well again. We were all so wretched when you were so terribly ill, and now God has made us happy and glad. Why, I feel I could sing for joy!"

"I think you rarely find difficulty in doing that, Mavis; you are so light-hearted."

"Not always, Aunt Lizzie; but I do try to be."

"Why?" Mrs. John inquired, in surprise.

"Because Jesus said, 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,'" Mavis answered, seriously. "I try not to be troubled or afraid," she continued; "but it's very, very hard not to be sometimes. I found that when mother went away; nothing seemed to matter much when we were together, but after she'd gone—oh, then it was different. I felt my heart would break, it ached so badly, but—are you sure I am not tiring you, Aunt Lizzie?"

"No; I like to hear you talk. Go on—tell me all you felt when your mother went away."

Mavis complied. She would have opened her heart to her aunt before, if she had ever had the least encouragement to make her her confidante. By-and-by, she became aware that there were tears in the sunken eyes which were watching the varying expressions of her countenance, and she ceased speaking abruptly.

"You must have been very lonely and sad, child," Mrs. John said. "I never realized you felt the parting from your mother so much. I wish I had known; but I thought—"

She paused, and did not explain what she had thought. She was beginning to understand that she had misjudged Mavis, and the knowledge that she had done so humiliated her, whilst she was conscious that she had allowed her jealous heart to prejudice her against the child. "I might have been kinder to you, my dear," she admitted, with a sigh.

"Oh, Aunt Lizzie, you have always been kind to me," Mavis said gratefully, unaware that Mrs. John's conscience was reminding her not so much of actions as of thoughts.

"I don't know what I have said to make you cry," she added, as a tear ran down her aunt's pale cheek. She wiped the tear away with her handkerchief as she spoke, and kissed the invalid. She had never felt greatly drawn towards her before, always having been a little in awe of her, but at that moment the barrier of misunderstanding which had stood between them was swept aside.

"I have not heard you singing lately," Mrs. John remarked, by-and-by. "Rose tells me you have been fearful of disturbing me. You need not be

now, for I believe it will cheer me greatly to hear you singing again. Our song-bird has been silent long enough."

Mavis smiled, and kissed her once more, and shortly after that, the nurse, who had been absent, returned, and confidential conversation was at an end.

The young people had been back to school for several weeks before the mistress of the Mill House was about again, and it was some time before she was well enough to undertake her accustomed duties. But with the lengthening days, she gained strength more rapidly, and the doctor said she needed only the spring sunshine to make her well.

In the meanwhile, Mavis continued to receive cheering news from her mother, who wrote every mail. Miss Dawson was much better, and there was now every reason to hope that she would return to England completely restored to health. But when that would be, Mrs. Grey had not yet said, though in one letter she had remarked that perhaps it would be sooner than Mavis expected. The little girl's heart had thrilled with happiness when she had read that.

Almost the first news Mrs. John was told when she was about again after her illness, was that Richard Butt, who had taken a cottage in the village, had been allowed a few days' holiday, and the loan of a waggon, on which he had conveyed his household furniture and his wife and baby from Woodstock to their new home.

"They're comfortably settled in now, ma'am," said Jane, who had explained all this to her mistress. "I've been to see them. Mrs. Butt seems a nice, well-mannered young woman, and the child's as fine a baby as you ever saw in your life."

"Yes," joined in Rose. "And father's very pleased with Butt, because he's so careful of the horses, and he hasn't had the least cause of complaint against him yet. Aren't you glad to know that, mother?"

"Butt thinks a great deal of father," Bob said, eagerly, "and no wonder! He told me he was almost despairing when father gave him work. He said father was one of the few people who wouldn't hit a man when he's down. I know what he means, don't you, mother?"

"Yes," was the brief assent.

"So do I," said Mavis. "I think the Good Samaritan in the parable must

have been very like Uncle John."

There was one piece of news which Rose had refrained from mentioning to her mother as yet, and that was that she and Mavis were now in the same class at school. She dreaded telling her this, and it was a decided relief when she learnt that it was not necessary for her to do so, as Mavis had forestalled her.

Mavis had also told her aunt, how greatly Rose was troubled on account of her slowness in learning, and how really painstaking she was, and this, coupled with Miss Matthews' report that Rose was patient and industrious and always desirous of doing her best, caused Mrs. John to reflect that she had been a little hard on her daughter.

"Although she's not quick like her cousin, she has many good qualities," she thought to herself. "God does not endow us all with gifts alike, and I have been unwise to make comparisons between the children."

So she spoke kindly and encouragingly upon the matter to Rose, who exclaimed, with a ring of glad surprise in her voice—

"Oh, mother, I so feared you would be angry with me for allowing Mavis to catch up to me in her lessons! Indeed, indeed, I have done my best. I know I'm slow and stupid in many ways; but God has given me one talent, and, now I know that, I don't mind. Nurse said I had a real talent for nursing, so I mean to be a nurse when I grow up. Mavis will be a great singer, I expect, but I shall be quite content to be a nurse."

Mrs. John made no response, but she pressed a warm kiss on Rose's lips, and her little daughter saw she was pleased, and added ingenuously—

"I asked God to make you understand I'd done my best, and He has."

CHAPTER XI

HAPPY DAYS

IT was a beautiful afternoon in May. The lilac and laburnum trees were in full bloom in the Mill House garden. And fritillaries—snakes' heads, as some people call them—were plentiful in the meadows surrounding W—,

lifting their purple and white speckled heads above the buttercups and daisies in the fresh-springing green grass.

"I think they are such funny flowers," said Mavis, who with Rose, had been for a walk by the towpath towards Oxford, along which they were now returning. She looked at the big bunch of fritillaries she had gathered, as she spoke. "And though they are really like snakes' heads, I call them very pretty," she added.

"Yes," agreed Rose. "Look, Mavis, there's Mr. Moseley in front of us. He's been sending Max into the water. I expect we shall catch up to him."

"And then I shall be able to tell him my news!" Mavis cried delightedly. "Oh, Rosie, I don't think I was ever so happy in my life before as I am to-day!"

A few minutes later, the two little girls had overtaken the Vicar. And, after they had exchanged greetings with him, Mavis told him her news, which she had only heard that morning, that her mother and Miss Dawson were returning to England, and were expected to arrive before midsummer.

"No wonder you look so radiant," he said, kindly.

Then, as Rose ran on ahead with Max, who was inciting her to throw something for him to fetch out of the river, he continued: "I remember so well the day I made your acquaintance, my dear. You were in sore trouble, and you told me you did not think you could be happy anywhere without your mother. Do you recollect that?"

"Oh yes," Mavis replied. "And you said if there were no partings there would be no happy meetings, and that we must trust those we love to our Father in heaven. And you asked me my name, and, when I had told it, you said I ought to be as happy as a bird. I felt much better after that talk with you, and I have been very happy at the Mill House—much happier lately, too. I don't know how it is, but Aunt Lizzie and I get on much better now."

"You have grown to understand each other?" suggested the Vicar.

"Yes—since her illness," Mavis replied.

The Vicar was silent. He had visited Mrs. John during her sickness, and knew how very near she had been to death's door. And he thought

very likely her experience of weakness and dependence upon others had softened her, and taught her much which she had failed to learn during her years of health and strength.

"Mother says Miss Dawson is quite well now," Mavis proceeded. "I am looking forward to meeting her again; I do wonder when that will be!"

She glanced at her companion as she spoke, and saw he was looking grave and, she thought, a little sad.

"Is anything amiss, Mr. Moseley?" she asked, impulsively.

"No, my dear," he replied. "I was merely thinking of two delicate young girls who were very dear to me. They died many years ago; but their lives might have been saved, if they could have had a long sea voyage and a few months' sojourn in a warmer climate. However, that was not to be."

"They did not go?"

"No. Their father was a poor man, with no rich friends to help him, and so—they died."

"Oh, how very sad!" exclaimed Mavis, with quick comprehension. "A trip to Australia and back costs a lot of money, I know. Oh, Mr. Moseley, how dreadful to see any one die for want of money, when some people have so much! How hard it must be! Didn't their poor father almost break his heart with grief? I should think he never could have been happy again."

"You are wrong, my dear. He is an old man now, with few earthly ties, but he is happy. Wife and children are gone, but he knows they are safe with God, and he looks forward to meeting them again when his life's work is over."

He changed the conversation then. But Mavis knew he had been speaking of himself, and that the young girls he had mentioned had been his own children, and her heart was too full of sympathy for words. Silently, she walked along by his side, till they overtook Rose. When Max created a diversion by coming close to her and shaking the water from his shaggy coat, thus treating her to an unexpected shower-bath.

"Oh, Max, you need not have done that!" cried Rose, laughing merrily, whilst the Vicar admonished his favourite too.

But Max was far too excited to heed reproof. He kept Rose employed in flinging sticks and stones for him to fetch, until the back entrance to the mill was reached, where the little girls said good-bye to the Vicar, and the dog followed his master home.

The next few weeks dragged somewhat for Mavis. But she went about with a radiant light in her eyes and joy in her heart. Would her mother come to her immediately on landing? she wondered. Oh, she would come as soon as she possibly could, of that she was sure.

"I expect she wants me just as badly as I want her," she reflected, "for we have been parted for nine months, and that's a long, long time—though, of course, it might have been longer still."

So the May days slipped by, and it was mid-June when, one afternoon, on returning from school, the little girls were met at the front door by Mrs. John, who looked at Mavis with the kindest of smiles on her face.

"You have heard from mother!" cried Mavis, before her aunt had time to speak. "Has the vessel arrived? Have you had a telegram or a letter?"

"Neither," Mrs. John answered; "but the vessel has arrived, and there's some one in the parlour waiting for you, Mavis. Go to her, my dear."

Mavis needed no second bidding. She darted across the hall and rushed into the parlour, where, the next moment, she found herself in her mother's arms, and clasped to her mother's breast.

"Mother—mother, at last—at last!" was all she could say.

"Yes, at last, my darling," responded the dearly loved voice.

Then they kissed each other again and again, and Mavis saw that her mother was looking remarkably well. And Mrs. Grey remarked that her little daughter had grown, and was the plumper and rosier for her sojourn in the country. It was a long while before Mavis could think of any one but themselves. But at last, she inquired for Miss Dawson, and heard that her mother had left her in her own home in London that morning.

"I expect she's glad to be back again, isn't she, mother?" Mavis asked.

"Very glad, dear. You can imagine the joyful meeting between her and

her father. I shall never forget the thankfulness of his face when he saw how bright and well she was looking. Poor man, I believe he had made up his mind that he would never see her again. She does not require a nurse now, but I have promised to stay with her for a few months longer, and during that time, Mavis, I want you to remain at the Mill House. Shall you mind?"

"No," Mavis answered, truthfully. "But you are not going right back to London, mother, are you?" she asked, looking somewhat dismayed.

"No, dear. I have arranged to stay a few days with you."

What a happy few days those were to Mavis! She was allowed a holiday from school, and showed her mother her favourite walks, and spent a long afternoon with her in Oxford, where they visited T— College and the haunts her father had loved. And oh how Mavis talked! There seemed to be no end to all she had to tell about the household at the Mill House, and the Vicar, and Richard Butt and his wife and baby, and kind Mrs. Long, to all of which her mother listened with the greatest interest and attention.

"Why, how many friends you have made!" Mrs. Grey said, on one occasion when Mavis had been mentioning some of her schoolfellows. "You will be sorry to have to say good-bye to them; but I do not know when that will be, for I have not decided upon my future plans. I hope we shall never be parted for such a long time again."

"Indeed I hope not," Mavis answered, fervently. "Shall we go back to live at Miss Tompkins'?" she inquired.

"I don't know, dear," was the reply. "Perhaps we may—for a time."

Every one at the Mill House was very sorry when Mrs. Grey left and returned to town. Her former visit had naturally been overshadowed by the prospect of separation from her little daughter. But this had indeed been a visit of unalloyed happiness, with no cloud of impending sorrow to mar its joy.

After her mother's departure, Mavis went back to school with a very contented heart, and in another month came the summer holidays. Her feelings were very mixed when she learnt that it had been arranged for her to stay at W— until the end of another term, for Mr. Dawson had earnestly requested Mrs. Grey to remain with his daughter till Christmas, and she had consented to do so. And she expressed her

sentiments to her aunt in the following words—

"I'm glad, and I'm sorry, Aunt Lizzie. Glad, because I can't bear the thought of saying good-bye to you all, and sorry, because I do want mother so much sometimes. Still, London's quite near; it isn't as though mother was at the other end of the world, and time passes so quickly. Christmas will soon be here."

* * * * *

"I feel as though I must be dreaming," said Mavis, "but I suppose it's really, really true. I can hardly believe it."

It was Christmas Eve, and a few days before the little girl had been brought up to town by her uncle, who had delivered her to her mother's care. To her surprise, however, she had not been taken to Miss Tompkins' dingy lodging-house, but to Mr. Dawson's house in Camden Square, where she had received a hearty welcome from Mr. Dawson and his daughter.

She was with her mother and Miss Dawson now, in the pretty sitting-room where, fifteen months previously, she had made the latter's acquaintance. But there was nothing of the invalid about Miss Dawson to-day; she looked in good health and spirits, and laughed heartily at the sight of Mavis' bewildered countenance.

"What is it you can hardly believe, eh?" asked Mr. Dawson, as he entered the room.

"I have been telling her that you mean to build and endow a convalescent home in the country for girls, as a thanks-offering to God for my recovery, father," Miss Dawson said, answering for Mavis, "and that her mother is to be the matron, and she can scarcely credit it. Still, I think she approves of our plan."

"Oh yes, yes!" cried Mavis. "It's just what I should wish to do if I were you," she proceeded frankly, looking at Mr. Dawson with approval in her glance, and then turning her soft hazel eyes meaningly upon his daughter, "and you couldn't have a better matron than mother—"

"Mavis! My dear!" interrupted Mrs. Grey.

"It's quite true," declared Miss Dawson. Then she went on to explain to Mavis that the home was to be within easy reach of London, and it was

to be a home of rest for sick working-girls, where they would have good nursing.

"I think it's a beautiful plan," said Mavis, earnestly. She realized that it meant permanent work for her mother, too; and turning to her she inquired, "Shall I be able to live with you, mother?"

"Yes, dear, I hope so," Mrs. Grey answered, with a reassuring smile.

"Oh yes, of course," said Miss Dawson.

And the little girl's heart beat with joy.

She remained silent for a while after that, listening to the conversation of her elders, and meditating on what wonderful news this would be for them all at the Mill House. Then her mind travelled to Mr. Moseley, and her face grew grave, as she thought of those two delicate girls so dear to him, who had faded and died. But it brightened, as she reflected how nice it must be to be rich, like Mr. Dawson, to be able to help those not so well off as himself.

She was aroused from her reverie by Miss Dawson, who asked her to sing a carol to them, and she willingly complied, singing the same she had sung at the village concert at W— nearly a year before. Afterwards, she gave them an account of the concert, and expressed the hope that she would be a great singer some day.

"Why, Mavis, I never knew such an idea had entered your head!" exclaimed her mother, greatly surprised.

"It never did, mother, until Mr. Moseley told me I had a great gift, and that God expected me to use it for the benefit of others," the little girl replied, seriously.

"Surely he was right!" said Miss Dawson.

And with that Mrs. Grey agreed.

Later in the evening, when Mavis went to the window and peeped out to see what the weather was like, she felt an arm steal around her shoulders, and Miss Dawson asked—

"What of the night? Are we going to have a fine Christmas?"

"I believe we are," Mavis answered. "The sky is clear and the stars are very bright. Look!"

Miss Dawson did so, pressing her face close to the window-pane. Then she suddenly kissed Mavis, and whispered—

"God bless you, dear, for all you've done for me. I carried the remembrance of your sweet voice singing, 'The Lord is only my support,' to Australia and back again, and it cheered and strengthened me more than you will ever know. I wish you a happy Christmas, little song-bird, and many, many more in the years to come."

THE END

[Illustration]

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