

A Little Mother to the Others

L. T. Meade

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Opening pages

BY

MRS. L.T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF "POLLY: A NEW-FASHIONED GIRL," "A SWEET
GIRL GRADUATE," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE POOR INNOCENT.

The four children had rather peculiar names. The eldest girl was called Iris, which, as everybody ought to know, means rainbow--indeed, there was an Iris spoken of in the old Greek legends, who was supposed to be Hera's chief messenger, and whenever a rainbow appeared in the sky it was said that Iris was bringing down a message from Hera. The Iris of this story was a very pretty, thoughtful little girl, aged ten years. Her mother often talked to her about her name, and told her the story which was associated with it. The eldest boy was called Apollo, which also is a Greek name, and was supposed at one time to belong to the most beautiful boy in the world. The next girl was called Diana, and the youngest boy's name was Orion.

When this story opens, Iris was ten years old, Apollo nine, Diana six, and little Orion five. They were like ordinary children in appearance, being neither particularly handsome nor particularly the reverse; but in their minds and ways, in their habits and tastes, they seemed to have inherited a savor of those far-off beings after whom their mother had called them. They were, in short, very unworldly children--that does not mean that they were specially religious--but they did not care for fine clothes, nor the ordinary amusements which ordinary children delight in. They loved flowers with a love which was almost a passion, and they also knew a great deal about the stars, and often coaxed their mother to allow them to sit up late at night to watch the different constellations; but above all these things they adored, with a great adoration, the entire animal kingdom.

It so happened that the little Delaneys spent the greater part of their time in a beautiful garden. I don't think, in all the course of my wanderings, I ever saw a garden quite to compare to that in which their early days were spent. Even in the winter they lived the greater part of their time here,

being hardy children and never catching cold. The house was a fine and beautiful building, having belonged to their family for several generations, but the children thought nothing at all of that in comparison with the garden. Here, when possible, they even had their lessons; here they played all their wonderful and remarkable games; here they went through their brief sorrows, and tasted their sweetest joys. But I must hasten to describe the garden itself. In the first place, it was old-fashioned, having very high brick walls covered all over with fruit trees. These fruit trees had grown slowly, and were now in the perfection of their prime. Never were such peaches to be seen, nor such apricots, nor such cherries, as ripened slowly on the red brick walls of the old garden. Inside the walls almost all well-known English flowers flourished in lavish profusion. There was also fruit to be found here in quantities. Never were such strawberries to be seen as could be gathered from those great strawberry beds. Then the gooseberries with which the old bushes were laden; the currants, red, black, and white; the raspberries, had surely their match nowhere else on this earth.

The walled-in garden contained quite five acres of ground, and was divided itself into three portions. In the middle was the flower garden proper. Here there was a long, straight walk which led to an arbor at the bottom. The children were particularly fond of this arbor, for their father had made it for them with his own hands, and their mother had watched its growth. Mrs. Delaney was very delicate at the time, and as she looked on and saw the pretty arbor growing into shape, she used to lean on Iris' arm and talk to her now and then in her soft, low voice about the flowers and the animals, and the happy life which the little people were leading. At these moments a look would often come into her mother's gentle eyes which caused Iris' heart to beat fast, and made her tighten her clasp on the slender arm. Then, when the arbor was quite finished, Mr. Delaney put little seats into it, a rustic chair for each child, which he or she could take in or out at pleasure. The chairs were carved in commemoration of each

child's name. Iris had the deep purple flowers which go by that name twined round and round the back of hers. Apollo's chair was made memorable with his well-known lyre and bow, and these words were carved round it: "The golden lyre shall be my friend, the bent bow my delight, and in oracles will I foretell the dark future."

Diana's chair had a bow and quiver engraved on the back, while little Orion's represented a giant with a girdle and a sword. The children were very proud of their chairs, and often talked of them to one another, and Iris, who was the story-teller of the party, was never tired of telling the stories of the great originals after whom she and her brothers and sister were named.

Down the straight path which led to the pretty arbor were Scotch roses, red and white. The smell of these roses in the summer was quite enough to ravish you. Iris in particular used to sniff at them and sniff at them until she felt nearly intoxicated with delight.

The central garden, which was mostly devoted to flowers, led through little, old-fashioned, somewhat narrow postern doors into the fruit gardens on either side. In these were the gooseberries. Here were to be found the great beds of strawberries; here, by-and-by, ripened the plums and the many sorts of apples and pears; here, too, were the great glass houses where the grapes assumed their deep claret color and their wonderful bloom; and here also were some peculiar and marvelous foreign flowers, such as orchids, and many others.

Whenever the children were not in the house they were to be found in the garden, for, in addition to the abundance of fruit and vegetables, it also possessed some stately trees, which gave plenty of shade even when the sun was at its hottest. Here Iris would lie full length on her face and hands, and dream dreams to any extent. Now and then also she would wake up with a start and tell marvelous stories to her brothers and sister. She told stories very well, and the others always listened solemnly and

begged her to tell more, and questioned and argued, and tried to make the adventures she described come really into their own lives.

Iris was undoubtedly the most imaginative of all the little party. She was also the most gentle and the most thoughtful. She took most after her beautiful mother, and thought more than any of the others of the peculiar names after which they were all called.

On a certain day in the first week of a particularly hot and lovely June, Iris, who had been in the house for some time, came slowly out, swinging her large muslin hat on her arm. Her face looked paler than usual, and somewhat thoughtful.

"Here you are at last, Iris," called out Diana, in her brisk voice, "and not a moment too soon. I have just found a poor innocent dead on the walk; you must come and look at it at once."

On hearing these words, the gloom left Iris' face as if by magic.

"Where is it?" she asked. "I hope you did not tread on it, Diana."

"No; but Puff-Ball did," answered Diana. "Don't blame him, please, Iris; he is only a puppy and always up to mischief. He took the poor innocent in his mouth and shook it; but I think it was quite deaded before that."

"Then, if it is dead, it must be buried," said Iris solemnly. "Bring it into the arbor, and let us think what kind of funeral we will give it."

"Why not into the dead-house at once?" queried Diana.

"No; the arbor will do for the present."

Iris quickened her footsteps and walked down the straight path through the midst of the Scotch roses. Having reached the pretty little summer-house, she seated herself on her rustic chair and waited until Diana arrived with the poor innocent. This was a somewhat unsightly object, being nothing more nor less than a dead earthworm which had

been found on the walk, and which Diana respected, as she did all live creatures, great or small.

"Put it down there," said Iris; "we can have a funeral when the sun is not quite so hot."

"I suppose it will have a private funeral," said Apollo, who came into the summer-house at that moment. "It is nothing but a poor innocent, and not worth a great deal of trouble; and I do hope, Iris," he added eagerly, "that you will not expect me to be present, for I have got some most important chemical experiments which I am anxious to go on with. I quite hope to succeed with my thermometer to-day, and, after all, as it is only a worm----"

Iris looked up at him with very solemn eyes.

"*Only* a worm," she repeated. "Is *that* its fault, poor thing?" Apollo seemed to feel the indignant glance of Iris' brown eyes. He sat down submissively on his own chair. Orion and Diana dropped on their knees by Iris' side. "I think," said Iris slowly, "that we will give this poor innocent a simple funeral. The coffin must be made of dock leaves, and----"

Here she was suddenly interrupted--a shadow fell across the entrance door of the pretty summer-house. An elderly woman, with a thin face and lank, figure, looked in.

"Miss Iris," she said, "Mrs. Delaney is awake and would be glad to see you."

"Mother!" cried Iris eagerly. She turned at once to her sister and brothers. "The innocent must wait," she said. "Put it in the dead-house with the other creatures. I will attend to the funeral in the evening or to-morrow. Don't keep me now, children."

"But I thought you had just come from mother," said Apollo.

"No. When I went to her she was asleep. Don't keep me, please." The woman who had brought the message had already disappeared down the long straight walk. Iris took to her heels and ran after her. "Fortune," she said, looking into her face, "is mother any better?"

"As to that, Miss Iris, it is more than I can tell you. Please don't hold on to my hand, miss. In hot weather I hate children to cling to me."

Iris said nothing more, but she withdrew a little from Fortune's side.

Fortune hurried her steps, and Iris kept time with her. When they reached the house, the woman stopped and looked intently at the child.

"You can go straight upstairs at once, miss, and into the room," she said. "You need not knock; my mistress is waiting for you."

"Don't you think, Fortune, that mother is just a little *wee* bit better?" asked Iris again. There was an imploring note in her question this time.

"She will tell you herself, my dear. Now, be quick; don't keep her waiting. It is bad for people, when they are ill, to be kept waiting."

"I won't keep her; I'll go to her this very instant," said Iris.

The old house was as beautiful as the garden to which it belonged. It had been built, a great part of it, centuries ago, and had, like many other houses of its date, been added to from time to time. Queerly shaped rooms jutted out in many quarters; odd stairs climbed up in several directions; towers and turrets were added to the roof; passages, some narrow, some broad, connected the new buildings with the old. The whole made an incongruous and yet beautiful effect, the new rooms possessing the advantages and comforts which modern builders put into their houses, and the older part of the house the quaint devices and thick, wainscoted walls and deep, mullioned windows of the times which are gone by.

Iris ran quickly through the wide entrance hall and up the broad, white, stone stairs. These stairs were a special feature of Delaney Manor. They had been brought all the way from Italy by a Delaney nearly a hundred years ago, and were made of pure marble, and were very lovely to look at. When Iris reached the first landing, she turned aside from the spacious modern apartments and, opening a green baize door, ran down a narrow passage. At the end of the passage she turned to the left and went down another passage, and then wended her way up some narrow stairs, which curled round and round as if they were going up a tower. This, as a matter of fact, was the case. Presently Iris pushed aside a curtain, and found herself in an octagon room nearly at the top of a somewhat high, but squarely built, tower. This room, which was large and airy, was wainscoted with oak; there was a thick Turkey carpet on the floor, and the many windows were flung wide open, so that the summer breeze, coming in fresh and sweet from this great height, made the whole lovely room as fresh and cheery and full of sweet perfume as if its solitary inmate were really in the open air.

Iris, however, had often been in the room before, and had no time or thought now to give to its appearance. Her eyes darted to the sofa on which her young mother lay. Mrs. Delaney was half-sitting up, and looked almost too young to be the mother of a child as big as Iris. She had one of the most beautiful faces God ever gave to anybody. It was not so much that her features were perfect, but they were full of light, full of soul, and such a very loving expression beamed in her eyes that no man, woman, or child ever looked at her without feeling the best in their natures coming immediately to the surface.

As to little Iris, her feelings for her mother were quite beyond any words to express. She ran up to her now and knelt by her side.

"Kiss me, Iris," said Mrs. Delaney.

Iris put up her soft, rosebud lips; they met the equally soft lips of the mother.

"You are much better, mummy; are you not?" said the child, in an eager, half-passionate whisper.

"I have had a long sleep, darling, and I am rested," said Mrs. Delaney. "I told Fortune to call you. Father is away for the day. I thought we could have half an hour uninterrupted."

"How beautiful, mother! It is the most delightful thing in all the world to be alone with you, mummy."

"Well, bring your little chair and sit near me, Iris. Fortune will bring in tea in a moment, and you can pour it out. You shall have tea with me, if you wish it, darling."

Iris gave a sigh of rapture; she was too happy almost for words. This was almost invariably the case when she found herself in her mother's presence. When with her mother she was quiet and seldom spoke a great deal. In the garden with the other children Iris was the one who chattered most, but with her mother her words were always few. She felt herself then to be more or less in a listening attitude. She listened for the words which dropped from those gentle lips; she was always on the lookout for the love-light which filled the soft brown eyes.

At that moment the old servant, Fortune, brought in the tea on a pretty tray and laid it on a small table near Mrs. Delaney. Then Iris got up, and with an important air poured it out and brought a cup, nicely prepared, to her mother.

Mrs. Delaney sipped her tea and looked from time to time at her little daughter. When she did so, Iris devoured her with her anxious eyes.

"No," she said to herself, "mother does not look ill--not even *very* tired. She is not like anybody else, and that is why--why she wears that

wonderful, almost holy expression. Sometimes I wish she did not, but I would not change her, not for all the world."

Iris' heart grew quiet. Her cup of bliss was quite full. She scarcely touched her tea; she was too happy even to eat.

"Have you had enough tea, mother?" she asked presently.

"Yes, darling. Please push the tea-table a little aside, and then come up very near to me. I want to hold your dear little hand in mine; I can't talk much."

"But you are better--you are surely better, mother?"

"In one sense, yes, Iris."

Iris moved the tea-table very deftly aside, and then, drawing up her small chair, slipped her hand inside her mother's.

"I have made up my mind to tell you, Iris," said the mother. She looked at the little girl for a full minute, and then began to talk in a low, clear voice. "I am the mother of four children. I don't think there are any other children like you four in the wide world. I have thought a great deal about you, and while I have been ill have prayed to God to keep you and to help me, and now, Iris, now that I have got to go away--"

"To go away, mother?" interrupted Iris, turning very pale.

"Yes, dearest. Don't be troubled, darling; I can make it all seem quite happy to you. But now, when I see it must be done, that I must undertake this very long journey, I want to put things perfectly straight between you and me, my little daughter."

"Things have been always straight between us, mother," said Iris. "I don't quite understand."

"Do you remember the time when I went to Australia?"

"Are you going to Australia again?" asked Iris. "You were a whole year away then. It was a very long time, and sometimes, mother, sometimes Fortune was a little cross, and Miss Stevenson never seemed to suit Apollo. I thought I would tell you about that."

"But Fortune means well, dearest. She has your true interest at heart, and I think matters will be differently arranged, as far as Miss Stevenson is concerned, in the future. It is not about her or Fortune I want to speak now."

"And you are going back to Australia again?"

"I am going quite as far as Australia; but we need not talk of the distance just now. I have not time for many words, nor very much strength to speak. You know, Iris, the meaning of your names, don't you?"

"Of course," answered Iris; "and, mother, I have often talked to the others about our names. I have told Apollo how beautiful he must try to be, not only in his face, but in his mind, mother, and how brave and how clever. I have told him that he must try to have a beautiful soul; and Orion must be very brave and strong, and Diana must be bright and sparkling and noble. Yes, mother; we all know about our names."

"I am glad of that," said Mrs. Delaney. "I gave you the names for a purpose. I wanted you to have names with meaning to them. I wanted you to try to live up to them. Now, Iris, that I am really going away, I am afraid you children will find a great many things altered. You have hitherto lived a very sheltered life; you have just had the dear old garden and the run of the house, and you have seen your father or me every day. But afterwards, when I have gone, you will doubtless have to go into the world; and, my darling, my darling, the cold world does not always understand the meaning of names like yours, the meaning of strength and beauty and nobleness, and of bright, sparkling, and high ideas. In short, my little girl, if you four children are to be worthy of your names and to

fulfill the dreams, the longings, the *hopes* I have centered round you, there is nothing whatever for you to do but to begin to fight your battles."

Iris was silent. She had very earnest eyes, something like her mother's in expression. They were fixed now on Mrs. Delaney's face.

"I will not explain exactly what I mean," said the mother, giving the little hand a loving squeeze, "only to assure you, Iris, that, as the trial comes, strength will be given to you to meet it. Please understand, my darling, that from first to last, to the end of life, it is all a fight. 'The road winds uphill all the way.' If you will remember that you will not think things half as hard, and you will be brave and strong, and, like the rainbow, you will cheer people even in the darkest hours. But, Iris, I want you to promise me one thing--I want you, my little girl, to be a mother to the others."

"A mother to the others?" said Iris, half aloud. She paused and did not speak at all for a moment, her imagination was very busy. She thought of all the creatures to whom she was already a mother, not only her own dear pets--the mice in their cages, the silk-worms, the three dogs, the stray cat, the pet Persian cat, the green frogs, the poor innocents, as the children called worms--but in addition to these, all creatures that suffered in the animal kingdom, all flowers that were about to fade, all sad things that seemed to need care and comfort. But up to the present she had never thought of the other children except as her equals. Apollo was only a year younger than herself, and in some ways braver and stouter and more fearless; and Orion and Diana were something like their names--very bright and even fierce at times. She, after all, was the gentlest of the party, and she was very young--not more than ten years of age. How could she possibly be a mother to the others?

She looked at Mrs. Delaney, and her mother gazed solemnly at her, waiting for her to speak.

"After all," thought Iris, "to satisfy the longing in mother's eyes is the first thing of all. I will promise, cost what it may."

"Yes," she said; then softly, "I will, mother; I will be a mother to the others."

"Kiss me, Iris."

The little girl threw her arms round her mother's neck; their lips met in a long embrace.

"Darling, you understand? I am satisfied with your promise, and I am tired."

"Must I go away, mother? May not I stay very quietly with you? Can you not sleep if I am in the room?"

"I would rather you left me now. I can sleep better when no one is by. Ring the bell for Fortune as you go. She will come and make me comfortable. Yes; I am very tired."

"One moment first, mummy--you have not told me yet when you are going on the journey."

"The day is not quite fixed, Iris, although it is--yes, it is nearly so."

"And you have not said *where* you are going, mother. I should like to tell the others."

But Mrs. Delaney had closed her eyes, and did not make any reply.

CHAPTER II.

A LITTLE MOTHER TO THE OTHERS.

That night the children's young mother went on her journey. The summons for her to go came unexpectedly, as it often does in the end. She had not even time to say good-by to the children, nor to her husband, only just a brief moment to look, with startled eyes, at the wonderful face of the angel who had come to fetch her, and then with a smile of bliss to let him clasp her in his arms and feel his strong wings round her, and then she was away, beyond the lovely house and the beautiful garden, and the children sleeping quietly in their beds, and the husband who was slumbering by her side--beyond the tall trees and the peaks of the highest mountains, beyond the stars themselves, until finally she entered the portals of a home that is everlasting, and found herself in a land where the flowers do not fade.

In the morning the children were told that their mother was dead. They all cried, and everyone thought it dreadfully sad, except Iris, who knew better. It was Fortune who brought in the news to the children--they had just gone into the day-nursery at the time.

Fortune was a stern woman, somewhat over fifty years of age. She was American by birth, and had lived with Mrs. Delaney since Iris was born. Mrs. Delaney was also American, which may have accounted for some of her bright fancies, and quiet, yet sweet and quick ways. Fortune was very fond of the children after her fashion, which was, however, as a rule, somewhat severe and exacting. But to-day, in her bitter grief, she sank down on the nearest chair, and allowed them all to crowd round her, and cried bitterly, and took little Orion in her arms and kissed him and petted him, and begged of each child to forgive her for ever having been cross

or disagreeable, and promised, as well and as heartily as she could, never to transgress again in that manner as long as she lived.

While the others were sobbing and crying round Fortune, Iris stood silent.

"Where is father?" she said at last, in a very quiet but determined voice.

Fortune glanced round at the grave little girl in some wonder.

"Miss Iris," she said, "you are not even crying."

"What do tears matter?" answered Iris. "Please, Fortune, where is father? I should like to go to him."

"He is locked up in his study, darling, and could not possibly see you nor anyone else. He is quite stunned, master is, and no wonder. You cannot go to him at present, Miss Iris."

Iris did not say another word, but she looked more grave and more thoughtful than ever. After a long pause she sat down in her own little chair near the open window. It was a very lovely day, just as beautiful as the one which had preceded it. As the child sat by the window, and the soft, sweet breeze fanned her pale cheeks, an indescribable longing came over her. No one was particularly noticing her. She crept softly out of the room, ran down some passages, and at last found herself once more mounting the turret stairs to the tower. A moment later she had entered the octagon room where she and her mother had talked together on the previous day. The windows were wide open, the pretty room looked just as usual, but mother's sofa was vacant. Iris went straight over to one of the open windows, knelt down, and put her little elbows on the ledge.

"Yes, mother," she said, speaking aloud and looking full up at the bright blue sky, "I promise you. I promised you yesterday, but I make a fresh, very, *very* solemn promise to-day. Yes, I will be a mother to the others; I will try never to think of myself; I will remember, mother darling,

exactly what you want me to do. I will try to be beautiful, to be a little messenger of the gods, as you sometimes said I might be, and to be like the rainbow, full of hope. And I will try to help Apollo to be the most beautiful and the bravest boy in the world; and, mother, I will do my best to help Diana to be strong and bright and full of courage; and I will do what I can for Orion--he must be grand like a giant, so that he may live up to the wonderful name you have given him. Mother, it will be very hard, but I promise, I promise with all my might, to do everything you want me to do. I will act just as if you were there and could see, mother, and I will *always* remember that it is beautiful for you to have gone away, for while you were here you had so much pain and so much illness. I won't fret, mother; no, I won't fret--I promise to be a mother to the others, and there won't be any time to fret."

No tears came to Iris' bright eyes, but her little thin face grew paler and paler. Presently she left the window and went slowly downstairs again.

Fortune had now left the other children to themselves. They were scattered about the bright day nursery, looking miserable, though they could scarcely tell why.

"I don't believe a bit that mother is never coming back," said Orion, in a stout, determined voice.

He was a very handsome little fellow, strongly made--he had great big black eyes like his father's. He was standing now with his Noah's ark in his hand.

"It is unfeeling of you to want to play with your Noah's ark to-day, Orion," said Apollo. "Now, do you think I would go into my laboratory and try to make a thermometer?"

"Well, at least," said Diana, speaking with a sort of jerk, and her small face turning crimson, "whatever happens, the animals must be fed."

"Of course they must, Diana," said Iris, coming forward, "and, Apollo, there is not the least harm in our going into the garden, and I don't think there is any harm in Orion playing with his Noah's ark. Come, children; come with me. We will feed all the pets and then go into the arbor, and, if you like, I will tell you stories."

"What sort of stories?" asked Diana, in quite a cheerful voice. She trotted up to her sister, and gave her her hand as she spoke. She also was a finely made child, not unlike her name.

"I 'gree with Orion," she said. "I'm quite certain sure that mother is coming back 'fore long. Fortune did talk nonsense. She said, Iris--do you know what she said?--she said that in the middle of the night, just when it was black dark, you know, a white angel came into the room and took mother in his arms and flew up to the sky with her. You don't believe that; do you, Iris?"

"Yes, I do, Diana," answered Iris. "But I will tell you more about it in the arbor. Come, Apollo; mother would not like us to stay in the house just because she has gone away to the angels. Mother never was the least little bit selfish. Come into the garden."

The three forlorn-looking little children were much comforted by Iris' brave words. They dried their eyes, and Diana ran into the night nursery to fetch their hats. They then ran downstairs without anyone specially noticing them, passed through the great entrance hall, and out on to the wide gravel sweep, which led by a side walk into the lovely garden.

Iris held Diana by one hand and Orion by the other, and Apollo ran on in front.

"Now, then," said Iris, when they had reached the garden, "we must begin by feeding all the pets."

"There *are* an awful lot of them," said Diana, in quite a cheerful voice; "and don't you remember, Iris, the poor innocent was not buried yesterday?"

Iris could not help giving a little shiver.

"No more it was," she said, in a low tone. "It must have quite a private funeral. Please get some dock leaves, Apollo."

"Yes," answered Apollo.

He ran off, returning with a bunch in a moment or two.

"Take them into the dead-house," said Iris, "and sew them up and put the poor innocent inside, and then take your spade and dig a hole in the cemetery. We can't have a public funeral. I--I don't feel up to it," she added, her lips trembling for the first time.

Diana nestled close up to Iris.

"You need not look sad, Iris," she said; "there's no cause, is there? I don't believe that story 'bout mother, and if it is not true there'll be nothing wrong in my laughing, will there?"

"You may laugh if you like, darling," answered Iris.

They all entered the arbor now, and Iris seated herself in the little chair which mother had seen father make, and round which the beautiful flowers of the iris had been carved.

"Laugh, Di," she said again; "I know mother won't mind."

For a full moment Diana stood silent, staring at her sister; then her big black eyes, which had been full of the deepest gloom, brightened. A butterfly passed the entrance to the summer-house, and Diana flew after it, chasing it with a loud shout and a gay, hearty fit of laughter.

Apollo came back with the stray cat, whose name was "Trust," in his arms.

"She looks miserable, poor thing," he said. "I don't believe she has had anything to eat to-day. She must have her breakfast, as usual; must she not, Iris?"

"Yes; we must feed all the pets," said Iris, making a great effort to brighten up. "Let us go regularly to work, all of us. Apollo, will you take the birds? You may as well clean out their cages--they are sure to want it. I will collect flies for the green frogs, and Orion, you may pick mulberry leaves for the silk-worms."

For the next hour the children were busily employed. No one missed them in the house. The house was full of shade, but the garden, although mother had left it forever, was quite bright; the sun shone as brilliantly as it did every other day; a great many fresh flowers had come out; there was a very sweet smell from the opening roses, and in especial the Scotch roses, white and red, made a waft of delicious perfume as the children ran up and down.

"I'm awfully hungry," said Diana suddenly.

"But we won't go into the house for lunch to-day," said Iris. "Let us have a fruit lunch--I think mother would like us to have a fruit lunch just for to-day. Please, Apollo, go into the other garden and pick some of the ripest strawberries. There were a great many ripe yesterday, and there are sure to be more to-day. Bring a big leaf full, and we can eat them in the summer-house."

Apollo ran off at once. He brought back a good large leaf of strawberries, and Iris divided them into four portions. Diana and Orion, seated on their little chairs, ate theirs with much gusto, and just as happily as if mother had not gone away; but as to Iris, notwithstanding her brave words and her determination not to think of herself, the strawberries tasted like

wood in her mouth. There was also a great lump in her throat, and a feeling of depression was making itself felt more and more, moment by moment.

Apollo sat down beside his sister, and glanced from time to time into her face.

"I cannot think why I don't *really* care for the strawberries to-day," he said suddenly. "I--" His lips trembled. "Iris," he said, gazing harder than ever at his sister, "you have got such a queer look on your face.

"Don't notice it, please, Apollo," answered Iris.

"I wish you would cry," said the boy. "When Fortune came in and told us the--the dreadful news, we all cried and we kissed her, and she cried and she said she was sorry she had ever been unkind to us; but I remember, Iris, you did not shed one tear, and you--you always seemed to love mother the best of us all."

"And I love her still the best," said Iris, in a soft voice; "but, Apollo, I have something else to do." And then she added, lowering her tones, "You know, I can't be sorry about mother herself. I can only be glad about her."

"Glad about mother! Glad that she is dead!" said the boy.

"Oh, I don't think about that part," said Iris. "She is not dead--not really. She is only away up above the stars and the blue sky, and she will never have any more suffering, and she will always be as happy as happy can be, and sometime or other, Apollo, I think she will be able to come back; and, if she can, I am sure she will. Yes, I am quite sure she will."

"If she comes back we shall see her," said Apollo; "but she can't come back, Iris. Dead people can't come back."

"Oh, please, don't call her that," said Iris, with a note of great pain in her voice.

"But Fortune says that mother is dead, just like anybody else, and in a few days she will be put into the ground. Oh, Iris! I am frightened when I think of it. Mother was so lovely, and to think of their putting her into the ground in a box just like--like we put the poor innocent and the other creatures, and if that is the case she can never come back--never, never, never!"

The little boy buried his black head of curling hair on his sister's knee, and gave vent to a great burst of tears.

"But it is not true, Apollo," said Iris. "I mean in one way it is not true--I can't explain it, but I know. Let us forget all the dark, dreadful part--let us think of her, the real mother, the mother that looked at us out of her beautiful eyes; she is not dead, she has only gone away, and she wants us all to be good, so that we may join her some day. She called me after the rainbow, and after the messenger of the gods; and you, Apollo, after the bravest and the most beautiful boy that was supposed ever to live; and Diana, too, was called after a great Greek goddess; and Orion after the most lovely star in all the world. Oh, surely we four little children ought to try to be great, and good, and brave, if we are ever to meet our mother again!"

"Well, it is all very puzzling," said Apollo, "and I can't understand things the way you can, Iris, and I have an awful ache in my throat. I am hungry, and yet I am not hungry. I love strawberries as a rule, but I hate them to-day. If only father would come and talk to us it would not be quite so bad; but Fortune said we were not to go to him, that he was shut up in his study, and that he was very unhappy. She said that he felt it all dreadfully about mother."

"Iris," said Diana's voice at that moment, "we are not surely to have any lessons to-day?"

She had come to the door of the summer-house, and was looking in.

"Lessons?" said Iris. She put up her hand to her forehead in a dazed manner.

"Yes; do be quick and say. Miss Stevenson is coming down the garden path. I do think that on the very day when mother has gone away it would be hard if we were to have lessons; and if what you say is true, Iris, and mother is happy, why, it does not seem fair; does it? We ought to have a whole holiday to-day, ought we not? Just as if it was a birthday, you know."

"I think so too," said Orion, with a shout. "I don't think we need be bothered with old Stevie to-day." He raised his voice, and ran to meet her. "You are not to give us any lessons to-day, Stevie," he said. "It is a holiday, a great, *big* holiday--it is a sort of birthday. We were all eating strawberries, for Iris said we were not to go back to the house."

"Oh, my poor, dear, little boy!" said Miss Stevenson. She was a kind-hearted, although old-fashioned, governess. She bent down now and kissed Orion, and tried to take one of his very dirty little hands in hers.

"My dear little children--" she began again.

"Please, Miss Stevenson, don't pity us," said Iris.

Miss Stevenson started.

"My dear Iris," she said, "you don't realize what it means."

"I do," answered Iris stoutly.

"And I know what Iris means," said Apollo; "I know quite well. I feel miserable; I have got a pain in my throat, and I cannot eat my

strawberries; but Iris says we ought not fret, for mother is much better off."

"Then, if mother is much better off, we ought to have a holiday, same as if it was a birthday; ought we not, Miss Stevenson?" said Diana, puckering up her face and looking, with her keen black eyes, full at her governess.

"You poor little innocents, what is to become of you all?" said Miss Stevenson.

She entered the summer-house as she spoke, sank down on the nearest chair, and burst into tears. The four children surrounded her. They none of them felt inclined to cry at that moment. Orion, after staring at her for some little time, gave her a sharp little tap on her arm.

"What are you crying about?" he said. "Don't you think you are rather stupid?"

"You poor innocents!" said Miss Stevenson.

"Please don't call us that," said Diana; "that is our name for the worms. Worms can't see, you know, and they are not to blame for being only worms, and sometimes they get trodden on; and Iris thought we might call them innocents, and we have always done so since she gave us leave; but we would rather not be called by *quite* the same name."

Miss Stevenson hastily dried her eyes.

"You certainly are the most extraordinary little creatures," she said.

"Don't you feel anything?"

"It would be horrid selfish to be sorry," said Diana "Iris says that mother is awfully happy now."

Miss Stevenson stared at the children as if they were bewitched.

"And we are *not* to have lessons, Stevie," said Orion; "that's settled, isn't it?"

"Oh, my dear little child! I was not thinking of your lessons. It is your terrible--your terrible loss that fills my mind; that and your want of understanding. Iris, you are ten years old; I am surprised at you."

Iris stood, looking very grave and silent, a step or two away.

"Please, Miss Stevenson," she said, after a long pause, "don't try to understand us, for I am afraid it would be of no use. Mother talked to me yesterday, and I know quite what to do. Mother asked me to be a mother to the others, so I have no time to cry, nor to think of myself at all. If you will give us a holiday to-day, will you please go away and let us stay together, for I think I can manage the others if I am all alone with them?"

Miss Stevenson rose hastily.

"I thought you would all have been overwhelmed," she said. "I thought if ever children loved their mother you four did. Oh! how stunned I feel! Yes, I will certainly go--I don't profess to understand any of you."

CHAPTER III.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE AUNT.

About a week after the events related in the last chapter, on a certain lovely day in June, a hired fly might have been seen ascending the steep avenue to Delaney Manor. The fly had only one occupant--a round, roly-poly sort of little woman. She was dressed in deep mourning, and the windows of the fly being wide open, she constantly poked her head out, now to the right and now to the left, to look anxiously and excitedly around her.

After gazing at the magnificent view, had anyone been there to look, they might have observed her shaking her head with great solemnity. She had round black eyes, and a rather dark-complexioned face, with a good deal of color in her cheeks. She was stoutly built, but the expression on her countenance was undoubtedly cheerful. Nothing signified gloom about her except her heavy mourning. Her eyes, although shrewd and full of common sense, were also kindly; her lips were very firm; there was a matter-of-fact expression about her whole appearance.

"Now, why does David waste all those acres of splendid land?" she muttered angrily to herself. "The whole place, as far as I can see, seems to be laid out in grass. I know perfectly well that this is an agricultural country, and yet, when produce is so precious, what do I see but a lawn here and another lawn there, and not even cows feeding on them. Oh, yes! of course there is the park! The park is right enough, and no one wants to interfere with that. But why should all the land in that direction, and in that direction, and in that direction"--here she put out her head again and looked frantically about her--"why should all that land be devoted to mere ornament? It seems nothing more nor less than a tempting of Providence." Here she suddenly raised her voice. "Driver," she said, "have the goodness to poke up your horse, and to go a little faster. I happen to be in a hurry."

"Orse won't do it, ma'am," was the response. "Steep 'ill this. Can't go no faster."

The little lady gave an indignant snort, and retired once more into the depths of the gloomy fly. Presently a bend in the avenue brought the old manor house into view. Once more she thrust out her head and examined it critically.

"There it stands," she said to herself. "I was very happy at the Manor as a girl. I wonder if the old garden still exists. Twenty to one it has been done away with; there's no saying. Evangeline had such dreadfully queer ideas. Yes, there stands the house, and I do hope some remnants of the garden are in existence; but the thing above all others to consider now is, what kind these children are. Poor David, he was quite mad about Evangeline--not that I ever pretended to understand her. She was an American, and I hate the Americans; yes, I cordially hate them. Poor David, however, was devoted--oh, it was melancholy, melancholy! I suppose it was on account of Evangeline that all this splendid land has been allowed to lie fallow--not even cows, not even a stray sheep to eat all that magnificent grass. Wherever I turn I see flower-beds--flower-beds sloping away to east and west, as far almost as the eye can travel. And so there are four children. I have no doubt they are as queer, and old-fashioned, and untrained as possible. It would be like their mother to bring them up in that sort of style. Well, at least I am not the one to shirk my duty, and I certainly see it now staring me in the face. I am the wife of a hard-working vicar; I work hard myself, and I have five children of my own; but never mind, I am prepared to do my best for those poor deserted orphans. Ah, and here we are at last! That is a comfort."

The rickety old fly drew up with a jerk opposite the big front entrance, and Mrs. Dolman got out. She was short in stature, but her business-like

manner and attitude were unmistakable. As soon as ever she set foot on the ground she turned to the man.

"Put the portmanteau down on the steps," she said. "You need not wait. What is your fare?"

The fly-driver named a price, which she immediately disputed.

"Nonsense!" she said. "Eight shillings for driving me from the station here? Why, it is only five miles."

"It is nearly seven, ma'am, and all uphill. I really cannot do it for a penny less."

"Then you are an impostor. I shall complain of you."

At this moment one of the stately footmen threw open the hall door and stared at Mrs. Dolman.

"Take my portmanteau in immediately, if you please," she said, "and pray tell me if your master is at home."

"Yes, madam," was the grave reply. "But Mr. Delaney is not seeing company at present."

"He will see me," said Mrs. Dolman. "Have the goodness to tell him that his sister has arrived, and please also see that my luggage is taken to my room--and oh, I say, wait one moment. What is the fare from Beaminster to Delaney Manor?"

The grave-looking footman and the somewhat surly driver of the cab exchanged a quick glance. Immediately afterwards the footman named eight shillings in a voice of authority.

"Preposterous!" said Mrs. Dolman, "but I suppose I must pay it, or, rather, you can pay it for me; I'll settle with you afterwards."

"Am I to acquaint my master that you have come, madam?"

"No; on second thoughts I should prefer to announce myself. Where did you say Mr. Delaney was?"

"In his private study."

"I know that room well. See that my luggage is taken to a bedroom, and pay the driver."

Mrs. Dolman entered the old house briskly. It felt quiet, remarkably quiet, seeing that there was a large staff of servants and four vigorous, healthy children to occupy it.

"Poor little orphans, I suppose they are dreadfully overcome," thought the good lady to herself. "Well, I am glad I have appeared on the scene. Poor David is just the sort of man who would forget everybody else when he is in a state of grief. Of course I know he was passionately attached to Evangeline, and she certainly was a charming, although *quite* incapable, creature. I suppose she was what would be termed 'a man's woman.'

Now, I have never any patience with them, and when I think of those acres of land and--but, dear me! sometimes a matter-of-fact, plain body like myself is useful in an emergency. The emergency has arrived with a vengeance, and I am determined to take the fortress by storm."

The little lady trotted down one or two passages, then turned abruptly to her left, and knocked at a closed door. A voice said, "Come in." She opened the door and entered. A man was standing with his back to her in the deep embrasure of a mullioned window. His hands were clasped behind his back; he was looking fixedly out. The window was wide open.

"There, David, there! I knew you would take it hard; but have the goodness to turn round and speak to me," said Mrs. Dolman.

When he heard these unexpected words, the master of Delaney Manor turned with a visible start.

"My dear Jane, what have you come for?" he exclaimed. He advanced to meet his sister, dismay evident on every line of his face.

"I knew you would not welcome me, David. Oh, no prevarications! if you please. It is awful to think how many lies people tell in the cause of politeness. When I undertook this wearisome journey from the north of England, I knew I should not be welcome, but all the same I came; and, David, when I have had a little talk with you, and when you have unburdened your heart to me, you will feel your sorrow less."

"I would rather not touch on that subject," said Mr. Delaney. He offered his sister a chair very quietly, and took another himself.

Father, as Iris used to say, was not the least like mother. Mother had the gentlest, the sweetest, the most angelic face in the world; she never spoke loudly, and she seldom laughed; her voice was low and never was heard to rise to an angry tone. Her smile was like the sweetest sunshine, and wherever she appeared she brought an atmosphere of peace with her. But father, on the other hand, although an excellent and loving parent, was, when in good spirits, given to hearty laughter--given to loud, eager words, to strong exercise, both physical and mental. He was, as a rule, a very active man, seldom staying still in one place, but bustling here, there, and everywhere. He was fond of his children, and petted them a good deal; but the one whom he really worshiped was his gentle and loving wife. She led him, although he did not know it, by silken cords. She always knew exactly how to manage him, how to bring out his fine points. She never rubbed him the wrong way. He had a temper, and he knew it; but in his wife's presence it had never been exasperated. His sister, however, managed to set it on edge with the very first words she uttered.

"Of course, I know you mean well, Jane," he said, "and I ought to be obliged to you for taking all this trouble. Now that you have come, you are welcome; but I must ask you to understand immediately that I will

not have the subject of my"--he hesitated, and his under lip shook for a moment--"the subject of my trouble alluded to. And I will also add that I should have preferred your writing to me beforehand. This taking a man by storm is, you know of old, my dear Jane--not agreeable to me."

"Precisely, David. I did not write, for the simple reason that I thought it likely you would have asked me not to come; and as it was necessary for me to appear on the scene, I determined, on this occasion, to take, as you express it, Delaney Manor by storm."

"Very well, Jane; as you have done it you have done it, and there is no more to be said."

Mr. Delaney rose from his seat as he spoke.

"Would you not like to go to your room, and wash and change your dress?" he asked.

"I cannot change my dress, for I have only brought one. I will go to my room presently. What hour do you dine?"

"At half-past eight."

"I have a few minutes still to talk to you, and I will not lose the opportunity. It will be necessary for me to return home the day after to-morrow."

An expression of relief swept over Mr. Delaney's countenance.

"I shall, therefore," continued Mrs. Dolman, taking no notice of this look, which she plainly saw, "have but little time at my disposal, and there is a great deal to be done. But before I proceed to anything else, may I ask you a question? How could you allow all that splendid land to lie waste?"

"What land, Jane? What do you mean?"

"Those acres of grass outside the house."

"Are you alluding to the lawns?"

"I don't know what name you choose to call all that grass, but I think it is a positive tempting of Providence to allow so much land to lie fallow. Why, you might grow potatoes or barley or oats, and make pounds and pounds a year. I know of old what the land round Delaney Manor can produce."

"As the land happens to belong to me, perhaps I may be allowed to arrange it as pleases myself," said Mr. Delaney, in a haughty tone.

His sister favored him with a long, reflective gaze.

"He is just as obstinate as ever," she muttered to herself. "With that cleft in his chin, what else can be expected? There is no use bothering him on that point at present, and, as he won't allow me to talk of poor Evangeline,--who had, poor soul, as many faults as I ever saw packed into a human being,--there is nothing whatever for me to do but to look up those children."

Mrs. Dolman rose from her seat as this thought came to her.

"I am tired," she said. "From Yorkshire to Delaney Manor is a long journey, as perhaps you do *not* remember, David; so I will seek my room after first having informed you what the object of my visit is."

"I should be interested to know that, Jane," he answered, in a somewhat softened tone.

"Well, seeing I am the only sister you have--"

"But we never did pull well together," interrupted he.

"We used to play in the same garden," she answered, and for the first time a really soft and affectionate look came into her face. "I hope to goodness, David, that the garden is not altered."

"It is much the same as always, Jane. The children occupy it a good deal."

"I am coming to the subject of the children. Of course, now that things are so much changed--"

"I would rather not go into that," said Mr. Delaney.

"Dear me, David, how touchy you are! Why will you not accept a patent fact? I have no wish to hurt your feelings, but I really must speak out plain common sense. I always was noted for my common sense, was I not? I don't believe, in the length and breadth of England, you will find better behaved children than my five. I have brought them up on a plan of my own, and now that I come here at great trouble, and I may also add expense, to try and help you in your--oh, of course, I must not say it--to try and help you when you want help, you fight shy of my slightest word. Well, the fact is this: I want you to take my advice, and to shut up Delaney Manor, or, better still, to let it well for the next two or three years, and go abroad yourself, letting me have the children!"

"My dear Jane!"

"Oh, I am your dear Jane now--now that you think I can help you. Well, David, I mean it, and what is more, the matter must be arranged. I must take the children back with me the day after to-morrow. Now I will go to my bedroom, as I am dead tired. Perhaps you will ring the bell and ask a servant to take me there."

Mr. Delaney moved slowly across the room. He rang the electric bell, and a moment later the footman appeared in answer to his summons. He gave certain directions, and Mrs. Dolman left the room.

The moment he found himself alone, the father of the children sank down on the nearest chair, put his hands on the table, pressed his face down on them, and uttered a bitter groan.

CHAPTER IV.

RUB-A-DUB.

"What am I to do, Evangeline?" said Mr. Delaney, a few moments later. He stood up as he spoke, shook himself, and gazed straight before him. It was exactly as if he were really speaking to the children's mother. Then again he buried his face in his big hands, and his strong frame shook. After a moment's pause he took up a photograph which stood near, and looked earnestly at the beautiful pictured face. The eyes, so full of truth and tenderness, seemed to answer him back. He started abruptly to his feet. "You always directed me, Evangeline," he said. "God only knows what I am to do now that you have left me. I am in some matters as weak as a reed, great, blustering fellow though I appear. And now that Jane has come--she always did bully me--now that she has come and wants to take matters into her own hands, oh, Evangeline! what is to be done? The fact is, I am not fit to manage this great house, nor the children, without you. The children are not like others; they will not stand the treatment which ordinary children receive. Oh, why has Jane, of all people, come? What am I to do?"

He paced rapidly up and down his big study; clenching his hands at times, at times making use of a strong exclamation.

The butler knocked at the door. "Dinner will be served in half an hour, sir," he said. "Am I to lay for two?"

"Yes, Johnson. Mrs. Dolman, my sister, has arrived, and will dine with me. Have places laid for two."

The man withdrew, and Mr. Delaney, stepping out through the open window, looked across the lawns which his sister had so strongly disapproved of.

"Jane was always the one to poke her finger into every pie," he said half aloud. "Certainly this place is distasteful to me now, and there is--upon my word, there is something in her suggestion. But to deliver over those four children to her, and to take them away from the garden, and the house, and the memory of their mother--oh! it cannot be thought of for a moment; and yet, to shift the responsibility while my heart is so sore would be an untold relief."

A little voice in the distance was heard shouting eagerly, and a small child, very dirty about the hands and face, came trotting up to Mr. Delaney. It was Diana. She was sobbing as well as shouting, and was holding something tenderly wrapped up in her pocket handkerchief.

"What is the matter with you, Di?" said her father. He lifted her into his arms. "Why, little woman, what can be the matter? and what have you got in your handkerchief?"

"It's Rub-a-Dub, and he is deaded," answered Diana. She unfolded the handkerchief carefully and slowly, and showed her father a small piebald mouse, quite dead, and with a shriveled appearance. "He is as dead as he can be," repeated Diana. "Look at him. His little claws are blue, and oh! his little nose, and he cannot see; he is stone dead, father."

"Well, you shall go into Beaminster to-morrow and buy another mouse," said Mr. Delaney.

Diana gazed at him with grave, wondering black eyes.

"That would not be Rub-a-Dub," she said; then she buried her little, fat face on his shoulder and sobs shook her frame.

"Evangeline would have known exactly what to say to the child," muttered the father, in a fit of despair. "Come along, little one," he said. "What can't be cured must be endured, you know. Now, take my hand and I'll race you into the house."

The child gave a wan little smile; but the thought of the mouse lay heavy against her heart.

"May I go back to the garden first?" she said. "I want to put Rub-a-Dub into the dead-house."

"The dead-house, Diana? What do you mean?"

"It is the house where we keep the poor innocents, and all the other creatures what get deaded," said Diana. "We keep them there until Iris has settled whether they are to have a pwivate or a public funeral. Iris does not know yet about Rub-a-Dub. He was quite well this morning. I don't know what he could have died of. Perhaps, father, if you look at him you will be able to tell me."

"Well, let me have a peep," said the man, his mustache twitching as he spoke.

Diana once again unfolded her small handkerchief, in the center of which lay the much shriveled-up mouse.

"The *darling*!" said the little girl tenderly. "I loved Rub-a-Dub so much; I love him still. I do hope Iris will think him 'portant enough for a public funeral."

"Look here," said Mr. Delaney, interested in spite of himself, and forgetting all about the dinner which would be ready in a few minutes; "I'll come right along with you to the dead-house; but I did not know, Di, that you kept an awful place of that sort in the garden."

"Tisn't awful," said Diana. "We has to keep a dead-house when we find dead things. We keep all the dead 'uns we find there. There aren't as many as usual to-day--only a couple of butterflies and two or three beetles, and a poor crushed spider. And oh! I forgot the toad that we found this morning. It was awful hurt and Apollo had to kill it; he had to stamp on it and kill it; and he did not like it a bit. Iris can't kill things, nor

can I, nor can Orion, so we always get Apollo to kill the things that are half dead--to put them out of their misery, you know, father."

"You seem to be a very wise little girl; but I am sure this cannot be at all wholesome work," said the father, looking more bewildered and puzzled than ever.

Diana gazed gravely up at him. She did not know anything about the work being wholesome or the reverse. The dead creatures had to be properly treated, and had to be buried either privately or publicly--that was essential--nothing else mattered at all to her.

"As Rub-a-Dub is such a dear darlin', I should not be s'prised if Iris did have a public funeral," she commented.

"But what is the difference, Di? Tell me," said her father.

"Oh, father! you are ig'rant. At a pwivate funeral the poor dead 'un is just sewn up in dock leaves and stuck into a hole in the cemetery."

"The cemetery! Good Heavens, child! do you keep a cemetery in the garden?"

"Indeed we does, father. We have a very large one now, and heaps and heaps of gravestones. Apollo writes the insipcron. He is quite bothered sometimes. He says the horrid work is give to him,--carving the names on the stones and killing the half-dead 'uns,--but course he has to do it 'cos Iris says so. Course we all obey Iris. When it is a pwivate funeral, the dead 'un is put into the ground and covered up, and it don't have a gravestone; then of course, by and by, it is forgot. You underland; don't you, father?"

"Bless me if I do," said Mr. Delaney, in a puzzled tone.

"But if it is a public funeral," continued Diana, strutting boldly forward now, and throwing back her head in quite a martial attitude, "why, then

it's grand. There is a box just like a coffin, and cotton wool--we steal the cotton wool most times. We know where Fortune has got a lot of it put away. Iris does not think it quite right to steal, but the rest of us don't mind. And we have banners, and Orion plays the Jew's harp, and I beat the drum, and Iris sings, and Apollo digs the grave, and the dead 'un is put into the ground, and we all cry, or pretend to cry. Sometimes I do squeeze out a tiny tear, but I'm so incited I can't always manage it, although I'm sure I'll cry when Rub-a-Dub is put into the ground. Then afterwards there is a tombstone, and Iris thinks of the insipcron. I spects we'll have a beautiful insipcron for poor Rub-a-Dub, 'cos we all loved him so much."

"Well, all this is very interesting, of course," said Mr. Delaney. "But now we must be quick, because your Aunt Jane has come."

"Who's her?" asked Diana.

"A very good lady indeed--your aunt."

"What's an aunt?"

"A lady whom you ought to love very much."

"Ought I? I never love people I ought to love," said Diana firmly.

"Please, father, this is the dead-house. You can come right in if you like, father, and see the dead 'uns; they are all lying on this shelf. Most of them is to be buried pwivate, 'cos they are not our own pets, you know; but Rub-a-Dub is sure to have a public funeral, and an insipcron, and all the rest."

Mr. Delaney followed Diana into the small shed which the children called the dead-house. He gazed solemnly at the shelf which she indicated, and on which lay the several dead 'uns.

"Put your mouse down now," he said, "and come along back with me to the house at once. You ought to have been in bed long ago."

Diana laid the mouse sorrowfully down in the midst of its dead brethren, shut the door of the dead-house, and followed her father up the garden path.

"It's a most beautiful night," she said, after a pause. "It's going to be a starful night; isn't it, father?"

"Starful?" said Mr. Delaney.

"Yes; and when it is a starful night Orion can't sleep well, 'cos he is a star hisself; isn't he, father?"

"Good gracious, child, no! He is a little boy!"

"No, no, father! You are awfu' mistook. Mother called him a star. I'll show you him up in the sky if it really comes to be a starful night. May I, father?"

"Some time, my darling; but now you must hurry in, for I have to get ready for dinner. Kiss me, Di. Good-night. God bless you, little one!"

"B'ess you too, father," said Diana. "I love 'oo awfu' well."

She raised her rosebud lips, fixed her black eyes on her parent's face, kissed him solemnly, and trotted away into the house. When she got close to it, a great sob came up from her little chest. She thought again of the dead Rub-a-Dub, but then the chance of his having a public funeral consoled her. She longed to find Iris.

Full of this thought, her little heart beating more quickly than usual, she rushed up the front stairs, and was turning down the passage which led to the nursery, when she was confronted by a short, stout woman dressed in black.

"Now, who is this little girl, I wonder?" said a high-pitched, cheery voice.

"It is not your little girl; and I am in a hurry, please," said Diana, who could be very rude when she liked. She did not wish to be interrupted now; she wanted to find Iris to tell her of the sad fate of Rub-a-Dub.

"Highty-tighty!" exclaimed the little lady, "that is no way to speak to grown-up people. I expect, too, you are one of my little nieces. Come here at once and say, 'How do you do?'"

"Are you the aunt?" asked Diana solemnly.

"The aunt!" replied Mrs. Dolman. "I am your aunt, my dear. What is your name?"

"Diana. Please, aunt, don't clutch hold of my hand; I want to find Iris."

"Of all the ridiculous names," muttered Mrs. Dolman under her breath.

"Well, child, I am inclined to keep you for a moment, as I want to talk to you. Do you know, you rude little girl, that I have come a long way to see you. Of course, my little girl, I know you are sad at present; but you must try to get over your great sorrow."

"Do you know, then, about Rub-a-Dub?" said Diana, her whole face changing, and a look of keen interest coming into it.

If Aunt--whatever her other name was--should turn out to be interested in Rub-a-Dub, and sorry for his untimely end, why, then, Diana felt there was a possibility of her squeezing a little corner for her in her hearts of hearts. But Mrs. Dolman's next words disturbed the pleasant illusion.

"You are a poor little orphan, my child," she said. "Your poor, dear mother's death must be a terrible sorrow to you; but, believe me, you will get over it after a time."

"I has quite got over it awready," answered Diana, in a cheerful voice. "It would be awfu' selfish to be sorry 'bout mother, 'cos mother is not suffering any more pain, you know. I am very *glad* 'bout mother. I am

going to her some day. Please don't squeeze my hand like that. Good-by, aunt; I weally can't stay another moment."

She trotted off, and Mrs. Dolman gazed after her with a petrified expression of horror on her round face.

"Well," she said to herself, "if ever! And the poor mother was devoted to them all, and she is scarcely a week in her grave, and yet that mite dares to say she has got over it. What nonsense she talked, and what a queer name she has. Now, our family names are sensible and suited for the rising generation. We have had our Elizabeths and our Anns, and our Lucys and our Marys, and, of course, there is Jane, my name. All these are what I call good old respectable Delaney names; but Diana and Iris make me sick. And I believe, if report tells true, that there are some still more extraordinary names in the family. What a rude, dirty little child! I did not like her manners at all, and how neglected she looked. I shall follow her; it is my manifest duty to see to these children at once. Oh! I shall have difficulty in breaking them in, but broken in they must be!"

Accordingly Mrs. Dolman turned down the passage where Diana's fat legs disappeared. The eager but gentle flow of voices directed her steps, and presently she opened the door of a large room and looked in.

She found herself unexpectedly on the threshold of the day-nursery. It was a beautiful room, facing due west; the last rays of the evening sun were shining in at the open windows; some children were collected in a corner of the room. Diana had gone on her knees beside a girl a little older and slighter than herself. Her plump elbows were resting on the girl's knee, her round hands were pressed to her rounder cheeks, and her black eyes were fixed upon the girl's face.

The elder girl, very quiet and calm, had one hand on Diana's shoulder, her other arm was thrown round a handsome little boy, not unlike Diana in appearance, while an older boy sat on a hassock at her feet.

"I will listen to you presently, Diana," said Iris. "Now, I must finish my story."

"Yes, please go on, Iris," said Orion; "it's all about me, and I'm 'mensely inte'sted."

"Very well, Orion. The King of Chios did not want his daughter to marry you."

"Good gracious!" muttered Mrs. Dolman in the doorway.

"So he let you fall sound asleep," continued Iris, in her calm voice. None of the children had yet seen the stout personage on the threshold of the room. "He let you fall very sound asleep, having given you some strong wine."

"What next?" thought Mrs. Dolman.

"And when you were very sound asleep indeed, he put out both your eyes. When you awoke you found yourself quite blind, and did not know what to do or where to go. Suddenly, in the midst of your misery, you heard the sound of a blacksmith's forge. Guided by the noise, you reached the place and begged the blacksmith to climb on your shoulders, and so lend you his eyes to guide you. The blacksmith was willing to do it, and seated himself on your shoulders. Then you said, 'Guide me to the place where I can see the first sunbeam that rises in the east over the sea,' and--"

"Yes," said Orion, whose breath was coming quickly, "yes; and what happened to me then?"

"Nonsense, little boy! Don't you listen to another word of that folly," said a very strong, determined voice.

All the children turned abruptly.

"Oh, *she* has come bothering!" said Diana.

But the other three had started to their feet, and a flush rose into Iris' pale face.

CHAPTER V.

AUNT IS HER NAME.

"Aunt is her name," said Diana, "and I don't think much of her."

Mrs. Dolman strode rapidly into the nursery.

"Yes, children," she said, "I am your aunt--your Aunt Jane Dolman, your father's only sister. Circumstances prevented my coming to see your father and mother for several years; but now that God has seen fit to give you this terrible affliction, and has taken your dear mother to Himself, I have arrived, determined to act a mother's part to you. I do not take the least notice of what that rude little girl says. When I have had her for a short time under my own control, she will know better. Now, one of you children, please have the politeness to offer me a chair, and then you can come up one by one and kiss me."

Iris was so much petrified that she could not stir. Diana and Orion came close together, and Diana flung her stout little arm round Orion's fat neck. Apollo, however, sprang forward and placed a chair for his aunt.

"Will you sit here, please, Aunt Jane Dolman?" he said.

"You need not say Aunt Jane Dolman," replied the lady; "that is a very stiff way of speaking. Say Aunt Jane. You can kiss me, little boy."

Apollo raised his lips and bestowed a very chaste salute upon Aunt Jane's fat cheek.

"What is your name?" said Aunt Jane, taking one of his small, hard hands in hers.

"Apollo," he replied, flinging his head back.

"Apollo! Heaven preserve us! Why, that is the name of one of the heathen deities--positively impious. What could my poor sister-in-law and your father have been thinking of? At one time I considered your father a man of sense."

Apollo flushed a beautiful rosy red.

"Please, Aunt Jane," he said, "I like my name very much indeed, and I would rather you did not say a word against it, because mother gave it to me."

"It is a name with a beautiful meaning," said Iris, coming forward at last. "How are you Aunt Jane? My name is Iris, and this is Diana, and this is Orion--both Diana and Orion are very good children indeed, and"--here her lips quivered, her earnest, brown eyes were fixed with great solicitude on her aunt's face--"I ought to know," she said, "for I am a mother to the others, and, I think, please, Aunt Jane, Orion and Diana should be going to bed now."

"I have not the slightest objection, my dear. I simply wished to see you children. I will say good-night now; we can have a further talk to-morrow. But first, before I go, let me repeat over your names, or rather you--Apollo, I think you call yourself--had better say them for me."

"That is Iris," said Apollo, pointing to his elder sister, "and I am Apollo, and that is Diana, and that is Orion."

"All four names taken from the heathen mythology," replied Aunt Jane, "and I, the wife of a good honest clergyman of the Church of England, have to listen to this nonsense. I declare it may be inconvenient--it may frighten the parishioners. I must think it well over. I have, of course, heard before of girls being called Diana, and also of girls being called Iris--but Apollo and Orion! My poor children, I am sorry for you; you are burdened for life. Good-night, good-night! You will see me again to-morrow."

The great dinner-gong sounded through the house, and Aunt Jane sailed away from the day-nursery.

"Fortune, who is she?" asked Iris, raising a pair of almost frightened eyes to the old nurse's face.

"She is your father's sister, my darling," said Fortune. "She has come on a visit, and uninvited, Peter tells me. I doubt if my master is pleased to see her. She will most likely go away in a day or two, so don't you fret, Miss Iris, love. Now, come along, Master Orion, and let me undress you. It is very late, and you ought to be in your little bed."

"I'm Orion," said the little boy, "and I'm stone blind." He began to strut up and down the nursery with his eyes tightly shut.

"Apollo, please, may I get on your shoulder for a bit, and will you lead me to that place where the first sunbeam rises in the east over the sea?"

"Come," said Fortune, in what Diana would call a "temperish" tone, "we can have no more of that ridiculous story-telling to-night. Miss Iris, you'll ask them to be good, won't you?"

"Yes. Children, do be good," said Iris, in her earnest voice.

Diana trotted up to her sister and took her hand.

"I has something most 'portant to tell you," she said, in a low whisper.

"It's an awfu' sorrow, but you ought to know."

"What is it, Di?"

"Rub-a-Dub has got deaded."

"Rub-a-Dub?"

"Yes; it is quite true. I found him stark dead and stiff. I has put him in the dead-house."

Iris said nothing.

"And he is to have a public funeral, isn't he?" said Diana, "and a beautiful insiperon. Do say he is, and let us have the funeral to-morrow."

"I am awfully sorry," said Iris, then; "I did love Rub-a-Dub. Yes, Di; I'll think it over. We can meet after breakfast in the dead-house and settle what to do."

"There are to be a lot of funerals to-morrow--I'm so glad," said Diana, with a chuckle.

She followed Orion into the night-nursery. He was still walking with his eyes tightly shut and went bang up against his bath, a good portion of which he spilt on the floor. This put both Fortune and the under-nurse, Susan, into a temper, and they shook him and made him cry, whereupon Diana cried in concert, and poor Iris felt a great weight resting on her heart.

"It is awfully difficult to be a mother to them all," she thought. "The usual kind of things don't seem to please them. Apollo, what is the matter? What are you thinking of?"

"I'm only wishing that I might be the real Apollo," said the boy, "and that I might get quite far away from here. Things are different here now that mother has gone, Iris. I don't like Aunt Jane Dolman a bit."

"Oh, well, she is our aunt, so I suppose it is wrong not to like her," answered Iris.

"I can't help it," replied Apollo. "I have a feeling that she means to make mischief. Why did she come here without being asked? Iris, shall we go down to dessert to-night, or not?"

"I would much rather not," answered Iris.

"But father likes us to go. It is the only time in the day when he really sees us. I think, perhaps, we ought to get dressed and be ready to go down."

"I will if you think so, Apollo; but I am very tired and sleepy."

"Well, I really do. We must not shirk things if we are to be a bit what mother wants us to be; and now that Aunt Jane has come, poor father may want us worse than ever."

"I never thought of that," replied Iris. "I'll run and get dressed at once, Apollo."

She flew away into a tiny little room of her own, which opened into the night-nursery.

"Susan," she called out, "will you please help me to put on my after-dinner frock?"

"You have only a white dress to wear this evening, miss; your new black one has not come home yet."

"A white one will be all right," replied Iris.

"Oh, dear me, miss! and your poor mother only a week dead."

"I wish, Susan, you would not talk of mother as dead," answered Iris. "I don't think of her like that a bit. She is in Heaven; she has gone up the golden stairs, and she is quite well and ever so happy, and she won't mind my wearing a white dress, more particular if I want to comfort father. Please help me on with it and then brush out my hair."

Iris had lovely hair--it was of a deep, rich chestnut, and it curled and curled, and waved and waved in rich profusion down her back. When Susan had brushed it, and taken the tangles out, it shone like burnished gold. Her pretty white frock was speedily put on, and she ran out of her

little room to join Apollo, who, in his black velvet suit, looked very picturesque and handsome.

Not long afterwards the little pair, taking each other's hands, ran down the broad, white marble stairs and entered the big dining room. They looked almost lost in the distance when they first appeared, for the table at which Mr. Delaney and Mrs. Dolman sat was far away in a bay window at the other end of the stately apartment.

"Hullo, children! so there you are!" called their father's voice to them. He had never been better pleased to see them in all his life, and the note of welcome in his tones found an answering echo in Iris' loving little heart.

They both tripped eagerly up the room and placed themselves one on each side of him, while Iris slipped her hand into his.

"Well, my chicks, I am right glad to see you," he said.

"Perhaps, David, you will remember how disgracefully late it is," said Mrs. Dolman. "Children, I must frankly say that I am *not* pleased to see you. What are you doing up at this hour?"

"We have come to keep father company," said Apollo, fixing his flashing black eyes, with a distinctly adverse expression in them, on his aunt's face.

"In my day," continued Aunt Jane complacently, helping herself to strawberries, "the motto was: 'Little boys should be seen and not heard.' To-night, of course, I make allowances; but things will be different presently. David, you surely are not giving those children wine?"

"Oh, they generally have a little sip each from my port," said Mr. Delaney; "it does not do them any harm."

"You may inculcate a taste," said Mrs. Dolman, in a very solemn voice. "In consequence of that little sip, which appears so innocent, those

children may grow up drunkards. Early impressions! Well, all I can say is this--when they come to live at the Rectory they will have to be teetotalers. In my house we are all teetotalers. My husband and I both think that we cannot have proper influence on the parishioners unless we do ourselves what we urge them to do."

Iris and Apollo both listened to these strange words with fast-beating hearts. What did they mean? Mrs. Dolman spoke of when they were to live at the Rectory. What rectory? She spoke of a time when they were to live with her. Oh, no; she must be mistaken. Nothing so perfectly awful could be going to happen.

Nevertheless, Iris could scarcely touch her wine, and she pushed aside the tempting macaroon which Mr. Delaney had slipped on to her plate. She found it impossible to eat.

Apollo, after a moment's hesitation, attacked his wine and swallowed his biscuit manfully; but even he had not his usual appetite.

After a short pause, Iris gave a gentle sigh and put both her arms round her father's neck.

"I am tired, father; I should like to go to bed."

"And I want to go too," said Apollo.

"Those are the first sensible remarks I have heard from either of the children," said Mrs. Dolman. "I should think they are dead tired for want of sleep, poor little mites. Good-night, both of you. When you come to live with me--ah! I see you are astonished; but we will talk of that pleasant little scheme to-morrow. Good-night to you both."

"Good-night, Aunt Jane," said Iris.

"Good-night, Aunt Jane," said Apollo.

"Good-night to you both, my pets," said Mr. Delaney.

Iris gave her father a silent hug, Apollo kissed him on the forehead--a moment later the little pair left the room. As soon as ever they had done so, Mrs. Dolman turned to her brother.

"Now then, David," she said, "you have got to listen to me; we may just as well settle this matter out of hand. I must return home on Thursday--and this is Tuesday evening. It will be impossible for you to stay on here with those four children and no one responsible to look after them. You appear half dead with grief and depression, and you want a thorough change. The place is going to rack and ruin. Your rent-roll, how much is it?"

"About fifteen thousand pounds a year--quite enough to keep me out of anxiety," said Mr. Delaney, with a grim smile.

"It ought to be twenty thousand a year--in our father's time it was quite that. No doubt you let your farms too cheap; and so much grass round the house is disgraceful. Now, if I had the management--"

"But you see you have not, Jane," said Mr. Delaney. "The property happens to belong to me."

"That is true, and I have a great deal too much on my mind to worry myself about Delaney Manor; but, of course, it is the old place, and you are my only brother, and I am anxious to help you in your great affliction. When you married you broke off almost all connection with me, but now--now I am willing to overlook the past. Do you, or do you not, intend those children to run wild any longer? Even though they are called after heathen idols they are flesh and blood, and it is to be hoped that some religious influence may be brought to bear on them. At the present moment, I conclude that they have none whatever."

"I never saw better children," said Mr. Delaney; "their mother brought them up as no one else could. In my opinion, they are nearly perfect."

"You talk nonsense of that kind because you are blinded by your fatherly affection. Now, let me assure you, in full confidence, that I never came across more neglected and more utterly absurd little creatures.

Good-looking they are--you are a fine-looking man yourself, and your wife was certainly pretty--the children take after you both. I have nothing to say against their appearance; but they talk utter gibberish; and as to that eldest little girl, if she is not given something sensible to occupy her I cannot answer for the consequence. My dear David, I don't want to interfere with your estate."

"You could not, Jane; I would not permit it."

"But with regard to the children, I really have experience. I have five children of my own, and I think, if you were to see them, you would be well assured that Iris and Diana, Apollo and Orion would do well to take example by them. We might change the names of the boys and give them titles not quite so terrible."

"I wish them to be called by the names their mother chose," said Mr. Delaney, with great firmness.

"Well, I suppose the poor children will live it down, but they will have a terrible time at school. However, they are too young for anything of that kind at present. Give me the children, David, and I will act as a mother to them; then pack up your belongings, put your estate into the hands of a good agent, and go abroad for some years."

"It would be an untold relief," said Mr. Delaney.

At that moment the door was opened, and the butler appeared with the evening post on a salver. Mr. Delaney laid the letters languidly by his plate.

"Shall we go into the drawing room, Jane?" he said.

Mrs. Dolman rose briskly.

"I shall retire early to bed," she said. "Read your letters, please, David; you need not stand on ceremony with me."

Mr. Delaney looked over his post; then his eyes lighted up as he saw the handwriting on one of the envelopes. He opened the letter in question, which immediately interested him vastly. It happened to be from an old friend, and certainly seemed to come at an opportune moment. This friend was about to start on an expedition to the Himalayas, and he begged his old fellow-traveler to go with him. His long letter, the enthusiastic way he wrote, the suggestions he threw out of possible and exciting adventures came just at the nick of time to the much-depressed and weary man.

"Why, I declare, Jane," he said, "this does seem to come opportunely." He walked over to where his sister was standing, and read a portion of the letter aloud. "If I might venture to trust my darlings to you," he said, "there is nothing in all the world I should like better than to accompany Seymour to the Himalayas. He starts in a fortnight's time, so there really is not a day to lose."

"Then, David," said Mrs. Dolman, "you will not allow this valuable opportunity to slip--you will trust your children to me. I assure you I will do my duty by them." She spoke with real sincerity, and tears absolutely dimmed her bright eyes. "David," she continued, "that letter seems a Providence; you will act upon it."

"It certainly does," said the man; "but, Jane, you will be good to the children--tender, I mean. Their mother has always been very gentle to them."

"You need not question me as to how I will treat them. I will bring them up as I would my own. I will do my utmost to rear them in the fear of God. David, this clinches the matter. Write to Mr. Seymour by this night's post."

Mr. Delaney promised to do so, and soon afterwards Mrs. Dolman, feeling that she had done a very good and excellent work, retired, in a thoroughly happy frame of mind, to her bedroom.

CHAPTER VI.

THE POOR DEAD 'UNS.

Mr. Delaney's bedroom faced east, and the following morning, at a very early hour, he began to have most unpleasant dreams. He thought a hobgoblin was seated on his chest, and several brownies were pulling him where he did not wish to go, and finally that a gnome of enormous dimensions was dragging him into a dark cavern, where he could never again behold the daylight. At last, in great perturbation, he opened his dazed eyes. The sight he saw seemed at first to be a continuation of his dream, but after a moment or two he discovered that the person who had become possessed of his chest was a small boy of the name of Orion, that a little black-eyed girl called Diana had comfortably ensconced herself on his knees, and that Iris and Apollo were seated one at each side of his pillow. The four children had all climbed up on to the big bedstead, and were gazing attentively at him.

"He is opening his eyes," said Orion, "he'll be all right after a minute or two. Don't hurry up, father; we can wait."

"We can wait quite well, father," said Diana; "and it's very comfable on your knees; they is so flat."

"We are awfully sorry to disturb you, father," said Iris.

"But we can't help it, because it's most solemnly important," said Apollo.

"So it seems," remarked Mr. Delaney, when he could at last find a voice.

"You have all subjected me to a terrible dream. I am really glad that I have awakened and find that the hobgoblins, and gnomes, and brownies are no less little people than my own four children. But why am I to be disturbed at such a very early hour?"

"If you like, father," said Diana, "we'll pull up all the blinds; then the hot, blazin' sun will come in, and you'll see that it's not early at all; it's late."

Mr. Delaney happened to glance at a clock which stood on the mantelpiece exactly facing the big bed.

"I read on the face of that clock," he said, "that the hour is half-past five. Now, what have you four little children to do, sitting on my bed at half-past five in the morning?"

When Mr. Delaney said this he shook himself slightly and upset Diana's balance, and made Orion choke with silent laughter. Iris and Apollo gazed at him gravely.

"We all made up our minds to do it," said Iris. "We have come to ask you to make a promise, father."

"A promise, my dear children! But you might have waited until the usual hour for getting up. What are you going to wring from me at this inclement moment?"

"I don't exactly know what inclement moment means," said Iris, "but I do know, and so does Apollo--"

"And so do I know all about it," shouted Diana. "You see, father," continued the little girl, who spoke rather more than any of the other children, "we has to think of the poor innocents, and the birds and the mice, and the green frogs, and our puppy, and our pug dog, and our--and our--" Here she fairly stammered in her excitement.

"Has a sudden illness attacked that large family?" said Mr. Delaney. "Please, children, explain yourselves, for if you are not sleepy, I am."

"Yes, father," said Iris, "we can explain ourselves quite easily. The thing is this--we don't want to go away."

"To go away? My dear children, what do you mean?" But as Mr. Delaney spoke he had a very uncomfortable memory of a letter which he had posted with his own hands on the previous evening.

"Yes," said Apollo; "we don't want to go away with her."

"And we don't wish for no aunts about the place," said Diana, clenching her little fist, and letting her big, black eyes flash.

"Now I begin to see daylight," said Mr. Delaney. "So you don't like poor Aunt Jane?"

"Guess we don't," said Orion. "She comed in last night and she made an awful fuss, and she didn't like me 'cos I'm Orion, and 'cos I'm a giant, and 'cos sometimes I has got no eyes. Guess she's afraid of me. I thought her a silly sort of a body."

"She's an aunt, and that's enough," said Diana. "I don't like no aunts; they are silly people. I want her to go."

"Apollo and I brought the two younger children," continued Iris, "because we thought it best for us all to come. It is not Aunt Jane being here that is so dreadful to me, and so very, very terrible to Apollo," she continued. "It's what she said, father, that we--we were to go away, away from the house and the garden--the garden where mother used to be, and the house where the angel came to fetch mother away--and we are to live with her. She spoke, father, as if it was settled; but it is not true, is it? Tell us, father, that it is not true."

"My poor little children!" said the father. His own ruddy and sunburnt face turned absolutely pale; there was a look in his eyes which Diana could not in the least understand, nor could Orion, and which even Apollo only slightly fathomed; but one glance told Iris the truth.

"When I am away you are to be a mother to the others," seemed at that moment to echo her mother's own voice in her ear. She gulped down a

great sob in her throat, and stretching herself by her father's side she put one soft arm round his neck.

"Never mind if it is *really* settled," she said. "I will try hard to bear it."

"You are about the bravest little darling in the world," said Mr. Delaney.

"What are you talking about, Iris?" cried Apollo, clutching his sister by her long hair as she spoke. "You say that you will try and bear it, and that father is not to mind? But father must mind. If I go to Aunt Jane Dolman's, why--why, it will kill me." And the most beautiful of all the heathen gods cast such a glance of scorn at his parent at that moment that Mr. Delaney absolutely quailed.

"For goodness' sake, Apollo, don't eat me up," he said. "The fact is this, children; I may as well have the whole thing out. Aunt Jane came last night and took me by surprise. I have been very lonely lately, and you know, you poor little mites, you cannot be left to the care of Fortune. She is a very good soul, but you want more than her to look after you, and then Miss Stevenson--I never did think her up to much."

"Father," said Apollo, "you have no right to abuse our spiritual pastors and masters."

Notwithstanding his heathenish name, it will be seen by this remark that some of his time was occupied learning the church catechism.

"I stand corrected, my son," said Mr. Delaney, "or, rather, at the present moment, I lie corrected. Well, children, the truth must out--Aunt Jane took me by surprise. She promises she will look after you and be a mother to you."

"We don't want no other mother, now that our own mother is gone, except Iris," said Apollo. "We won't have Aunt Jane for a mother."

"She is a howid old thing, and I hate aunts," said Diana.

"Well, children, I am very sorry for you, but it is too late to do anything now. The whole thing is arranged. I hope you will try to be good, and also to be happy with Aunt Jane. You won't find her half bad when you get to know her better, and of course I won't be very long away, and when I come back again--"

"Please don't say any more, father," interrupted Iris. She slipped off the bed and stood very pale and still, looking at her father with eyes which, notwithstanding all her efforts, were full of reproach.

"Come, children," she said to the others, "let poor father have his sleep out. It is quite early, father, and--and we understand now."

"Do say you are not angry with me, you dear little kids. I would not hurt you for the whole world."

"Of course we are not angry, father," said Iris. She bent slowly forward and kissed her father on his forehead. "Go to sleep, father; we are sorry we woke you so early."

"Yes, father, go to s'leep," echoed Diana. "I underland all 'bout it. You won't have no hobgoblins now to dweam about, for I has got off your knees. They was lovely and flat, and I didn't mind sitting on them one bit."

"All the same, Diana, I am obliged to you for getting off," said Mr. Delaney, "for I was beginning to get quite a terrible cramp, to say nothing of my sensations at having this giant Orion planting himself on my chest. I will have a long talk with you all, darlings, in the course of the day, and I do hope you won't be very unhappy with your Aunt Jane Dolman."

"We'll be mis'ble, but it can't be helped," said Diana. "I never did like aunts, and I'm never going to, what's more. Come 'long now, sildrens. It's a gweat nuisance getting up so early, particular when father can't help

hissself. Can you, father? Go to s'leep now, father. Come 'long this minute, back to bed, sildrens."

Diana looked really worthy of her distinguished name as she strode down the passage and returned to the night-nursery. She and Orion slipped into their respective little cots and lay down without waking either Fortune or Susan, who slept in beds at the opposite side of the room. Iris and Apollo also returned to their beds, and presently Apollo dropped asleep, for, though he had an alarming temper, his fits of passion never lasted long. But Iris did not close her bright brown eyes again that morning. She lay awake, full of troubled thoughts--thoughts far too old for her tender years.

It was one of Fortune's fads never on any occasion to awaken a sleeping child, and as the other children slept rather longer than usual after their early waking, breakfast was in consequence full half an hour late in the day-nursery that morning. At last, however, it was finished. No special lessons had been attended to since mother had gone away to the angels, and the children, snatching up their hats, rushed off as fast as possible to the garden. When they got there they all four breathed freely. This at least was their own domain--their fairyland, their country of adventure. From here they could travel to goodness only knew where--sometimes to the stars with bright Apollo and brave Orion--sometimes to happy hunting fields with Diana, the goddess of the chase, and sometimes they might even visit the rainbow, with sweet Iris as their companion.

There never were happier children than these four in that lovely, lovely beyond words, garden. When the children went into it, it seemed as if an additional ray of sunshine had come out to fill all the happy world with light and love and beauty. The bees hummed more industriously than ever, the flowers opened their sweet eyes and gazed at the children, the animals came round them in a group.

On this special morning, however, Diana's dear little face looked very grave and full of business.

"It's most 'citing," she said. "'Fore we does anything else we must 'tend to the funerals--there is such a lot of dead 'uns to bury this morning. Come 'long to the dead-house at once, Iris."

"I must smell the Scotch roses first," answered Iris.

"You can do that afterwards, can't you? There's poor Rub-a-Dub. We has to 'cide whether he is to have a public or a pwivate funeral, or whether he is just to be sewn up in dock leaves, and put into the gwound p'omisc's."

Diana had a great facility for taking up long words, which she always used in the most matter-of-fact style, not in the least caring how she pronounced them.

The other children could not help laughing at her now, and the four hurried off as fast as they possibly could to the dead-house.

This unpleasantly named abode was in reality a pretty little shed in one corner of the old garden. It contained a door with lock and key, a nice little window, and everything fitted up for the keeping of tools and carpenters' implements. Long ago, however, the children decided that here the dead animals of all sorts and species were to be kept until the solemn moment of interment.

Iris looked just as grave as the others when she unlocked the door of the dead-house now, and they all entered. The dead 'uns were decently laid out on a shelf, just in front of the public view. There was a dead bee, and two butterflies; there were two dead worms and a dead toad; also three or four beetles in different stages of decomposition, and a terribly crushed spider--and solemnly lying in the midst of his dead brethren lay Rub-a-Dub, the precious and dearly loved piebald mouse.

"They look beautiful, poor darlin's," said Diana; "they will most fill up the cemetery. Now please, Iris, which is to have a public funeral?"

"Of course Rub-a-Dub must," answered Iris. "As to the others--"

"Don't you think that poor toad, Iris?" said Diana, wrinkling up her brows, and gazing anxiously at her sister. "The toad seems to me to be rather big to have only a pwivate funeral. We could scarcely get dock leaves enough."

"We must try," answered Iris; "the toad must be buried privately with the others. We always make it a rule--don't you remember, Di--only to give public funerals to our own special pets."

"All wight," answered Diana. She was very easily brought round to accept Iris' view. In her heart of hearts she considered Iris' verdict like the laws of the Medes and Persians--something which could not possibly be disputed.

"Run, Orion!" she said; "be quick, and fetch as many dock leaves as possible. I will thread a needle so as to sew up the poor dead 'uns in their coffins. We must get through the pwivate funerals as quick as possible this morning, and then we'll be weady for poor Rub-a-Dub."

"Rub-a-Dub is to be buried exactly at eleven o'clock," said Iris.

"We'll all wear mourning, course?" asked Diana.

"Yes; black bows."

"And are the dogs and the other animals to wear mourning?"

"Black bows," repeated Iris.

"That is most lovely and 'citing," said Diana.

Orion left the dead-house, and presently returned with a great pile of dock leaves. Then the children sat down on the floor and began to sew

coffins for the different dead 'uns. They were accustomed to the work and did it expeditiously and well. When all the poor dead 'uns were supplied with coffins they were carried in a tray across the garden to the far-famed cemetery. Here they were laid in that part of the ground apportioned to private funerals. Apollo made small holes with his spade, and each dead 'un in his small coffin was returned to mother earth. The ground was immediately covered over, and Apollo trampled on it with his feet. He did this on the present occasion with right good will. "I'll be rather glad when the funerals are over," he said, looking at Iris as he spoke, "for I want to get on with my ship. I have got hold of some canvas the gardener brought me from town, and I really believe I may be able to make a funnel and a place for boiling water. You would like to see my ship when it is afloat; would you not, Iris?"

"Yes; very much indeed," answered Iris.

"I call ships stupid," said Diana. "I don't see no use in 'em. Now, do let us hurry back. Poor Rub-a-Dub will be so lonely."

"It's you who is silly now," said Orion. "You know Rub-a-Dub can't feel; don't you, Di?"

"I know nothing 'bout it," said Diana. "I want to hurry back to get his beautiful public funeral weedy. Now, look here, 'Rion; will you go into the house to steal the cotton wool, or shall I?"

"What is that I hear?" said a voice which seemed to come from right over the children's heads.

They all looked up in alarm, to see Aunt Jane Dolman and their father standing close by. Mr. Delaney wore an amused, and Aunt Jane a scared expression.

"What were you saying, little girl?" she continued, taking Diana by her arm and giving her a slight shake; "that you wished to *steal* something?"

"Yes; some cotton wool," said Diana; "it's most 'portant; it's for a public funeral."

Mrs. Dolman turned her round black eyes on her brother. Horror was expressed in each movement of her face.

"My dear Jane," he said, *sotto voce*, "there are several things which these children do which will astonish you very much. Don't you think you had better give up the scheme?"

"Not I, David," she replied. "The more I see of the poor neglected mites the more I long to rescue them from evident destruction."

He shook his head and looked with some pity at Iris.

"Shall Orion go to steal the cotton wool?" repeated Diana, who looked as if it was impossible for anyone in this world to terrify her in the very least.

"If it must be stolen, and if you ask me," said Mr. Delaney, "perhaps Orion may as well be the thief as anyone else. In the old times of the heathen deities I believe they did now and then stoop to that small crime."

"David, it is appalling to hear you speak," said Mrs. Dolman. "Orion, I hate to pronounce your name, but listen to me, little boy. I forbid you to go if you are bent on theft."

"But I must go," said Orion. "Poor Rub-a-Dub must be buried, and I must have a box for his coffin and cotton wool to lay him in."

"See here, Orion," said the father; "where do you get the cotton wool?"

"We gen'ly get it from Fortune's box in the night-nursery," replied Orion.

"And you steal it?"

"Oh, yes; she would make *such* a fuss if we asked her for some. We always steal it for public funerals."

"Well, on this occasion, and to spare your aunt's feelings, tell Fortune that I desire her to give you some."

"Now, Jane," continued Mr. Delaney, "as you are here, and as I am here, we may both of us as well witness this ceremony. The children are fond of doing all honor to their pets, even after the supreme moment of dissolution. Shall we witness this public funeral?"

Mrs. Dolman looked wonderfully inclined to say "No," but as her object now was to humor her brother as far as possible, she agreed very unwillingly to wait.

Accordingly he and she began to pace up and down the lovely garden, and soon, in the interest which the sight of the unforgotten playground of her youth excited within her, her brow cleared, and she became pleasant and even talkative. The two were in the midst of a very interesting conversation, and were pacing up and down not far from the summer-house, when Orion's clear voice was heard. "The public funeral is going to begin," he shouted, "so you had best come along if you want to see it. If you don't, Diana and me, and Apollo and Iris--why, we don't care."

"Oh, we'll come, you rude little body," said his father, laughing and chuckling as he spoke. "You mark my words, Jane," he continued, "you will have a handful with those children."

"Oh, I'll manage them," said Mrs. Dolman. "I have not lived my thirty-five years for nothing; they certainly need managing, poor little spoilt creatures."

They both hurried to the cemetery, where Apollo was standing, having dug a grave nearly a foot deep, and large enough to hold a square

cardboard box. He stood leaning on his spade now, his hat pushed off, his handsome little face slightly flushed with the exercise, his eyes full of a sort of gloomy defiance. But now the funeral procession was coming on apace. Orion's mouth was much puffed out because he was blowing vigorously on his Jew's harp, Diana followed him beating a little drum, and Iris, with long black ribbons fastened to her flowing chestnut locks, was walking behind, carrying the tiny coffin. Iris, as she walked, rang an old dinner bell in a very impressive manner, and also sang a little dirge to the accompaniment of the bell and the two other children's music. These were the words Iris sang:

"Ding-a-dong, Rub-a-Dub's dead; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub. Sleep well in your little bed; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub.

"We'll put a stone at your head and your feet; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub. And you shall sleep very sound and sweet; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub. And you'll never know fear any more; Little dear; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub."

Iris was a poet on occasions, and she had made up these impressive lines in great haste while the other children were arranging minor details of the funeral.

As the mourning party approached the open grave, Apollo came forward and dropped on his knees. The coffin was supplied with strings of white satin ribbon, and was lowered with great solemnity into the grave. Then the four mourners stood over it and each of them sang the last words of Iris' poem:

"And you'll never know fear any more, Little dear; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub."

The moment this was over flowers were strewn upon the box, and Apollo with great vigor began to shovel in the earth.

"Make a nice high mound," said Diana; "let it look as like a weal gwave as possible." Then she turned eagerly to her sister. "When are we to see about making the tombstone for the head and the feet?" she asked.

"We'll talk it over this evening," answered Iris.

It may here be noted that none of the four mourners took the slightest notice of Mr. Delaney or of Mrs. Dolman. To them it was as if these two grown-up spectators did not exist--they were all lost in their own intensely important world.

"Well," said Mrs. Dolman, as she turned away with her brother, "of all the heathenish and wicked nonsense that I was ever permitted to witness, this beats everything. It is a right good thing--yes, I will say it frankly, David--that you are going abroad, and that your benighted children are handed over to me. When you come back in a year or two--I assure you, my dear brother, I do not wish to hurry you--but when you come back in a few years you will see, please Providence, very different children waiting to welcome you."

"Well, Jane," said David Delaney, "I have arranged to give the children to you, and I hope to Heaven I am doing right; but do not spoil them whatever you do, for to me and to their sainted mother they were ever the sweetest little quartette that breathed the breath of life." Mr. Delaney's eyes filled with sudden tears as he said these words. "Good-by, Rub-a-Dub," he whispered as he left the garden. "Yes, there are many good-bys in the air just now."

CHAPTER VII.

BUT ANN COULD NOT HELP LETTING OUT NOW AND THEN.

The Rectory at Super-Ashton was a large, sunny, cheerful house. It was filled with every modern convenience, and possessed plenty of rooms papered with light, bright-looking papers, and painted also in cheerful colors. The windows were large and let in every scrap of sunshine; the passages and hall and stairs were broad and roomy; the nurseries and the children's rooms were models of comfort; the servants were all well behaved and thoroughly accustomed to their duties; the meals were punctual to a moment; in fact, nothing was left to chance at Super-Ashton Rectory.

Mrs. Dolman was the life and soul of this extremely orderly English home. She was one of the most active little women in the world. She invariably got up, summer and winter, soon after six o'clock, and might be seen bustling about the house, and bustling about the garden, and bustling about the parish from that moment until she retired to rest again, somewhere between ten and eleven at night. She was never exactly cross, but she was very determined. She had strict ideas, and made everyone in the parish not only respect her and look up to her, but live up to her rule of life. She was, as a matter of fact, thought a great deal more of by the parishioners than her husband, the Reverend William Dolman, and the real Rector of Super-Ashton.

Mr. Dolman was a very large man, tall in stature and broad. He was also fat and loosely built. He had a kindly face and a good-humored way of talking. He preached very fair sermons on Sundays, and attended to his duties, but without any of the enthusiasm which his wife displayed.

When Mrs. Dolman wrote to her husband to say that she was returning home with the four little Delaneys, it caused considerable excitement at the breakfast table. Five little hearts beat considerably faster than usual; but so great were the order and regularity of the household that the five little faces to which the hearts belonged remained apparently impassive.

Miss Ramsay, the governess, was presiding at the head of the table. The Dolman girls were neatly dressed in print frocks with white pinafores; the boys wore holland blouses and knickerbockers. The boys happened to be the two youngest of the family, and none of the children had yet gone to school. The name and ages of the five were as follows: First came Lucy, aged twelve; then Mary, aged ten; then Ann, aged nine; then Philip and Conrad, aged respectively seven and a half and six. The faces of the whole five bore a curious resemblance to both father and mother, the eldest girl having the round, black eyes of her mother, and the large, somewhat irregular features of the father. Mary resembled Lucy in being fat and largely built, but her eyes were blue instead of black; while little Ann had a small face, with gray eyes and rather sensitive lips. The complexions of the three were fair, and their good looks were rather above the average. They were proper, neat-looking little girls, and, notwithstanding their inward excitement, they ate their breakfast tidily, and took good care not to express any emotion before Miss Ramsay or their good-natured father.

"Yes," said Mr. Dolman, looking at them, and pushing his spectacles up on his forehead, "yes, that is the news. Your mother returns to-night, and the four Delaneys with her. Let me see what else she says." He replaced his spectacles on his nose and looked over his wife's letter again. "These are the very words," he said; "Observe, Miss Ramsay, that I read from the letter. 'I return by the train which reaches Super-Ashton at six o'clock, and will bring the four Delaneys with me.' Four, you see, Lucy; that is the number. But mamma does not mention the sex of the children. How

many boys or how many girls? I really am quite out of date with regard to your cousins, my love."

"But I know all about them, papa," burst from Ann's eager lips.

"You forget your French, Ann," said Miss Ramsay, laying her hand on the little girl's arm. "You will be punished if you speak English again at meals."

Ann colored and dropped her eyes. She began to eat her bread and butter hastily; she longed beyond words to tell the others the knowledge she had secretly acquired about her cousins the Delaneys.

"Please send the wagonette to the station," continued Mr. Dolman, reading his wife's letter, and holding it close to his eyes, "and--yes, the cart for the luggage, as the children'--um, um, um, that part is private, my dears."

Mr. Dolman dropped his spectacles and nodded at the eager little group round the table.

"Well," he continued, "I am glad mamma is coming home. I have really been quite bothered by the parishioners since she went away. There is always a vast deal of work left undone when mamma is absent, eh, children? eh, Miss Ramsay?"

"I agree with you, Mr. Dolman," said Miss Ramsay. "Mrs. Dolman does not spare herself; she will have her reward some day."

"God grant it!" said Mr. Dolman, with a heavy sigh. "She certainly will need rest whenever she does leave this world, for I never did come across such an active woman."

He left the room, hitching up his huge shoulders as he did so, and slammed the door noisily behind him.

"Papa would not do that if mamma were here," whispered Philip to Ann.

Ann said "Hush!" in a frightened tone, and then Miss Ramsay folded her hands as an intimation to the children that the meal was at an end, and that one of them was to say grace.

Immediately after breakfast they went upstairs to the schoolroom, and lessons began, just as if no four little Delaneys were to arrive to turn everything topsy-turvy that evening.

Lessons proceeded without any interruption until twelve o'clock. Then the three little girls retired to the neat bedroom which they shared together, and put on their sun-bonnets, their white capes, and their washing-gloves, and came back again to Miss Ramsay, equipped for their walk. The boys, with straw hats sticking very far back on their heads, were also waiting Miss Ramsay's pleasure in the hall downstairs. The children and the governess went out walking solemnly two and two, Miss Ramsay and Conrad in front, Lucy and Mary following, with Ann and Philip behind.

It was a hot day; but Miss Ramsay never excused the morning walk on the dusty highroads. The children came in very much flushed and tired at one o'clock for dinner. They assembled again in the big, cool dining room and ate their roast mutton and peas and new potatoes, and rice pudding and stewed fruit with the propriety of children who have been thoroughly well brought up.

At dinner French was again the only language allowed to be spoken. In consequence there was a sad dearth of any conversation at that dinner table.

After dinner Mr. Dolman told Miss Ramsay that he had given orders about the wagonette, and he supposed Simpson knew about the sleeping arrangements, as he was given to understand that she had received a letter from Mrs. Dolman.

"I have spoken to Simpson," replied Miss Ramsay, dropping her eyes as she made the remark, "and she fully understands what is expected of her. The two girls are to have small rooms to themselves, and so is the eldest boy, but the youngest will sleep in the nursery with Philip and Conrad. Those are Mrs. Dolman's directions."

"Quite right, quite right," said Mr. Dolman. "Anything Mrs. Dolman wishes, of course. Miss Ramsay, I shall not be home to tea this evening. I have to go to visit a sick parishioner at the other end of the parish. Good-by, Lucy; good-by, the rest of you children. I hope to see you all before bedtime; if not--"

"But, father," burst from Ann, "the new children will be here about six."

"They cannot arrive before half-past six, my dear," replied Mr. Dolman.

"Ann, you have again spoken English," said Miss Ramsay; "I shall be forced to punish you. You will have to stay in after the others this afternoon, and learn ten lines of your French poetry."

Poor little Ann colored and her lips trembled. She really felt dreadfully excited, and it was terrible to have to bottle up all her thoughts during the long, hot day.

Immediately after dinner the children went up to the schoolroom, where they lay down on the floor for half an hour to learn their lessons.

At three o'clock the ordinary lessons began again, and went on without interruption until five, when there was tea. After tea the children were supposed to have the rest of the day to do what they liked in. But on this occasion, Ann was kept in the schoolroom to learn her French poetry as best she could. The ten lines were difficult, and the little girl felt sleepy, cross, and dissatisfied. Soon her small, curly head fell upon her plump arms, and sleep took possession of her little soul.

Miss Ramsay came in and found her in a state of heavy slumber.

"Ann!" she cried; "Ann!"

Little Ann raised herself with a start.

"Oh, please, Miss Ramsay, won't you excuse the French poetry to-day," she cried; "I am so--"

"So what, Ann? I am surprised at you. What can be the matter?"

"I am *so* excited about the little Delaneys," answered Ann. "They are coming so soon, and they are my own first cousins--I seem to see them all the day--they come between me and--and my poetry. Please, Miss Ramsay, if you'll only allow me I'll get up early to-morrow morning and learn it perfectly. Do say I need not finish it this afternoon--do, please."

Miss Ramsay was astonished and annoyed at this rebellion on the part of Ann.

"You surprise me," she said. "You know that lessons have to be done during lesson hours, and that rules are not to be broken. You know what your mother would say if she heard you talking English at meals. Twice to-day you broke through that rule. The first time I pardoned you--the second time it was unpardonable. Now, my dear, apply yourself to your task--get it well over, and you will doubtless be ready to welcome your cousins when they arrive."

Miss Ramsay left the room. Ann shed a few tears, and then, seeing there was no help for it, applied herself with all her might and main to learning her appointed task. She got her poetry by heart after a fashion, and, hastily replacing the book in the bookcase, ran out of the schoolroom. She saw Lucy and Mary pacing up and down the terrace in front of the house. They were in clean white frocks, with sashes round their waists, and their hair was very trimly brushed and curled over their heads. Their faces shone from soap and water, and even at that distance Ann could perceive that their hands were painfully, terribly clean. In her heart of

hearts Ann hated clean hands; they meant so much that was unpleasant--they meant that there must be no grubbing in the garden, no searching for dear little weeds and small flowers, and all kinds of delicious, unexpected things in mother earth. In her heart of hearts Ann had a spark of originality of her own, but it had little chance of flourishing under the treatment so carefully pursued at Super-Ashton.

Philip and Conrad might also be seen on the terrace in their clean linen blouses and fresh knickerbockers; their hands were also carefully washed, their hair brushed back from their faces, the faces themselves shining from soap and water.

"Oh, dear! there's no help for it," thought little Ann, "I must go into the nursery and let Simpson pull me about. How she will scrub me and tug at my hair, and put on such a horrid starched dress, and it's so hot to-night! Well, if I hurry I may be in time to tell Philip what I know about their names. Oh, how delicious it will be! He'll be so excited. Yes, I'll be as quick as possible."

Ann ran down the long passage which led from the schoolroom to the nursery, opened the door, and approached a prim old servant with a somewhat cross face, who was busily engaged mending stockings.

"Please, Simpson, here I am. Will you dress me?" said Ann, panting as she spoke.

Simpson laid down her work with deliberation.

"Now, I wonder, Miss Ann," she said, "why I am to be put about for you. I have just finished dressing all the other children. Why didn't you come with the others? There, miss, you must just dress yourself, for I can't and won't be worried; these stockings must be finished before the mistress comes home."

"All right," answered Ann, in a cheerful tone. "I can wash myself beautifully. May I go into the night-nursery, please, Simpson, and do my best?"

"Yes, my dear. You'll find a white frock hanging in the wardrobe. I'll fasten it for you after you have washed yourself and combed out your hair. Now, do be quick. I would help you willingly, Miss Ann, only I really have not a minute to spare; Master Philip and Master Conrad are dreadful with their socks, and when the mistress comes with that fresh family, goodness knows when I shall have a moment to see to your clothes again."

Ann dressed herself, and ran back to Simpson.

"Simpson," she said, as that good woman was fastening the hooks and eyes at the back of her frock, "I know it is wrong to be so much excited, but I am. My heart beats awfully fast at the thought of their coming."

"Well, Miss Ann, it's more than my heart does. And now, miss, if you'll take a word of advice from me, you'll keep your feelin's to yourself, as far as your ma is concerned. Your ma don't wish any of you to give way to excitement. She wants you to grow up steady, well-conducted young ladies."

"I hate being a well-conducted young lady," burst from little Ann.

"Oh, dear me, miss! it's dreadful to hear you talk so unproper. Now stand still and don't fidget."

The frock was fastened, and Ann ran off to join her brothers and sisters on the terrace.

Lucy and Mary were little girls after their mother's own heart. They never questioned her wishes, they never rebelled against her rules, they were as good and well-behaved as any two little English maids of the respective

ages of twelve and ten could be. Now, as little Ann approached, they looked at her as if they thought her quite beneath their notice.

"Oh, do go away, Ann!" said Lucy. "Mary and I are talking secrets, and we don't want you."

"You are always talking secrets," said Ann. "It's horrid unfair to me."

"We have got to talk things over. We can't confide in you; you're the youngest. Please don't be disagreeable now. We are having a most important talk. Please run away at once."

Ann looked beseeching, but then, all of a sudden, her eyes fell upon Philip. She turned, ran up to him, clutched him by the arm, and pulled him away from Conrad.

"Phil," she said, "I want to have you all to myself. I have something terribly exciting to say."

Philip looked from Conrad to Ann.

"But you are always getting into hot water, Ann," he replied, "and Con and I were talking about our fishes. We think if we are very careful with our pocket-money we may have enough to buy some gold and silver fish in the holidays."

"Yes, yes," answered Ann impetuously; "buy any kind of fish you like. Only, Con, like a dear, good boy, please go and walk at the other end of the terrace for five minutes. I must speak to someone or I'll burst."

"How awfully vulgar you are, Ann!" said Lucy, who happened to pass by, with Mary leaning on her arm, at that moment.

But Philip felt flattered at Ann's evident anxiety to be alone with him.

"Go and do as you are told, Conrad," he said, in lofty tones; "go to the other end of the terrace at once."

"It's rather hard on me," said Conrad. "I like having secrets as well as anybody else; the air is full of secrets to-day--why shouldn't I have some?"

"I'll have a secret with you by and by," said Ann, "if you'll only go away now."

The little boy looked at her, saw she was in earnest, and obeyed somewhat unwillingly.

"Now then, Ann," said Philip, "speak out; be as quick as ever you can."

"Philip," said Ann, in a solemn voice, "don't you want to know all about the children who are coming to-night?"

"Is that what the secret is about?" said Philip in disgust. "Do you know, Ann, what I heard Miss Ramsay say to Simpson to-day. She said that the new children would be awful bothers, and that *she* for one does not know if she is going to stay, and Simpson said she was sure that she would give notice too. Miss Ramsay said it was an awful shame bringing four children to the house, and Simpson threw up her hands. You know how she looks when she throws up her hands. And she said, 'Them's my sentiments, Miss Ramsay.' Do you know what she meant by 'Them's my sentiments,' Ann, 'cos I don't? I never heard such funny words before. Did you, Ann?"

"No," said Ann; "but you ought not to have listened, Phil."

"Oh, I often listen!" replied Philip calmly. "I get to know all kinds of funny things that way, and they turn out no end useful. I know lots of things about Miss Ramsay, and since I just let her know that I did, she is not half so hard on me. That's how I find listening useful."

"Well, it is not right," said Ann, "but I have no time to argue with you now, Phil; I want to talk about the children. Whatever Simpson says, and whatever Miss Ramsay says, I am delighted that they are coming. I think

it will be fun. In my heart, you know, Phil, I love fun, and I want to be able to talk English sometimes, and Phil, would, *would* you like to know their names?"

"Their names?" said Philip. "I suppose they have names, although I never thought about them."

"Well, of course they have, and I'll tell you what they are. They have got lovely names; once I heard mother say that the whole four of them were called after heathen idols. Isn't it awful and exciting to be called after a heathen idol? Oh, Phil! they have such lovely names!"

Philip was not much interested in heathen idols, but Ann's excited face and her bright blue eyes did strike him as out of the common.

"Well, you are in a state," he said. "What creatures girls are! You'll catch it when mother comes home. You know she never can stand anybody all jumpy, and jerky, and quivery, like you are now. Well, what are the names? Out with them and get them over."

"Iris is the name of the eldest girl," said Ann. "Then comes Apollo--he is a boy."

"I'll never be able to get hold of that name," said Philip. "Apollo! how queer."

"But it is not queer, really," said Ann, delighted at having roused his real interest at last. "Of course, Apollo is very well known indeed. He was a sort of beautiful god long ago."

"But this boy is not a god--horrid little beggar," said Philip. "Well, what are the names of the others?"

"There is a girl called Diana."

"Diana," repeated Philip. "There's nothing in that name. That name is in the Bible. Miss Ramsay read the whole story aloud to us last Sunday

when the beastly rain kept dropping and dropping all day long. 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians.' I rather like the sound, but there's nothing at all in a name of that sort, Ann."

"Well, I didn't say there was," answered Ann. "I only think it awfully pretty."

"I don't think much of it for an ordinary girl. Well, now, what is the other name? I'll call Conrad back, if you are not quick."

"I'll tell it to you. Look here, Phil, I bet you never heard a name like it."

"You bet?" said Philip. "Oh, if mamma only heard you!"

"For goodness' sake, don't tell her," said Ann. "I can't help letting out sometimes, and it does relieve me so. The name of the other boy is Orion, and he is called after a cluster of stars. I do know that much. And oh, Phil! Phil! Phil! they are coming! they are coming!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRAW TOO MUCH.

The crunching of wheels was heard distinctly on the gravel, and the next moment the wagonette swept into view. The horses drew up with a flourish at the front door of the pretty Rectory, and the five little Dolmans rushed forward.

"Stand back, children, and allow your cousins to get comfortably out of the carriage," called out Mrs. Dolman. "No excitement, I beg, from any of you--I have had quite enough of that already. Stand quietly just where you are. Lucy, where is Miss Ramsay?"

"Up in her room, I think, mamma. Shall I call her?"

"Not at present, although she ought to have been here. Now, Iris, get out quietly--quietly, my dear. Apollo, give me your hand, you come next; now, Diana--easy, little girl, easy--you will fall, if you jump like that."

"I think nothing of a little easy hop like that, aunt," replied Diana. She sprang from the carriage, disdaining the use of the steps. When she found herself on the gravel sweep she stood very firmly on her two fat legs and looked her five cousins all over.

"You aren't none of you much to boast," she said; "I'd wather have the animals." Then she turned her back and gazed around her at the view.

Meanwhile, Orion was being helped out of the carriage. He was also very sturdy and independent, and felt half inclined to follow Diana's spirited example; but Mrs. Dolman would not permit this. She took the youngest of the little heathen gods firmly into her arms and deposited him on the gravel.

"There you are, little boy," she said, giving him a slight shake as she did so, "and I do trust you will behave yourself."

Orion ran up to Diana and took hold of her hand. Diana took no notice of him, but continued to admire the view.

Mrs. Dolman's face was quite red. She was very tired after her long journey, and she had found the little Delaneys not the easiest traveling companions in the world. It is true that Iris had been as good as possible, but between whiles she had cried a good deal, and her sad face, and somewhat reproachful expression, seemed to hurt Mrs. Dolman even more than the really obstreperous, and at times violent, behavior of her brothers and sister; for the fact is, the other three little Delaneys had not yet got the slightest idea into their heads that they were bound to obey Mrs. Dolman. Far from this; a sudden and extreme naughtiness had taken possession of their unruly little hearts. Even Iris' gentle words had no effect on them. They hated Aunt Jane; considering her, in their heart of hearts, extremely cruel and unworthy of affection. Had she not parted them at one blow from their father, their home, their lovely garden, even from poor Fortune, who was better than nobody, and, above all, from their darling, precious pets? They had none of them been broken-hearted children when their mother died, but they all, even Iris, felt broken-hearted now. But this fact did not prevent their being extremely naughty and rebellious, and when Diana felt Orion's hand clutching hers, she whispered to him in an indignant voice:

"Come 'long, 'Rion, let's have a wun--my legs is so stiff; and, Orion, I has got the box, and we can open it when we is away by our own two selves."

"What are you talking about, little children?" questioned Mary Dolman.

"You mean to run away all by yourselves. But you must do nothing of the sort. This is not the hour for running about in the open air. There is supper ready for us all in the dining room, but I think mamma would like you first to go upstairs and have your faces and hands washed. If you will follow me, I'll show you where to go."

"Thank you, Mary," said Mrs. Dolman, who had overheard her daughter. "Ann, my dear, what are you staring at me for? Go and help your cousins. Now, you four children, follow Lucy and Ann to your rooms, where my servant, Simpson, will attend upon you. Go, children, at once. If there is any naughtiness, remember I shall have to punish you severely."

"What do she mean by that?" said Diana, fixing her eyes on Mary's face. "I never did like aunts. Is she your aunt?"

"No; she is my mother," said Mary, "and you must not speak in that tone of mamma."

"I'll speak in any tone I p'ease," replied Diana. "Ise not going to be fwightened. But what do she mean by punish? Who will she punish?"

"She will punish you," replied Mary. "Were you never punished?"

"Never. I don't know what it means. Is it nasty?"

"Oh, isn't it!" said Philip, who came up at that moment. "What a lark it will be to see you punished, Diana. I wonder when your first time will come? I expect rather soon. You had best obey mamma, I can tell you, and papa too; if you don't, you'll just catch it hot."

"Boo!" replied Diana, "you is a silly boy." Then she turned to Mary. "I is awfu' tired and s'eeepy," she said. "I'd like to go stwaight to bed."

"You must have supper first. Did you not hear mamma say so? Now, come along with me."

Mary held out her hand, which Diana, after a momentary hesitation, condescended to take.

Meanwhile, Ann had gone up to Iris.

"Would you not like me to show you your room, cousin?" she said; "and please, I want to say how very glad I am that you have come."

A faint tinge of delicate color came into Iris' sweet little face at these words--they were the first attempt at a real welcome she had received. She held out her hand to Ann without a word, and the Delaneys and Dolmans entered the cheerful Rectory in a body. The four little strangers, accompanied by Mary and Ann, went upstairs, where Simpson was waiting for them. Simpson was feeling very cross at the arrival of four additional children, but when she saw Diana's tired face, and the tears on Iris' pale cheeks, and the defiant, and yet baby look in Orion's bright eyes, something came over her which she could not quite account for, and she suddenly became kind and agreeable.

"Come, my dears," she said; "why, you must all be dead tired, you poor little mites. Come now--come in here. And what are your names?"

"I am Iris," replied the eldest little girl in a sweet voice.

"Iris!" repeated Simpson; "and what's your name, young master?"

"Apollo," answered the little boy, flinging back his dark head and fixing his handsome eyes upon the woman.

"My word! that's a queer sort of name--outlandish, I call it!" ejaculated Simpson. "And now, missy, I expect you are called Baby?"

"No, I aren't," replied Diana. "I is the gweat Diana; I has got a bow and arrow, and I'll shoot you if you is not kind."

"Oh, lor'! Now, missy, you would not be so cruel as that?"

"Yes, I would," replied Diana. "See this box in my hand? It's an awfu' pwecious box--it has got spiders in it and two beetles. May I put the poor darlin's loose in my room?"

Now, if Simpson had a horror, it was of spiders and beetles.

"You keep that box shut, miss," she said, "for if you dare to open it in your bedroom I'll just go straight down and tell my mistress."

"And then you'll get punished, Diana," said Mary, in her most annoying voice.

"Is you a cousin?" asked Diana, by way of reply.

"Certainly I am." Mary opened her round eyes in some astonishment.

"Is you my cousin?"

"Yes; I am your first cousin."

"First cousin," repeated Diana. She flung off her hat and threw it on the floor.

"Orion," she said, turning to her little brother, "you take good care of our pwecious box. And what is you?" she continued, raising her eyes to Simpson's face.

"Well, my dear, at the present moment I am the nurse, and ready to wash you and look after you, and make you comfortable."

"Then I wishes to say something," remarked Diana. "I wishes to say it bold, and I wishes to say it soon. I hate cousins, more 'specially first, and I hate nurses. There, now, you can go downstairs, first cousin, and tell aunt, and she can punish me. I don't care. You can tell your mamma just what you p'ease."

Diana strutted across the room, deposited her box on the washhand-stand, and then, turning round once again, began to view the company. What might have happened at that moment there is no saying, if Iris had not come to the rescue.

"Please don't mind her," she said; "she is only a very little child and she has gone through great trouble, for our mother--our own mother--she has left us, you know. Diana does not really mean to be rude. Please let me talk to her. Di, darling, come to me, come to Iris."

It was impossible to resist Iris when she spoke in that tone, and when she looked at Diana with her speaking dark eyes, and that gentle, beautiful expression on her little face, it seemed to Diana then as if the hard journey, and the pain of all the partings had never taken place at all. She rushed up to her sister, clasped her fat arms round her neck, and began to sob.

"Poor little thing, she is dreadfully tired!" said Iris. "If I might have a little bread and milk to give her, and then if she might be put to bed, I know she would fall asleep immediately and be quite herself in the morning."

"Indeed, miss, I think you are right," said Simpson, who could not help gazing at Iris with admiration. "I see you are a very kind little sister, and of course no one ought to mind the words of a mere baby. I'll take it upon me, miss, to do what you suggest, even though my missus may be angry. Oh, my word! there's the supper gong. You must go down at once, Miss Iris, you really must. I cannot answer for two of you being absent, but I will speak to Mrs. Dolman afterwards, and tell her that I just put Miss Diana straight to bed, for she was much too sleepy to go downstairs again."

"But I won't let you leave me, Iris," almost screamed Diana, tightening her arms round her sister's neck.

"Please let me stay here," said Iris. "I do not really want any supper, and I know how to manage her. She has gone through a great deal."

"Well, miss, do you dare?"

"Oh, I dare anything! I am quite positive certain Aunt Jane won't mind when I tell her my own self what I have done."

"I will tell mamma; she shan't mind," said little Ann suddenly.

Iris looked up at her and smiled--Ann smiled back at her. The hearts of the two little cousins were knit together in real love from that moment.

The gong sounded again downstairs, and this time in a distinctly angry manner. The three Dolman girls and the two Delaney boys had to hurry off as fast as they could, and then Iris undressed Diana and put her into her snug little white bed.

"I is drefful unhappy, Iris," said Diana, as she laid her head on her pillow.

"But you won't be in the morning, Diana. You'll feel brave and strong and bright in the morning, just like the dear name mother gave you."

"Oh, p'ease, p'ease, will you see that the spiders and beetles has somethin' to eat? They is so far from home, poor darlin's, and they has come a drefful long journey, and they may be deaded in the morning if nothing's not done for 'em. P'ease see to 'em; won't you, Iris?"

"Yes," replied Iris.

"Very well. Now, I'll say my pwayers and go stwaight off to s'leep. P'ease, God, b'ess Di, make her good girl. Amen. Good-night, Iris."

The next moment the little girl had gone away into the world of happy slumber and innocent dreams. She knew nothing whatever about what poor Iris, to her dismay, soon discovered, namely, that Simpson had marched off with the box which contained the spiders and beetles. That box, with its contents, was never found again. It was the straw too much, as Simpson expressed it afterwards.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PUNISHMENT CHAMBER.

The next morning matters began by being a little better, and might have gone on being so but for Diana. The four little Delaneys had slept well, and were refreshed; and as the sun was shining brightly, and there was a pleasant breeze blowing, Mrs. Dolman decided that all the nine children might have a holiday in order to get acquainted with one another. It did not seem so very dreadful to Iris and Apollo to have cousins to walk about with and talk to. Philip and Conrad, too, were fairly kind to little Orion; they took him round to see their gardens and their several pets. Life was certainly prim at the Rectory compared to what it had been at the Manor; but children will be children all the world over, and when there is a bright sun in the heavens, and flowers grow at their feet, and a gentle breeze is blowing, it is almost impossible to be all sulks and tears and misery. Even Diana was interested in what was going on. She had never been away from home before, and she found it pleasant to watch the Dolman children. As she expressed it, in her sturdy fashion, she did not think much of any of them, but still it amused her to hear them speak, and to take Ann's hand and allow her to lead her round the garden.

Ann was extremely kind to her, but she only received a very qualified measure of approval from the saucy little miss. Lucy and Mary she could not bear, but as Ann showed her all her treasures, and as Ann happened also to be very fond of animals, Diana began to chatter, and presently became almost confidential. Suddenly, however, in the midst of quite a merry game of play, the little girl was heard to utter a shout.

"Where is my darlin's that I brought from home?" she cried; "my three spiders and my four beetles? I have not given none of 'em their bwefkus. I must wun and fetch 'em. Iris promised to see to 'em last night, so I know they isn't deaded; but I must go this very instant minute to feed 'em, 'cos,

of course, they wants their bwefkus, poor dears. If you like I'll show 'em to you, Ann; you can see 'em while they is eating."

"Please, Diana, don't go!" called out Ann; but Diana did not hear her. Putting wings to her sturdy little feet, she sped across the lawn, ran helter-skelter into the house, and up to the room where she had slept.

The room was empty, the windows were wide open, the little bed was neatly made; there was not a sign of the precious box to be discovered anywhere.

"Where is that howid old nurse?" called Diana aloud. "She must know where my pets is. Oh, they must be desp'te hungry, poor darlin's. I say, nurse, where is 'oo? Nurse, come 'long, you howid old thing!"

Simpson, who happened to be in the day-nursery not far away, heard Diana's imperious little cry. The under-nurse was also standing in the room.

"Mrs. Simpson," she said, "I hear one of the strange little ladies calling out for you."

"Well, and so do I hear her," answered Mrs. Simpson, with a toss of her head; "but she must learn to speak respectful before I take any notice. I fully expect it's that pert little Miss Diana. They say she is called after one of the heathen gods; no wonder she is so fiery and--"

But at that moment the fierce little face, the jet-black head and sparkling eyes were seen peeping round the nursery door.

"There you is, old Simpson; that's wight," said Diana, dancing up to her. "Now, p'ease, tell me where you put my box."

"What box, miss? I'll thank you, Miss Diana, not to call me old Simpson. My name is Mrs. Simpson."

"I only call you what you is," said Diana. "You is old, your hair is gway; you is awfu' old, I 'spect. Now, where is my box? Where did you put it, old--I mean, Mrs. Simpson?"

"What box, miss?" said Simpson, beginning to temporize, for she really was afraid of the burst of wrath which Diana might give way to when she learned the truth.

"You *is* a stupid," said Diana. "It's the box what holds my pwecious beetles and spiders. I want to feed 'em. I'm just going to catch flies for my spiders. I know how to catch 'em quite well; and my dear little bettles, too, must be fed on bits of sugar. Where did you put the box? The woom I s'ept in is kite tidy. Where is the box? Speak, can't you?"

"Well, then, Miss Diana, I must just tell you the simple truth. We can't have no messing with horrid vermin in this house. I would not stay here for an hour if I thought those odious beetles and spiders were anywhere about."

"Well, then, you can go," said Diana; "nobody wants you to stay; you is of no cons'kence. I want my darlin' pets, my little home things that comed from the lovely garden; my spiders and my dear beetles. Where did you put 'em?"

"The fact is, Miss Diana, you want a right good talking to," said Simpson. "Well, then, this is the truth. I have put 'em away."

"Away! Where?"

"They are gone, miss; you'll never find 'em again."

"Gone!" cried Diana, her face turning pale. "Gone! Did Iris let you take 'em away?"

"Your sister knew nothing about it, miss. I took the box last night and threw it into the dust-hole. I hope the vermin inside are dead by now--horrid, odious, disgusting things!"

"Vermin!" cried Diana. Her great eyes leaped, a ray of pure fire seemed to dart from them. She looked for a moment as if she meant to strike Simpson, but then, thinking better of it, she turned and rushed like a little fury from the room. Downstairs, with her heart choking, her breath coming fast, her whole little body palpitating with the most frantic passion, she ran.

The first person she happened to meet was her uncle, Mr. Dolman. He was coming sleepily in from the garden, for the day was getting intensely hot. He meant to go to his study to begin to write his sermon for next Sunday. He did not feel at all inclined to write his sermon, but as it had to be got through somehow, he thought he would devote an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half, to its composition this morning. When he saw Diana, however, rushing madly through the hall, with her eyes shining, her face white, and her whole little body quivering with excitement, he could not help exclaiming under his breath at her remarkable beauty.

"What a handsome little spitfire!" he said aloud.

"Spitfire, indeed!" said Diana; "it's you all who is spitfires; it's not me. I want to say something to you, big man."

"Very well, small girl," answered Mr. Dolman. "I am willing to listen to you. What is the matter?"

This was really much more diverting than sitting down to his sermon.

"I want you to have that howid old woman upstairs put in pwison. I want you to get the perlice, and have her hands tied, and have her took away to pwison. She has done a murder--she has killed my--" But here little Diana's voice suddenly failed; high as her spirit was, it could not carry

her any further. A sense of absolute loneliness came over her, and her passion ended in a burst of frantic weeping.

And now all might have been well, for Mr. Dolman was a kind-hearted man, and the little child, in her black dress, would have appealed to him, and he would have taken her in his arms and comforted her after a fashion, and matters might never have been so sore and hard again for little Diana, if at that moment Mrs. Dolman had not appeared. She was walking hastily across the hall with her district-visiting hat on. Mrs. Dolman's district-visiting hat was made in the shape of a very large mushroom. It was simply adorned with a band of brown ribbon, and was not either a becoming or fashionable headgear.

Diana, who had a strong sense of the ludicrous, stopped her tears where her aunt appeared.

"What a poky old thing you is!" she said.

These words enraged Mrs. Dolman.

"William," she remarked, "what are you doing with that child? Why, you have taken her in your arms; put her down this minute. Diana, you are a very naughty little girl."

"So is you a very naughty old woman," retorted Diana. "I's not going away from this nice old man. I don't like you. I'm going to stay with you, old man, so don't put me down out of your arms. You will send for the perlice, won't you, and you'll have that howid pusion upstairs put in pwison. Go 'way, aunt. I never did like you, and I never will, and you is awfu' poky in that bonnet. But I'll go with you, old man." Here she flung her fat arms round her uncle's neck and gave him a hug.

"You are not pwetty like faver," she said, "you are kite an ugly old man, but all the same I like you;" and she kissed him, a slobbering, wet kiss on his cheek.

"Jane," said Mr. Dolman, "this poor little girl is in great trouble. I cannot in the least make out why, but perhaps you had better let her come with me into the library for a few minutes."

"I'll allow nothing of the kind," answered Mrs. Dolman. "Diana Delaney is an extremely naughty little child, and I am quite determined that her spirit shall be broken. It was all very well for you to go on with your tantrums at the Manor, miss, but now you are under my control, and you shall do exactly what I wish. Come, Diana, none of this. What, you'll kick me, will you? Then I shall have you whipped."

"What's whipped?" questioned Diana.

Mrs. Dolman stooped down and lifted her into her arms. She was a stout and largely-made child, and the little woman found her somewhat difficult to carry. She would not let her down, however, but conducted her across the cool hall and into a room at the further end of the passage. This room was nearly empty, matting covered the floor and a round table stood in the center, while two or three high-backed chairs, with hard seats, were placed at intervals round the walls. It was a decidedly dreary room, and rendered all the more so because the morning sun was pouring in through the dusty panes.

This room was well known to all the little Dolmans, for it was called the punishment chamber. In this room they had all of them shed bitter tears in their time, and some of the spirit which had been given to them at their birth was subdued and broken here, and here they learned to fear mamma, although not to respect her. They were all accustomed to this chamber, but little Diana Delaney had never in the whole course of her spirited six years heard of anything in the least resembling this odious and ugly apartment.

"Here you stay until you beg my pardon," said Mrs. Dolman, "and if I hear you daring to call me names again, or your uncle names, or doing

anything but just behaving like a proper little Christian child, I shall have you whipped. I believe in not sparing the rod, and so the child is not spoiled. What, you'll defy me, miss!"

"I hate you," screamed Diana, "and I want you to go to prison too, as well as that awful old Simpson upstairs. She has gone and murdered all my animals--she said they was vermin. Oh, I hate you, aunt!"

"Hate me or not, you'll stay where you are until dinner-time," said Mrs. Dolman, and she left the room, locking the door after her.

Diana flew to it and kicked it furiously, but although she kicked and screamed and shouted herself hoarse, no one heard her, and no one came to the rescue. At last, worn out with her frantic grief, she threw herself down in the middle of the floor and, babylike, forgot her sorrows in profound slumber.

The rest of the children were having a fairly happy morning, and Iris, who was trying to make the best of things, did not miss her little sister until the preparation gong for dinner sounded. The moment its sonorous notes were heard pealing over the Rectory garden, little Ann got up soberly, and Lucy and Mary also rose to their feet.

"That is the first gong, Iris," said Ann; "we must go in to clean our hands and have our hair brushed. Mamma would be very angry if we were not all in the dining room when the second gong sounds. There is only five minutes between the two gongs, so we had better go and get ready at once."

Iris was quite ready to accompany her cousins into the house. Now, for the first time, however, she missed Diana.

"Where is Di?" she said. "Apollo, have you seen her?"

Apollo was coming up the lawn; Iris ran down to meet him.

"Oh, there's Orion with Philip and Conrad," said Iris, "but where can Di be? I thought she was with you, Apollo."

"I have not seen her for the greater part of the morning," replied Apollo. "Have you, Orion?"

"Not I," answered Orion, giving himself a little shake. "I say, Phil," he continued, "is it true that you can take me fishing with you this afternoon?"

"Yes; but pray don't talk so loud. I'll take you, if you won't split about it."

"What's 'split'?" questioned Orion.

"Hush, you little beggar!" Philip drew Orion to one side and began to whisper in his ear. Orion's face got very red.

"Oh!" he said. "Well, I won't tell. What are you talking about, Iris?"

"I want to find Diana," said Iris.

"I have not seen her," said Orion. "I wish you would not bother me, Iris. I am talking to Philip. Phil and I has got some secrets. Very well, Phil; we'll walk on in front, if you like."

"Yes, come along," said Philip; "you can come too, Conrad. Now, Orion, if you are not going to be a silly goose and a tell-tale, I'll--" Here he dropped his voice to a whisper, and Orion bent an attentive ear.

Iris, in some bewilderment, turned to her girl cousins.

"I must find Diana," she said.

"She may be in the house," said Ann. "Perhaps she has gone to the nurseries--perhaps she is with Simpson."

The whole party entered the house, which was very cool and pleasant in contrast to the hot outside world. They met Mr. Dolman striding across the hall.

"You had better be quick, children," he called out. "Mamma won't be pleased unless you are all waiting and ready to sit down to table when the second gong sounds."

"Oh, please, Uncle William!" said Iris, "do you happen to know where Diana is?"

"Little Diana with the spirited black eyes?" questioned Mr. Dolman.

"Yes; do you know anything about her?"

He pushed his spectacles halfway up on his broad, bald forehead.

"I am afraid little Diana has been very naughty," he said; "but, pray don't say that I mentioned it. You had better question your aunt, my dear. No, there is no use asking me. I vow, once for all, that I am not going to interfere with you children--particularly with you little Delaneys. I only know that Diana has been naughty. Ask your aunt--ask your aunt, my dear."

"Iris, do pray come upstairs," called out Mary; "we'll get into the most dreadful scrape if we are late. Mamma is so terribly particular."

"Oh, there is Aunt Jane!" said Iris, with a sigh of relief. "Aunt Jane, please," she continued, running up to her aunt as she spoke, "I can't find Diana anywhere. Do you happen to know where she is?"

"I am afraid you won't find Diana, Iris," answered Mrs. Dolman, "for the simple reason that she has been a very impertinent, naughty little girl, and I have been obliged to lock her up."

"You were obliged to lock her up?" said Iris, her face turning pale. She gave Mrs. Dolman a look which reminded that lady of her brother. Now,

the little Delaneys' father could give very piercing glances out of his dark eyes when he chose, and Mrs. Dolman had been known, in her early days, to quail before them. For the same inexplicable reason she quailed now before the look in Iris' brown eyes. "Please take me at once to my sister," said the little girl, with dignity.

Mrs. Dolman hesitated for a moment.

"Very well, Iris, on this occasion I will take you," she said. "But please first understand that you four children have got to bend your wills to mine; and when you are naughty,--although I don't expect you will ever be naughty, Iris,--I trust you, at least, will be an example to the others,--but when any of you are naughty you will be most certainly punished. I have brought you here with the intention of disciplining you and making you good children."

"Then," said Iris, very slowly, "do you really think, Aunt Jane, that when mother was alive we were bad children?"

"I have nothing to say on that point," answered Mrs. Dolman. She led Iris across the cool hall, and, taking a key out of her pocket, opened the door of the punishment chamber. She threw it wide open, and there, in the center of the matting, lay Diana, curled up like a little dog, very sound asleep.

"Much she cares," said Mrs. Dolman.

"Oh, Aunt Jane!" said Iris, tears springing to her eyes, "how could you be cruel to her, and she is not long without mother, you know--how could you be cruel to her, Aunt Jane?"

"You are not to dare to speak to me in that tone, Iris," said Aunt Jane.

But at that moment the noise, or perhaps it was the draught of fresh air, caused Diana to stir in her sleep. She raised her head and looked around her. The first person her eyes met was Iris.

"So you has come at last," she said. "I don't think much of you for a mother. You made a lot of pwomises, and that's all you care. Has that ugly old woman been sent to pwison? There's my darlin' pets gone and got deaded, and she deaded 'em. Has she been put in pwison for murder? Oh, there you is, too, old Aunt Jane! Well, I is not going to obey you, so there! Now you know the twuf. I is Diana, the gweat Diana. I isn't going to obey nobody!"

"Iris," said Mrs. Dolman, "will you speak to this extremely naughty little girl? If she will not repent and beg my pardon she shall have no dinner. I will send her in some bread and water; and here she shall stay until her naughty little spirit is broken."

Mrs. Dolman left the room as she spoke, and Iris found herself alone with her sister.

"You isn't much of a mother," repeated Diana. She went over to the window, and stood with her back to Iris. Her little bosom was heaving up and down; she felt very forlorn, but still she hugged her misery to her as a cloak.

Iris gazed at her in perplexity.

"Di," she said, "I never saw you like this before. What are you turning away from me for? Come to me, Di; do come to me."

Diana's little breast heaved more than ever, tears came into her eyes, but she blinked them furiously away.

"You can come to me, if you want; I shan't come to you. You isn't much of a mother," she repeated.

"But I did not know you were in trouble, darling. Do, do come to your own Iris. Do tell me what is the matter."

"Oh, Iris!" sobbed Diana.

The first kind note utterly melted her little heart; she rushed to her sister, flung herself upon her, and sobbed as if she would never stop crying.

"We can't stay in this howid place, Iris," she said; "all my darlin's has gone and got deaded. That howid old woman upstairs said they was wermin. She has killed 'em all. I can't stay here; I won't stay here. Take me back to the beautiful garden. Do, Iris; do. I'se just so mis'ble."

Iris sat down on one of the hard-backed chairs.

"Look here, Di," she said, "I have no time now to talk things over with you. Of course, everything is altered, and our lives are completely changed. When mother was dying, when I last saw her, she told me that I must expect this. She said she knew that, when she went away to the angels, we four children would have to go out into the world and fight our battles. She said that everybody in the world has got a battle to fight, and even little children have to fight theirs. She said, too, that if we were brave and the kind of children she wants us to be, we would follow the names she gave us and conquer our enemies. Now, Di, you are called after Diana, the great Diana, who was supposed to be a sort of goddess. Do you think she would have given in? Don't you think she would have been brave?"

"Yes, course," said the little nineteenth-century Diana. "She would have shotted people down dead with her bow and arrows--I know kite well she was a bwave sort of a lady. All wight, Iris, I'll copy her if you wishes."

"Indeed I do wish, darling. I think it would be splendid of you."

"She was a very bwave lady," repeated Diana. "She had her bow and her arrows; she was a gweat huntwess, and she shotted people. I don't mind copying her one little bit."

Diana dried away her tears and looked fixedly at her sister.

"Then you really mean to be good and brave, Di?"

"Certain sure, Iris."

"And you won't call Aunt Jane any more names?"

"I won't call her names--names don't si'nify, names don't kill people."

"And you'll go and beg her pardon now?"

"What's that?"

"You'll say you are sorry that you called her names."

"Would she let me out of this woom, then? and could I do just what I liked my own self?"

"I expect so; I expect she is really sorry that she had to be hard on you to-day; but you see she has got a different way of bringing up children from our own mother."

"Please, Iris, we won't talk much of our own mother--it makes me lumpy in the trof," said Diana, with a little gulp. "I'll beg her pardon, if it pleases her. I don't care--what's words? I'll go at once, and, Iris, mind me that I'm like Diana. She was a bwave lady and she shotted lots of people."

"Well, then, come along, Di; you'll be allowed to come to dinner if you beg Aunt Jane's pardon."

Di gave her hand to Iris, who took her upstairs. Here Iris washed her little sister's face and hands and brushed out her thick black hair, and kissed her on her rosebud lips, and then said:

"There is nothing I would not do, Di, to be a real little mother to you."

"All wight," answered Diana; "you just mind me now and then that I is called after the bwave lady what lived long, long ago. Is that the second gong? I'se desp'ate hungry. Let's wun downstairs, p'ease, Iris."

Diana entered the dining room with her face all aglow with smiles, the rich color back again in her cheeks, and her black eyes dancing. Even Mr. Dolman gave a gasp of relief when he saw her.

Even Mrs. Dolman felt a slight degree of satisfaction. She did not intend to be hard on the children--in her heart of hearts she was quite resolved to make them not only good, but also happy.

"Well, my dear little girl," she said, drawing Diana to her side, "and so you are sorry for what you said?"

"Awfu' sossy," answered Diana, in a cheerful voice.

"Then you beg my pardon, and you won't be naughty again?"

"I begs yours pardon, Aunt Jane," said Diana. She looked very attentively up and down her relation's figure as she spoke.

"Poor Aunt Jane, she's awfu' stout," murmured Diana, under her breath. "I must get a good sharp arrow--oh, yes! words is nothing."

Mrs. Dolman drew out a chair near herself.

"You shall sit near me, Diana, and I will help you to your dinner," she said. "I hope in future you will really try to be a very good little girl."

Diana made no reply to this, but when her aunt piled her plate with nourishing and wholesome food, she began to eat with appetite. Towards the end of the meal she bent over towards Mrs. Dolman, and said in a confiding voice:

"Has you got woods wound here?"

"Yes, my dear; there are some nice woods about a mile away."

"I'd like to go there this afternoon, please, Aunt Jane. I has 'portant business to do in those woods." Diana looked round the table very solemnly as she said these last words. Philip could not help laughing.

"Hush, Philip! I won't have Diana laughed at," said Mrs. Dolman, who for some reason was now inclined to be specially kind to the little girl. "If you would really like to spend the afternoon in the woods, Diana, I see nothing against it," she remarked. "You are all having a holiday, and as to-morrow lessons will of course be resumed, I do not see why your wish should not be gratified. Miss Ramsay, you will of course accompany the children, and, Lucy, my dear, you can have the pony chaise, if you promise to be very careful. You can take turns to sit in it, children. And what do you say to asking cook to put up a few bottles of milk and some cake and bread and butter--then you need not return home to tea?"

"That would be delightful, mamma," said Lucy, in her prim voice.

"Thank you, mamma," said Mary.

"French, my dears; French!" said Miss Ramsay.

"As it is a holiday, Miss Ramsay, the children are allowed to tender their thanks to me in the English tongue," said Mrs. Dolman.

Miss Ramsay bowed and slightly colored.

"Is you going with us?" asked Diana, fixing her dark eyes full upon the governess' face.

"Yes, Diana; your aunt wishes it."

"We don't want no g'own-ups."

"Hush, Diana! you must not begin to be rude again," said Mrs. Dolman.

"Miss Ramsay certainly goes with you, please understand."

"I underland--thank you, Aunt Jane," said Diana.

She looked solemnly down at her empty plate. Her whole little mind was full of her namesake--the great Diana of long ago. She wondered if in the

deep shade of the woods she might find a bow strong enough to injure her enemies.

CHAPTER X.

BOW AND ARROW.

Nothing interfered with the excursion to the pleasant woods near Super-Ashton Rectory. The children all found themselves there soon after four o'clock on this lovely summer afternoon. They could sit under the shade of the beautiful trees, or run about and play to their hearts' content.

Miss Ramsay was a very severe governess during school hours, but when there was a holiday she was as lax as she was particular on other occasions. This afternoon she took a novel out of her pocket, seated herself with her back to a great overspreading elm tree, and prepared to enjoy herself.

Lucy, Mary, and Ann surrounded Iris; Apollo marched away by himself, and Philip and Conrad mysteriously disappeared with little Orion. Diana thus found herself alone. For a time she was contented to lie stretched out flat on the grass playing soldiers, and watching the tricks of a snow-white rabbit who ran in and out of his hole close by. Presently, however, she grew tired of this solitary entertainment, and sprang to her feet, looking eagerly around her.

"Punishment is a very good thing," she said to herself. "I's punished, and I's lot better. It's now Aunt Jane's turn to be punished, and it's Simpson's turn to be punished--it'll do them heaps of good. First time I's only going to punish 'em, I isn't going to kill 'em down dead, but I's going to pwick 'em. I is Diana, and mother said I was to live just like the gweat Diana what lived long, long, *long* ago."

Diana began to trot eagerly up and down under the shade of the tall forest trees. She looked about her to right and left, and presently was fortunate enough to secure a pliant bough of a tree which was lying on the ground. Having discovered this treasure, she sat down contentedly and began to

pull off the leaves and to strip the bark. When she had got the long, supple bough quite bare, she whipped some string out of her pocket, and converted it into the semblance of a bow. It was certainly by no means a perfect bow, but it was a bow after a fashion.

The bow being made, the arrow must now be secured. Diana could not possibly manage an arrow without a knife, and she was not allowed to keep a knife of her own. Both bow and arrow must be a secret, for if anyone saw her with them it might enter into the head of that person not to consider it quite proper for her to punish Aunt Jane.

"And Aunt Jane must be punished," muttered Diana. "I must make an arrow, and I must pwick her with it. My bow is weally beautiful--it is a little crooked, but what do that matter? I could shoot my arrow now and pwick the twees, if only I could get one made. Oh, here's a darlin' little stick--it would make a lovely arrow, if I had a knife to sharpen the point with. Now, I do wonder what sort of a woman that Miss Wamsay is."

Diana fixed her coal-black eyes on the lady.

"She looks sort of gentle now she's weading," whispered the little girl to herself. "She looked howid this morning in the schoolroom, but she looks sort of gentle now. I even seed her smile a minute back, and I should not be a bit s'prised if she didn't hate Aunt Jane too. I know what I'll do; I'll just go and ask her--there is nothing in all the world like being plain-spoke. If Miss Wamsay hates Aunt Jane, why, course, she'll help me to sharpen my arrow, when I tell her it is to give Aunt Jane a little pwick."

Accordingly Diana approached Miss Ramsay's side, and, as the governess did not look up, she flung herself on the grass near by, uttering a deep sigh as she did so. But Miss Ramsay was intent on her book, and did not take the least notice of Diana's deep-drawn breath. The little girl

fidgeted, and tried further measures. She came close up to the governess, and, stretching out one of her fat hands, laid it on one of Miss Ramsay's.

"Don't touch me, my dear," said the lady. "You are much too hot, and your hand is very dirty."

"It's sossy for that," said Diana. "I had to touch you 'cos you wouldn't look up. I has something most 'portant to talk over."

"Have you indeed?" replied Miss Ramsay. She closed her book. The part she was reading was not specially interesting, and she could not help being amused with such a very curious specimen of the genus child as Diana Delaney.

"Well, little girl, and what is it?" she asked.

"I 'spects," said Diana, looking very solemnly into her face, "that you and me, we has both got the same enemies."

"The same enemies! My dear child, what do you mean?" asked Miss Ramsay.

"I 'spects I's wight," said Diana, tossing her black head. "It's not often wrong. I wead your thoughts--I think that you has a desp'ate hate, down deep in your heart, to Aunt Jane."

"Good gracious!" cried the governess, "what does the child mean? Why should I hate Mrs. Dolman?"

"But why should not you?--that's the point," said Diana.

"Well, I don't," said Miss Ramsay.

Diana looked intently at her. Slowly, but surely, her big black eyes filled with tears; the tears rolled down her cheeks; she did not attempt to wipe them away.

"What is the matter with you, you queer little creature?" said Miss Ramsay. "What in the world are you crying about?"

"I is so bitter dis'pointed," repeated Diana.

"What, because I don't hate your Aunt Jane?"

"I is bitter dis-pointed," repeated Diana. "I thought, course, you hated her, 'cos I saw her look at you so smart like, and order you to be k'ick this morning, and I thought, 'Miss Wamsay don't like that, and course Miss Wamsay hates her, and if Miss Wamsay hates her, well, she'll help me, 'cos I hates her awful.'"

"But do you know that all this is very wrong?" said Miss Ramsay.

"W'ong don't matter," answered Diana, sweeping her hand in a certain direction, as if she were pushing wrong quite out of sight. "I hate her, and I want to punish her. You ought to hate her, 'cos she told you to be k'ick, and she looked at you with a kind of a fwown. Won't you twy and begin? Do, p'ease."

"I really never heard anything like this before in the whole course of my life," said Miss Ramsay. "Mrs. Dolman did warn me to be prepared for much, but I never heard a Christian child speak in the way you are doing."

"I isn't a Chwistian child," said Diana. "I is a heathen. Did you never hear of Diana what lived long, long ago?--the beautiful, bwave lady that shotted peoples whenever she p'ceased with her bow and arrows?"

"Do you mean the heathen goddess?" said Miss Ramsay.

"I don't know what you call her, but I is named after her, and I mean to be like her. My beautiful mother said I was to be like her, and I'm going to twy. See, now, here is the bow"--she held up the crooked bow as she spoke--"and I only want the arrow. Will you help me to make the arrow?"

I thought--oh, I did think--that if you hated Aunt Jane you would help me to make the arrow. Here's the stick, and if you have a knife in your pocket you can just sharpen it, and it will make the most perfect arrow in all the world. I'll love you then. I'll help you always. I'll do my lessons if you ask me, and I'll twy to be good to you; 'cos you and me we'll both have our enemies, and p'w'aps, if I'm not stwong enough to use the bow, p'w'aps you could use it, and we might go about together and sting our enemies, and be weal fwriends. Will you twy? Will you make me the little arrow, p'ease, p'ease?"

"And what are you going to do with the arrow when it is made?" asked Miss Ramsay. "I happen," she continued, without waiting for Diana's reply, "to have a knife in my pocket, and I don't mind sharpening that piece of wood for you. But bows and arrows are dangerous weapons for little girls like you."

"Course they is dangerous," said Diana. "What would be the use of 'em, if they wasn't? They is to pwick our enemies and p'w'aps kill 'em."

"But look here, Diana, what do you want this special bow and arrow for?"

"I want to have Aunt Jane Dolman and Simpson shotted. I'll tell you why I want 'em both to be shotted--'cos Simpson killed my spiders and beetles, and Aunt Jane Dolman is a poky old thing and she shut me up in a punishment woom. Now wouldn't you like to help me--and then we'll both have deaded our enemies, and we'll be as happy as the day is long."

Miss Ramsay was so astounded at Diana's remarks that she slowly rose from her seat and stared for nearly half a minute at the little girl.

"Well," she said at last, "I have seen in my lifetime all sorts of children. I have taught little girls and boys since I was eighteen years of age. I have seen good children and naughty children, and clever children, and stupid children, but I have never met anyone like you, little Diana Delaney. Do

you really know what you are saying? Do you know that you are a very, very wicked little girl?"

"Are I?" said Diana. "Well, then, I like being a wicked little girl. I thought p'w'aps you would help me; but it don't matter, not one bit."

Before Miss Ramsay could say another word Diana had turned abruptly and flown, as if on the wings of the wind, right down through the wood.

The governess watched the little figure disappearing between the oaks and elms until at last it quite vanished from view. She felt a momentary inclination to go after the child, but her book was interesting, and her seat under the overhanging elm extremely comfortable. And this was a holiday, and she worked hard enough, poor thing, on working days. And, after all, Diana was nothing but a silly little child, and didn't mean half she said.

"It would be folly to take the least notice of her remarks," thought the governess. "I'll just go on treating her like the others. I expect I shall have a good deal of work breaking in that interesting little quartette, for, after all, if my salary is to be raised, I may as well stay at the Rectory as anywhere else. The house is comfortable, and I have got used to Mrs. Dolman's queer ways by this time."

Accordingly Miss Ramsay reseated herself, and again took up her novel. She turned the leaves, and soon got into a most interesting part of the volume. Lost in the sorrows of her hero and heroine, she forgot all about Diana Delaney and her bow and arrow.

Meanwhile, Diana, walking rapidly away by herself, was reflecting hard.

"Miss Wamsay's a poor sort," she thought. "I aren't going to twouble 'bout anyone like her, but I must get that arrow made. The bow is beautiful, but I can't do nothing 'cos I hasn't got an arrow."

At this moment, to her great delight, she saw Apollo coming to meet her.

"There you is!" she shouted.

"What do you want with me?" asked Apollo.

"Look at my bow, 'Pollo! Aren't it beautiful? Aren't I just like the weal Diana now?"

"Did you make this bow all by yourself?" asked Apollo.

"Yes; why shouldn't I?"

"Well, it's awfully crooked."

"Is it?" said Diana; "I thought it was beautiful. Can you stwaighthen it for me a little bit, 'Pollo?"

"I think I can make you a better bow than this," answered Apollo.

"Oh, can you? What a darlin' you is! And will you cut an arrow for me, and will you make it very sharp? Will you make it awfu' sharp? The kind that would pwick deep, you know, that would cut into things and be like the arrow that the gweat Diana used."

Apollo was finding his afternoon somewhat dull. He had made no friends as yet with the little Dolman children. Orion had disappeared with both the boys; Iris was with Ann, Lucy, and Mary; he had been thrown for the last hour completely on his own resources. The sight, therefore, of Diana, with her flushed face and bright eyes and spirited manner, quite cheered the little fellow. He and Diana had often been chums, and he thought it would be rather nice to be chummy with his little sister to-day.

"I may as well help you," he said, "but, of course, Di, you can't expect me to do this sort of thing often. I shall most likely be very soon going to school, and then I'll be with fellows, you know."

"What's fellows?" asked Diana.

"Oh, boys! Of course, when I get with boys, you can't expect me to be much with you."

"All wight," answered Diana. "I hope you won't get with no fellows this afternoon, 'cos you is useful to me. Just sit down where you is, and help me to make a bow and arrow."

Apollo instantly seated himself on the grass, and Diana threw herself on her face and hands by his side. She raised herself on her elbows and fixed her bright black eyes on her brother's face. She stared very hard at him, and he stared back at her.

"Well," she said, "isn't you going to begin?"

"Yes," he replied; "but what do you want the bow and arrow for?"

"To get my enemies shotted."

"Your enemies? What folly this is, Di. You have not got any enemies."

"Haven't I? I know better. I won't talk to you about it, 'Pollo."

"All right," replied Apollo; "you must tell me, or I won't help you."

"There, now!" said Diana, "you's got a howid fwown between your bwows. I don't like it; you's going to be obs'nate. I don't like obs'nate boys."

"I mean what I say," replied Apollo. "I know you of old, you monkey. You are up to mischief, and I insist upon hearing all about it."

Diana gazed at him solemnly.

"Does you like Aunt Jane?" she said, after a pause.

"I can't say that I do," replied Apollo.

"Does you like that old thing in the nursery--Simpson, they calls her?"

"I can't say that I do," replied the boy again.

"They is sort of enemies of yours, isn't they?" asked Diana.

"Oh! I don't know that I go as far as that," replied Apollo.

"But if Aunt Jane makes you do howid lessons all day, and if Simpson is always fussing you and getting you to wash your face and hands, and if you can't never go with *fellows*, and if you is kept in--and if--and if--"

"Oh! don't begin all that, Di," said Apollo. "Where is the use of making the worst of things?"

"Well, I want to make the best of things," said Diana. "I want to have our enemies shotted wight off."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Apollo, laughing, "that you wish to shoot Aunt Jane and that old woman in the nursery?"

"I wish to pwick 'em first time, and then, if they is naughty again, to have 'em shotted down dead. Why not? Mother, who is up in the heavens, called me after gweat Diana, and Diana always shotted her enemies."

"Oh, dear me, Di! I think you are the queerest little thing in the world," said Apollo. "But now, look here," he added, "I am older than you, and I know that what you are thinking about is very wrong. I can't make you a bow and arrow to do that sort of thing."

Diana looked bitterly disappointed. She could master, or she fancied she could master, Aunt Jane, Simpson, and Miss Ramsay, but she knew well, from past experience, that she could not master Apollo.

"What is to be done?" she said. She thought for a long time. "Would not you like a bow and arrow just all your own, to shoot at the twees with?" she asked at last artfully.

"Oh, I have no objection to that!" answered Apollo. "It seems right that I should have one; does it not, Di? But of course I would never do any mischief with it. Why, little thing, you have been talking the most awful rot."

"Well, you can make a bow and arrow for your very own self," said Diana.

"I don't see why I shouldn't, but you'll have to promise--"

"Oh, I won't make pwomises!" said Diana. "Why should I make pwomises about your bow and arrows? I'll help you to make 'em. Do let me, Apollo!"

Apollo seemed suddenly smitten with the idea. After all, it would be fine to make a bow and arrow, and to try to shoot things in the wood. How lovely it would be if he succeeded in shooting a rabbit; he would certainly have a try. Accordingly, he rose and climbed into the lower branches of an elm tree, and cut down a long, smooth young bough, and, descending again to the ground, began to peel the bark off. When this was done, Diana produced some more string out of her pocket, and a very creditable bow was the result.

"Now, the arrow," said the little girl.

"We must get some strong wood for that," said Apollo, "something that won't split. I'll just walk about and look around me." He did so, and soon found a stick suitable for his purpose. He sat down again and began whittling away. Very soon a fairly sharp arrow was the result. "Of course it ought to be tipped," said Apollo, "but we have nothing to tip it with. It is lucky that the wood is hard, and so it is really sharp. Now, shall I have a few shots with it?"

"Please do, Apollo. Oh, how 'licious it all is! Don't you feel just as if you was a heathen god?"

"I wish I were," said Apollo, throwing back his head. "Oh, Di, how hot it is in the wood! What wouldn't I give to be back in the dear old garden again?"

"Maybe we'll go soon," said Diana; "maybe they won't want to keep us if--" But here she shut up her little mouth firmly.

Apollo was too much excited about the bow and arrows to think of Diana's remarks. He stood up and began to practice shooting.

"You is doing it beautiful," said Diana, applauding his extremely poor efforts. "Now, twy again. Think that you has lived long, long ago, and that you is shotting things for our dinner."

The arrow went wide of the mark, the arrow went everywhere but where it ought to. Diana clapped and laughed and shouted, and Apollo thought himself the finest archer in the world.

"Now, let me have a teeny turn," she said.

"To be sure I will," he replied good-naturedly. He showed her how to place the arrow, and she made one or two valiant attempts to send it flying through the wood.

"It is hard," she panted; "the arrow don't seem even to make the least little pwick. Now, I want to shoot stwaight at that oak twee, or would you mind awfu', Apollo, if I was to shoot at you?"

"All right," replied Apollo; "you may aim at my hand, if you like." He walked about a dozen yards away and held up his hand.

Diana made valiant efforts, and grew crimson in the face, but the arrow still went wide of the mark.

CHAPTER XI.

JOG'APHY.

The next day lessons began with a vengeance. It was one thing for the four Delaney children to work with Miss Stevenson at the old Manor House. Lessons in mother's time were rather pleasant than otherwise; as often as not they were conducted in the garden, and when the day happened to be very hot, and the little people somewhat impatient of restraint, Miss Stevenson gave them a certain amount of liberty; but lessons at the Rectory were an altogether different matter. Miss Ramsay, when she awoke the next day, had seemed emphatically to have put on all her armor. During the holiday, neither Orion nor Diana, neither Apollo nor Iris, thought Miss Ramsay of any special account. They stared a good deal at Uncle Dolman, and they watched Aunt Jane with anxious eyes, but Miss Ramsay did not matter, one way or the other. The next day, however, they came to have a totally different opinion with regard to her.

At breakfast, on the following morning, whenever Diana opened her rosebud lips, she was told that she must not speak unless she could do so in the French tongue. Now, all that Diana could manage to say in French was 'Oui' and 'Non,' nor was she very certain when to say either of these very simple words. She hated being silent, for she was a very talkative, cheery little body, except when she was angry. Accordingly, the meal was a depressing one, and Diana began to yawn and to look wearily out on the sunshiny garden before it was half-finished. But, of course, there was no play in the garden for any of the children that morning.

Immediately after breakfast they all went up to the schoolroom. Now, the schoolroom was a very pleasant room, nicely and suitably furnished, but in summer it was hot, and on very sunshiny days it was painfully hot; its single large bay window faced due south, and the sun poured in relentlessly all during the hours of morning school. Miss Ramsay, seated at the head of the baize-covered table with her spectacles on, looked

decidedly formidable, and each of the children gazed at their governess with anxious eyes. Mary and Lucy were always good little girls, but Philip and Conrad were as idle as boys could possibly be, and did their utmost to evade Miss Ramsay's endeavors to instill learning into their small heads. Orion sat between his two little boy cousins, but for some reason or other Orion did not look well that morning. His little face, not unlike Diana's in appearance, was bloated, his eyes were heavy, he had scarcely touched his breakfast, and he earnestly, most earnestly longed to get out of the hot schoolroom.

Miss Ramsay, when all the little people were seated round her, knocked sharply on the table with her ruler, and proceeded to make a speech. "My dear old pupils," she said, looking at the five little Dolmans as she spoke, "on account of your cousins, who, I fear, are ignorant little children, I mean on this occasion to speak to you in the English tongue. I have now got nine pupils to instruct, and nine pupils are a great many for one person to teach. Your mother, however, has promised that the master from the village shall come up to instruct you all in arithmetic, and your French master and your music master will, of course, attend here as usual. I trust, therefore, that by more attention on the part of my pupils I may be able to continue the heavy task which I have undertaken. What I want to impress upon you children"--here she turned abruptly to the little Delaneys--"is that lessons are lessons, and play is play. During lesson-time I allow *no* wandering thoughts, I allow no attempts at shirking your duties. The tasks I set you will be carefully chosen according to your different abilities, and I can assure you beforehand that learned they must be. If I find that they are not carefully prepared I shall punish you. By being attentive, by making the best of your time, you can easily get through the lessons appointed you, and then when they are over I hope you will thoroughly enjoy your time of play. Now, all of you sit quiet. We will begin with a lesson from English history."

Miss Ramsay then began to lecture in her usual style. She was really an excellent teacher, and Iris found what she said very interesting. She began to tell about the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and she made that time quite live to the intelligent little girl. But Apollo had not nearly come to the reign of Elizabeth in his English history. He, consequently, could not follow the story, and soon began to look out of the window, and to count the flies which were buzzing in the hot sunshine on the window-panes. When Miss Ramsay addressed a sudden question to him he was unable to reply. She passed it on to Ann, who instantly gave the correct answer. But Apollo felt himself to be in his governess' black books. As this was the first morning of lessons, she was not going to be severe, and, telling the little boy to take his history away to another table, desired him to read it all carefully through.

"I will question you to-morrow about what I told you to-day," she said. "Now, remember, you must tell me the whole story of the Spanish Armada to-morrow."

"But I have not gone farther than the reign of John," said Apollo.

"Don't answer me, Apollo," said Miss Ramsay; "you are to read this part of your history book. Now, sit with your back to the others and begin."

Apollo shrugged his shoulders. For a short time he made an effort to read his dull history, but then once again his eyes sought the sunshine and the flies on the window panes.

Meanwhile Diana, Orion, and the two little Dolman boys were in a class by themselves, busily engaged over a geography lesson.

Diana had not the smallest wish to become acquainted with any portion of the globe where she was not herself residing. Her thoughts were all full of the bow and arrow which Apollo had carefully hidden in a little dell at the entrance of the wood, on the previous night. She was wondering when she could run off to secure the prize, and when she

would have an opportunity of punishing her enemies. She began to think that it would be really necessary to give Miss Ramsay a prick with the fatal arrow. Miss Ramsay was turning out to be most disagreeable.

Meanwhile, the heat of the room, and a curious giddy sensation in her head, caused it to sink lower and lower, until finally it rested on her book, and little Diana was off in the land of dreams.

A sharp tap on her shoulders roused her with a start. Miss Ramsay was standing over her, looking very angry.

"Come, Diana! this will never do," she cried. "How dare you go to sleep! Do you know your geography?"

"P'ease, I doesn't know what jog-aphy is," said Diana.

"What a very naughty little girl you are! Have not I been taking pains to explain it all to you? You will have to stay in the schoolroom when lessons are over for quite five minutes. Now, stand up on your chair, hold your book in your hands, don't look out of the window, keep your eyes fixed on your book, and then you will soon learn what is required of you."

Diana obeyed this mandate with a very grave face.

In about ten minutes Miss Ramsay called her to her side.

"Well, do you know your lesson?" she asked.

"Kite perfect," replied Diana.

"Well, let me hear you. What is the capital of England?"

"Dublin Bay," replied Diana, with avidity.

"You are a very naughty child. How can you tell me you know your lesson? See, I will ask you one more question. What is the capital of Scotland?"

"Ireland," answered Diana, in an earnest voice.

Miss Ramsay shut the book with a bang. Diana looked calmly at her.

"I thought I knew it," she said. "I's sossy. I don't think I care to go on learning jog-aphy; it don't suit me." She stretched herself, gave utterance to a big yawn, and half turned her back on her teacher. "You is getting in temper," she continued, "and that isn't wight; I don't care to learn jog-aphy."

What serious consequences might not have arisen at that moment it is hard to tell, had not Orion caused a sudden diversion. He fell off his chair in a heap on the floor.

Iris sprang from her seat and ran to the rescue.

"I'm drefful sick," said Orion; "I think it was the lollipops and ginger-beer. Please let me go to bed."

"Lollipops and ginger-beer!" cried Miss Ramsay in alarm. "What does the child mean?"

CHAPTER XII.

A BABY'S HONOR.

When Miss Ramsay repeated Orion's words there was a dead silence for a full half minute in the schoolroom. Had anyone noticed them, they might have observed Philip and Conrad turn very pale; but all eyes were directed to little Orion, who was lying on the floor, pressing his hand to his stomach and moaning bitterly.

"I'm drefful sick," he said; "I wish I had not taken that horrid ginger-beer."

"But where did you get ginger-beer?" said Miss Ramsay, finding her voice at last. "Get up this minute, Orion, and come to me."

"Really," continued the good lady to herself, "there must be something uncanny in those outlandish names; I don't think I can manage these children. Orion is as bad as Diana, and she is the greatest handful I ever came across."

"Come here, Orion," continued the governess, "and tell me what is the matter with your stomach."

"Pain," answered the little boy, "crampy pain. It's the ginger-beer. I'm drefful sick; I can't do no more lessons."

"Let me put him to bed," said Diana; "let me go nurse him. I'll sit on his bed and talk to him. He is a very naughty boy, but I know how to manage him. Come 'long, Orion; come 'long wid sister Di." She grasped the little boy firmly with one of her own stout little hands, and pulled him up on to his feet.

"Diana, you are not to interfere," said Miss Ramsay. "Come, Orion; come and explain what is the matter."

"Lollipops," moaned Orion, "and ginger-beer. Oh, I did like the lollipops, and I was so thirsty I thought I'd never leave off drinking ginger-beer."

"But where did you get lollipops and ginger-beer? Mrs. Dolman never allows the children to take such unwholesome things. What can you mean? Where did you get them?"

To this question Orion refused to make any reply. Baby as he was, he had a confused sort of idea of honor. Philip and Conrad had told him that he was on no account whatever to mention the fact that they had gone away fishing on the previous afternoon, that they had visited a little shop and spent some of Orion's own money. Philip and Conrad had no money of their own, but before he parted with the children, Mr. Delaney had given the two elder ones five shillings apiece, and the two younger ones half a crown, and Orion's half-crown had seemed great wealth to Philip and Conrad, and had accordingly induced them to treat the little fellow with marked consideration. The whole of the money was now gone. How, Orion had not the slightest idea. He only knew that his pockets were empty and that he felt very sick and very miserable.

He shut up his little lips now and raised his eyes, with a sort of scowl in their expression, to Miss Ramsay's face.

"Where did you get the lollipops and ginger-beer?" repeated the governess.

"That's my own business," said Orion. "I'm drefful sick; I want to go to bed."

"You are a very naughty little boy," said Miss Ramsay.

"I think him a brick," whispered Philip to Conrad.

"Hush, for goodness' sake!" whispered back Conrad.

"I want to go to bed," repeated Orion. "I'm drefful sick; I'm quite tired of telling you. I have got a headache and a pain in my tumtum." Again he pressed his hand to his stomach and looked imploringly around him.

"What's all this fuss?" here burst from Diana. "Why can't Orion go to bed? New teacher, you has a very queer way of managing sildrens. When we was at home we went to bed when we had pains. I can't underland you, not one little bit."

"Come with me this moment, Orion," said Miss Ramsay. "Diana, if you speak a word except in the French tongue, you shall be kept in during all the afternoon."

Orion and Miss Ramsay left the room, and the other children stared at one another. The three Dolman girls sat down to their books. Philip and Conrad thought it best to follow their example. Iris and Apollo looked wistfully from one to the other, but did not dare to speak; but Diana, walking boldly over to the nearest window, amused herself by touching each fly in turn with the tip of her small fat finger.

"They don't like it, poor darlin's," she said to herself, "but I don't mean to hurt 'em. I wonder now if I could get away to the wood and get hold of my bow and arrow. Miss Wamsay must be shotted as well as the others. It's awful what I has got to do."

Apollo sank dejectedly down before the account of the Spanish Armada, and Iris, with tears slowly rising to her eyes, turned over her lesson books. At last the impulse to do something was more than she could stand, and, rising from her seat, she edged her way to the door. Mary called after her in French to know what she was going to do, but Iris would make no reply. She reached the door, opened it, and then ran as fast as she could to the nursery.

There she found Simpson putting Orion to bed. The little boy was crying bitterly.

"As soon as ever you lie down, master, you have got to drink off this medicine," said Simpson.

"I won't touch it--horrid stuff!" said Orion.

"But you must, sir. I'll allow no 'won'ts' in my nursery. Little boys have got to do what they are told. If you make any fuss I'll just hold your nose and then you'll be obliged to open your mouth, and down the medicine will go. Come, come, sir, none of those tears. You have been a very naughty little boy, and the pain is sent you as a punishment."

"Oh, there you are, Iris!" said Orion. "Oh, Iris! I am so glad. Please be a mother to me--please put your arms round me--please kiss me, Iris."

Iris flew to the little fellow, clasped him in her arms, and held his hot little forehead against her cheek.

"Simpson," she said, turning to the nurse, "I know quite well how to manage him. Won't you let me do it?"

"I am sure, Miss Iris, I'd be only too thankful," said the perplexed woman. "There's Miss Ramsay and my mistress in no end of a state, and Master Orion as obstinate as a boy can be. There's something gone wrong in this house since you four children arrived, and I really don't know how I am to stand it much longer. Not that I have any special fault to find with you, Miss Iris, nor, indeed, for that matter, with Master Apollo; but it's the two younger ones. They are handfuls, and no mistake."

"I like being a handfu' 'cept when I'm sick," said Orion. "I don't want to be a handfu' to-day. Please, Iris, don't mek me take that horrid medicine."

"He must take it, Miss Iris; he won't be better till he do," said the nurse, lifting up the glass as she spoke and stirring the contents with a spoon. "Come, now, sir, be a brave boy. Just open your mouth and get it down. Then you'll drop asleep, and when you wake you will probably be quite well."

Orion pressed his lips very tightly together.

"You'll take the medicine for me, Orion?" said Iris.

"No, I can't," he moaned.

"Oh, but, darling! just try and think. Remember you are a giant--a grand, great giant, with your girdle and your sword, and this medicine is just an enemy that you have got to conquer. Here now; open your mouth and get it down. Think of mother, Orion. She would like you to take it."

Orion still kept his mouth very firmly shut, but he opened his sweet, dark eyes and looked full at his sister.

"Would mother really like it?" he said at last, in a whisper.

"Of course; it would make her ever so happy."

"And will she know about it, Iris?"

"I think she will. Maybe she is in the room with us just now."

"Oh, lor'! what awful talk to say to the child," murmured Simpson to herself.

"If I really thought mother could see, and if I really thought--" began the little boy.

"Yes, yes, she can see!" said Iris, going on her knees and clasping both the little fellow's hands in one of hers. "She can see, she does know, and she wants her own brave giant to be a giant to the end. Now, here is the enemy; open your mouth, conquer it at one gulp."

"Well, to be sure," whispered Simpson.

Orion, however, did not glance at Simpson. He gazed solemnly round the room as if he really saw someone; then he fixed his brown eyes on his sister's face, then he opened his mouth very wide. She instantly took the

cup and held it to the little lips. Orion drained off the nauseous draught and lay back, panting, on his pillow.

"It was a big thing to conquer. I am a fine giant," he said, when he returned the empty cup to Iris.

"Yes, you are a splendid old chap," she replied.

At that moment Mrs. Dolman and Miss Ramsay entered the room.

"Has Orion taken his medicine?" said Mrs. Dolman. "Iris, my dear, what are you doing here?"

"I am very sorry, Aunt Jane," replied Iris, "but I had to come. He would never have taken his medicine but for me. I had to remind him--"

"To remind him of his duty. He certainly wanted to be reminded. So he has taken the medicine. I am glad of that; but all the same, Iris, you did very wrong to leave the schoolroom."

"Please forgive me this one time, Aunt Jane."

"I really think Iris does try to be a good child," interrupted Miss Ramsay.

"And she certainly can manage her little brother, ma'am," said Simpson, speaking for the first time. "He would not touch his medicine for me--no, not for anything I could do; but he drank it off when Miss Iris talked some gibberish, all about giants and belts and swords."

"'Tisn't gibberish," said Orion, starting up from his pillow; "it's the truest thing in all the world. I am a giant, and I has got a belt and a sword. You can look up in the sky on starful nights and you can see me. 'Tisn't gibberish."

"Well, lie down now, child, and go to sleep. I am afraid he is a bit feverish, ma'am."

"No, that I aren't," said Orion. "Only I'm drefful sick," he added.

"Listen to me, Orion," said Mrs. Dolman, seating herself on the edge of the bed and gazing very sternly at the little fellow. "I intend to wring a confession out of you."

"What's to wring?" asked Orion.

"I am going to get you to tell me where you got the lollipops and ginger-beer."

"I promised not to tell, and I aren't going to," answered Orion.

"But you must. I insist."

"Perhaps, Aunt Jane," said Iris, "I could get him to tell. You see he is not accustomed to--not accustomed to----" Her little face turned crimson.

"What do you mean, Iris? Do you object to the way I speak to this child?"

"Mother never spoke to him like that," said Iris.

"And oh! it is so hot, and he is not well, and I think I can manage him. I may get him to tell me."

"Yes, I'll tell you," said Orion, "'cos you'll be faithful."

"Well, really," said Mrs. Dolman, "I am absolutely perplexed. I suppose I must give in on this occasion, or that child will be really ill, and I by no means wish to have the expense of a doctor. Miss Ramsay, you and I had better leave that little pair together. You can remain with Orion until dinner-time, Iris."

"Thank you very much indeed, Aunt Jane," replied Iris.

That day at dinner Iris looked very grave. Orion was better, but was not present. Mrs. Dolman waited until the meal had come to an end, then she called the little girl to her side.

"Now, my dear Iris, what is all this mystery?" she asked.

"Orion has told me all about it, Aunt Jane, but I don't think I'll tell. Please don't ask me."

"My dear. I insist upon knowing."

"It was not his fault, Aunt Jane, and I am almost sure he will never do it again; he is very sorry indeed. I think he will try to be good in future."

Mrs. Dolman was about to reply angrily, when a sudden memory came over her. She recalled words her brother had used.

"I will give you the children," he had said, "but you must try to be gentle with them."

She looked at Iris now, and did not speak for nearly a minute.

"Very well," she said then; "you are a queer child, but I am inclined to trust you. Only please understand that if ever there is any misconduct in the future, I shall insist on knowing everything."

"I am greatly obliged to you, Aunt Jane. I could love you for being so kind. I will promise that Orion never does anything of that sort again."

The children all filed out of the dining room. They had now, according to the rule of the day, to return to the schoolroom and lie down for an hour. This part of the daily programme was intensely distasteful to the little Dolmans, and certainly the Delaneys did not appreciate it a bit better, but at long last the wearisome lessons were over, and the little people were free.

The moment they got into the garden Philip and Conrad might have been seen scudding away as fast as their little feet could carry them. Iris, however, had watched them disappearing.

"I want to speak to the boys," she said to Ann.

"Why?" asked Ann.

"Please ask them to come to me, Ann; I have something most particular to say to them."

"I know what you mean," answered Ann, turning crimson; "it was Philip and Conrad who got poor little Orion into mischief. Oh, Iris! it was brave of you, and it was brave of Orion not to tell. I wondered how you had the courage to defy mamma."

"I did not defy her," answered Iris. "But please, Ann, I must speak to the boys. Send them to me at once."

"They are frightened, and are going to hide," said Ann; "but I'll soon get them," she answered. "I know their ways."

After a minute or two she returned, leading Philip and Conrad by the hands.

"Iris wants to talk to you," she said to them.

"Yes," said Iris, "I want to say something to you by yourselves."

Ann disappeared.

"I love Iris," whispered little Ann Dolman to herself. "I think she is beautiful; and how brave she is! I wish I were like her."

"What do you want with us, Iris?" asked Philip, when he found himself alone with his cousin. He raised defiant eyes, and put on an ugly little scowl.

"I want to tell you, Phil," said Iris, "that I know everything. Poor little Orion would not confess, because you got him to promise not to tell; but, of course, he told me the truth. Don't you think you behaved very badly indeed?"

"We don't want *you* to lecture us," said Conrad.

"All right," replied Iris with spirit. "But please remember that I promised Orion I would not tell, only so long as you make me a promise that you will not tempt him again. If ever I hear that you have led Orion into mischief, I will tell everything."

"I thought you looked like a tell-tale," said Conrad.

"No, I am not, nor is Orion; you know better, both of you. Now, please understand that I will not have Orion made miserable nor tempted to do naughty things. Aunt Jane thinks you are good boys, and she thinks Diana and Orion very bad little children; but neither Orion nor Diana would do the sort of thing you both did yesterday. Neither of them would think of *that* sort of naughtiness. I call it mean."

Iris walked away with her head in the air. The boys gazed after her with a queer sinking of heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

BIRCH ROD.

Orion speedily recovered from his bad fit of indigestion, and matters began to shake down a little in the schoolroom and nursery. No one meant to be unkind to the little Delaneys; and although all things were changed for them, in some ways both Iris and Apollo were all the better for the strict and vigorous discipline they were now undergoing. Iris really enjoyed her lessons, and when Apollo found that he had no chance of going to school, and of being with "fellows," as he expressed it, until he had conquered certain difficult tasks which Miss Ramsay set him, he began, for his own sake, to apply himself to his lessons. He was a bright, clever little chap, and when he tried to understand his governess' method of teaching, he did his work fairly well. But Diana and Orion were much too young for the somewhat severe transplantation which had taken place in their little lives. Had Iris been allowed to be with them matters might not have grown quite so bad, but she was much occupied with her lessons, and the younger children spent the greater part of their time alone.

Philip and Conrad were afraid to make any further advances to Orion. In consequence, he had no companion near his own age, except Diana, and Diana's little heart, day by day, was growing fuller of insubordinate and angry feelings. She was not at all by nature an unforgiving little child, but the want of petting and the severe life which she was obliged to lead began to tell on her high spirits. She became defiant, and was always looking out for an opportunity to vent her wrath upon the people whom she termed her enemies. Had Iris only had a chance of talking to the little girl, she would soon have got to the bottom of the matter, and things might not have turned out as they did; but Iris did not even sleep in the room with Diana, and in her sister's presence the little girl made a valiant effort to appear as happy as usual. As a matter of fact, however, she and

Orion spent most of their playtime in perfecting their little scheme of revenge, and on a certain hot day matters came to a crisis.

It had been much more trying than usual in the schoolroom; the sun seemed to beat in with fiercer rays; there were more flies on the window-panes, and the air seemed more charged with that terrible sleepiness which poor little Diana could not quite conquer. At last she dropped so sound asleep that Miss Ramsay took pity on her, and told her she might go and have a run in the garden.

"Go into the Filbert walk," said the governess; "don't on any account play where the sun is shining. You may stay out for half an hour. There is a clock just by the stables, which you can see when you come to the end of the walk; you will know then when the half-hour is out. Run off now and enjoy yourself."

Diana scarcely wasted any time in thanking Miss Ramsay. She flew from the schoolroom as though she were herself a little arrow shot from a bow, she tumbled rather than walked downstairs, and with no hat over her thick, black curls, careered out wildly, shouting as she did so. The prospect of the walk and the look of the sunshine were making the little girl very happy, and she might not have thought of any special revenge had not Mrs. Dolman at that moment caught sight of her.

Mrs. Dolman was coming out of the kitchen garden. She had on her invariable mushroom hat, her face was much flushed with exercise, and she was by no means in the best of humors.

"Diana," she said, "what are you doing? Come here this minute."

"No, I won't," answered Diana. She backed before the good lady, dancing and skipping and flinging her fat arms over her head. "Oh, it's 'licious out!" she said: "I won't come. I has only got half an hour; I hasn't any time; I won't come."

Mrs. Dolman began to run after her, which fact excited the little girl very much. She instantly raced away, and the stout lady had to follow her, panting and puffing.

"Diana, you are a dreadfully naughty little girl; if I catch you up, won't I punish you!" panted Mrs. Dolman.

"I don't care," called back Diana. "You can't catch me up; you is fat; you can't wun. See, let's have a wace--let's find out who'll be at the end of the walk first. Now then, one, two, three, and away! Go it, Aunt Jane! Now, then, k'ick, Aunt Jane; k'ick!"

Mrs. Dolman's rage at this great impertinence made her almost speechless. She flew after Diana, but would have had little or no chance of catching her, if the child had not suddenly tripped up against a stone and measured her full length on the ground. Before she could rise again Mrs. Dolman had caught her by the shoulder, and, as a preliminary measure, began to shake her violently.

"You are a bad little thing," she said. "Why didn't you come to me when I called you?"

"Cos I didn't want to, Aunt Jane."

"But do you know that you have got to obey me, miss? What would your mother say?"

"You isn't to dare to talk of mother to me," answered Diana.

"Highty-tighty! I'm not to dare. Do you suppose, Diana, that I will allow a little child like you to defy me in my own house?"

"What's defy?" asked Diana.

"You are defying me now; you are a very naughty little girl, and I shall punish you."

"I don't care," said Diana, tossing her head. "I was sent out by Miss Wamsay 'cos I found the schoolroom too hot and I was sleepy. I can't obey you and Miss Wamsay both at the same time, can I? I did not come to you 'cos I don't like you."

"That's a pretty thing to say to your own aunt. Come, miss, I shall punish you immediately."

"Oh, you's going to lock me up in the punishment woom. I don't care one bit for that," said Diana. "I'll just lie on the floor and curl up like a puppy and go to s'leep. I dweam beautiful when I s'leep. I dweam that you is shotted, and that I is back again in the dear old garden at home with all the pets; and that Rub-a-Dub is alive again. I dweam that you is shotted down dead, and you can do no more harm, and----"

But Diana could not proceed any further. Mrs. Dolman, in her wild indignation, had lifted her in her arms, clapped her hand over her mouth, and carried her bodily into the study, where Mr. Dolman was preparing his sermon.

"William," said his wife, "I am really very sorry to disturb you, but I must ask you to come to my assistance."

"In what way, Jane?" he said. He pushed his spectacles, as his invariable habit was, high up on the middle of his forehead, and looked from his wife to Diana, and from Diana back again to his wife.

"Hi, Diana! is that you? Why, what is the matter, little one?" he said.

"You are not to speak to this very naughty little girl," said Mrs. Dolman. "I am sorry to trouble you, William, but matters have come to a crisis, and if you don't support your wife on this occasion, I really do not know what will happen."

"But, my dear Jane, do you mean to say that little Diana----"

"Little Diana!" repeated Mrs. Dolman. "She is quite a monster, I can tell you--a monster of ingratitude, wickedness, and rudeness, and I don't see how we can keep her any longer with our own children."

"But I am afraid, my dear wife, we cannot get David Delaney back now; he must have reached the Himalayas by this time."

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Dolman, "I pity him for being the father of such a very bad little girl."

"I aren't bad," cried Diana. "If you say any more, naughty woman, I'll slap 'oo."

Mrs. Dolman thought it best to let Diana slide down on the floor.

The moment the little girl found her feet she rushed up to her Uncle Dolman.

"I like you, old man," she said; "you isn't half a bad sort. I'll stay with you. P'ease, Aunt Jane, punish me by letting me stay with Uncle William. I'll just sit on the floor curled up, and maybe I'll dwop as'leep, and have my nice dweams about the time when you is shotted, and I'm back again in the old garden with all my darlin', dear, sweet pets. I'll dweam, p'waps, that we is having funerals in the garden and we is awfu' happy, and you is shotted down dead. Let me stay with Uncle William, Aunt Jane."

"Now, you see what kind of child she is, William," said Mrs. Dolman. "You have heard her with your own ears--she absolutely threatens *me*. Oh, I cannot name what she says; it is so shocking. I never came across such a terribly bad little girl. William, I must insist here and now on your chastising her."

"In what way?" said Mr. Dolman. "I am very busy, my dear Jane, over my sermon. Could it not be postponed, or could not you, my dear?"

"No, William, I could not, for the dark room is not bad enough for this naughty little girl. She must be whipped, and you must do it. Fetch the birch rod."

"But really," said Mr. Dolman, looking terribly distressed, "you know I don't approve of corporal punishment, my dear."

"No more do I, except in extreme cases, but this is one. William, I insist on your whipping this very bad little girl."

"I don't care if you whip me," said Diana. She stood bolt upright now, but her round, flushed little face began perceptibly to pale.

Mr. Dolman looked at her attentively, then he glanced at his wife, and then at the manuscript which lay on his desk. He always hated writing his sermons, and, truth to tell, did not write at all good ones; but on this special morning his ideas seemed to come a little more rapidly than usual--now, of course, he had lost every thought, and the sermon was ruined. Besides, he was a kind-hearted man. He thought Diana a very handsome little fury, and was rather amused with her than otherwise. Had she been left alone with him, he would not have taken the least notice of her defiant words. He would have said to himself, "She is but a baby, and if I take no notice she will soon cease to talk in this very silly manner."

But alas! there was little doubt that Uncle William was very much afraid of Aunt Jane, and when Aunt Jane dared him to produce the birch rod, there was nothing whatever for it but to comply. He rose and walked slowly and very unwillingly across the room. He unlocked the door of a big cupboard in the wall, and, poking in his large, soft, flabby hand, presently produced what looked in Diana's eyes a very terrible instrument. It was a rod, clean, slender, and with, as she afterwards expressed it, *temper* all over it. It flashed through her little mind by and by that, if she could really secure this rod, it might make a better bow even than the one which she and Apollo had hidden in the wood, but she

had little time to think of any future use for the birch rod at this awful moment. The terrible instrument in Uncle William's flabby hand was carried across the room. When she saw it approaching her vicinity she uttered a piercing shriek and hid herself under the table.

"Come, come; none of this nonsense!" said Mrs. Dolman. "Punished you shall be. You must be made to understand that you are to respect your elders. Now, then, William, fetch that child out."

"Diana, my dear, you are a very naughty little girl; come here," said Mr. Dolman.

Diana would not have minded in the least defying Aunt Jane, but there was something in Uncle William's slow tones, particularly in a sort of regret which seemed to tremble in his voice, and which Diana felt without understanding, which forced her to obey. She scrambled slowly out, her hair tumbled over her forehead, her lower lip drooping.

"Suppose I have a little talk with her, Jane; suppose she says she is sorry and never does it again," said Mr. Dolman.

"Oh, yes, yes, Uncle William!" said Diana, really terrified for the first time in her life. "Yes, I's sossy--I's awfu' sossy, Aunt Jane. It's all wight now, Aunt Jane; Diana's sossy."

"You shall be a great deal more sorry before I have done with you," said Mrs. Dolman, who had no idea of letting the culprit off. "Now, then, William, do your duty."

"But it's all wight," said Diana, gazing with puzzled eyes up into her aunt's face. "I's been a bad girl, but I's sossy; it's all wight, I say. Naughty wod, go 'way, naughty wod."

She tried to push the rod out of Mr. Dolman's hand.

"Really, Jane, she is only five years old, and--and a poor little orphan, you know."

"Yes," said Diana eagerly, "I's a poor orphan, only a baby, five years old, awfu' young, and I's sossy, and it's all wight now. Go 'way, Aunt Jane; go 'way, naughty Aunt Jane; I's sossy."

"William," said Mrs. Dolman, "if you refuse to give that child the necessary punishment which is to make her a Christian character, I shall simply wash my hands of her. Now, then, miss, get on my lap. William, do your duty."

Poor Mr. Dolman, pale to the very lips, was forced to comply. Down went the rod on the fat little form--shriek after shriek uttered Diana. At last, more from terror than pain, she lay quiet on Mrs. Dolman's knee. The moment she did so, Mr. Dolman threw the rod on the floor.

"It's a horrid business," he said. "I hate corporal punishment. We have hurt the child. Here, give her to me."

"Nonsense, William! She is only pretending."

But this was not the case. The fright, joined to the state of excitement and heat which she had been previously in, proved too much for the defiant little spirit, and Diana had really fainted.

Mrs. Dolman was frightened now, and rushed for cold water. She bathed the child's forehead, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing her coming to again.

There was not a word of defiance from Diana now, and not a single utterance of reproach, but when she looked at Mrs. Dolman there was an expression in her black eyes from which this lady absolutely recoiled.

"Uncle William, I's hurted awfu'," whispered Diana. "Let me lie in your arms, p'ease, Uncle William."

And so she did for the rest of the morning, and the sermon never got written.

CHAPTER XIV.

DIANA'S REVENGE.

Diana had quite a nice time for the rest of the morning. Uncle William had not the least idea of sending her back to the schoolroom.

"It's very hot," he said, "and I feel sleepy. I dare say you do also."

"I do awfu'," answered Diana. "You isn't a bad old man, not at all," she continued. Here she raised her fat hand and stroked his flabby cheek.

"You hates writing sermons, don't you?"

"Diana," he answered, "I would rather you did not speak about it."

"Oh, I can keep secrets," replied Diana.

"Well, in that case, to be quite frank with you, I do not care for writing sermons."

"And I don't care for learning lessons. You didn't mean to sting me so bad with that howid wod, did you, Uncle William?"

Mr. Dolman made no reply with his lips, for he did not like to defy his wife's authority, but Diana read his thoughts in his rather dull blue eyes.

"You is a kind old man," she said; "that is, when you isn't tempted by that naughty, howid woman. You is a kind old man by yourself, and you shan't be shotted."

"What do you mean by being shotted, Diana?"

But here Diana pursed up her rosy lips and looked rather solemn.

"That's a secret," she answered. "Uncle William, may I have a whole holiday to-day?"

"I think so, my dear little girl. I really think that can be managed. It is too hot to work--at least, I find it so."

"Then course I does also," answered Diana, clapping her hands. "Shall we go out into the garding--what you say?"

"Would you like to?" he asked.

"Yes, more particular in fruit garding. We can eat cherries and strawberries, and pelt each other. What you say?"

Mr. Dolman looked out of the open window. He was pretty certain that his wife by this time was absent in the village. The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past eleven; the early dinner would not be ready until one o'clock. It would be cool and pleasant in the fruit garden, and it would please poor little Diana, who, in his opinion, had been very harshly treated.

"All right," he answered, "but, you know, your aunt is not to be told."

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and, stretching out his long hand, allowed Diana to curl her fingers round one of his.

"I should wather think Aunt Jane isn't to know," replied Diana, beginning to skip in her rapture. "I don't like aunts; I always said so. I like uncles; they isn't half bad. You isn't bad, for an old man. You is awfu' old, isn't you?"

"Not so very old, Diana. I'm not forty yet."

"Forty! What a ter'ble age!" said Diana. "You must 'member all the kings and queens of England; don't you, Uncle William?"

"Not quite all, Diana. Now, I'll just take you through the garden, for I think a little fresh air will do you good."

"And if I pop cherries into your mouf it 'll do you good," answered Diana. "Oh, we'll have a lovely time!"

So they did, and Mr. Dolman devoutly hoped that there was no one there to see. For Diana rapidly recovered her spirits, and picked cherries in quantities and pelted her uncle; and then she ran races and incited him to follow her, and she picked strawberries, heaps and heaps, and got him to sit down on a little bench near the strawberry beds, and popped the delicious ripe berries into his mouth; and although he had never played before in such a fashion with any little girl, he quite enjoyed it, and presently entered the house with his lips suspiciously red, and a confession deep down in his heart that he had spent quite a pleasant morning.

At dinner-time Diana and her uncle walked into the room, side by side.

"Well, William," said Mrs. Dolman, "I hope you have finished your sermon."

"Not quite, my dear," he answered.

"Not kite, my dear," echoed Diana.

Mr. Dolman gave her a half-terrified glance, but she was stanch enough, and had not the least idea of betraying the happy morning they had spent together.

Towards the end of the meal, her clear little voice might have been heard calling to her uncle.

"Uncle William, you wishes me to have a whole holiday; doesn't you? You pwomised I is to have a whole holiday to-day."

Now, Mrs. Dolman had felt very uncomfortable about Diana during her hot walk to the village that morning. She had not at all minded punishing her, but when she saw her lying white and unconscious in her arms, she

had certainly gone through a terrible moment, and had, perhaps, in the whole course of her life, never felt so thankful as when the black eyes opened wide, and the little voice sounded once again. The look, too, that Diana had given her on this occasion she could not quite efface from her recollection. On the whole, therefore, she felt inclined to be gentle to the little girl, and when she pleaded for a holiday Mrs. Dolman did not say a word to interfere.

"It is a very hot day, and Diana was not quite well this morning," said Mr. Dolman, glancing first at his wife and then at Miss Ramsay, "so, all things considered, perhaps--"

"Thank you, uncle," interrupted Diana, "it's quite settled, and you isn't half a bad sort of old man. And now, please, I want Orion to have a holiday too."

"Oh, that's another matter!" interrupted Miss Ramsay. "Orion is in perfect health to-day, and as he is extremely backward for his age--"

"But the heat of the day, and the child being so young," put in Mr. Dolman.

"I'd be much happier if I had Orion with me," continued Diana, "and it's 'portant my being happy; isn't it, Uncle William? Please, Uncle William, say that Orion may have a holiday."

"I will give leave if your aunt and Miss Ramsay will," he replied.

"Oh, don't ask me!" said Mrs. Dolman, rising hastily as she spoke. "I wash my hands of the pair."

"She washes her hands of the pair, so she don't count," said Diana. "Is we to have a holiday, Uncle William? I is, but is Orion, too? That's the 'portant part," she added.

"I have no objection," said Miss Ramsay, who thought it best to close this scene as quickly as possible.

Orion uttered a shout of rapture, Diana rushed up to him, clutched him round the neck, and pulled him from the room.

Nearly wild with glee, they both ran helter-skelter out of the house, into the cool shrubbery beyond.

"Now, Orion," said Diana, the moment they found themselves alone, "you must cool down and not 'cite yourself too much. We has a ter'ble lot of work to do. I has got my holiday through awfu' suff'in'. I was beated and killed, and I has come fresh to life again. Course I's in a wage, and I's got a holiday for you and for me 'cos we must do our work. Wun upstairs, Orion, and bwing down your big straw hat and mine, and we'll go and find *them*."

Orion knew perfectly well what "them" meant. He looked hard at Diana, saw something in her eyes which she could not suppress, and, with a sigh of mingled pleasure and alarm ran off to do her bidding. He returned in less than a minute with his large sailor hat stuck on the back of his head, and a white sun-bonnet for Diana. Diana's sun-bonnet had a black bow at the back and black strings.

"Howid, hot old thing," she said, "I won't wear it. Here, let's hide it; I don't mind going with nothing."

"But you must not do that," said Orion, "'cos, if they see you, they'll catch you and bring you home. You had best sling it on your arm, Di; and then, if they are seen coming, why, you can pop it on your head."

"Well, p'w'aps so," answered Diana. "We has an awfu' lot to do this afternoon, Orion, 'cos Aunt Jane has got to be shotted, and I's thinking of having Miss Wamsay shotted too."

"But do you mean," said Orion, "that you'll really shoot 'em both?"

"Yes," replied Diana. "It has to be done; it's ter'ble, but it must be done. What would be the good if they wasn't shotted dead? Yes, they'll be shotted, and they'll have a public funeral, and after that we'll have a lovely time. Uncle William isn't half bad, and 'stead of doing howid lessons every morning we'll just go into the garding and eat stwawberries and cherries, and he'll play with us. He'll love to, for he don't like writing sermins a bit, and we'll blindfold him and he'll wun after us. He's k'ite a nice old man, and if Aunt Jane and Miss Wamsay is shotted--why, we'll have a jolly time. Now, let's wun and fetch the big bow and arrows."

Orion had always a great respect for his younger sister Diana. "Well," he said, "if you're a grand lady, don't forget that I'm a big giant, and that I've got a belt and a sword. There's Simpson, you know; she's rather a bother, and I can run my sword into her, if you really wish it, Diana."

"I'll think about it," answered Diana. "I don't want to have three persons deaded wight off; it might be sort of troublesome. I'll think what's best to be done with Simpson. Now, let's start at once."

Mrs. Dolman was under the supposition that the children had gone to play in the back garden. The greater part of that somewhat neglected domain was laid out in shrubbery, and there were shady trees and swings and see-saws, and other sources of amusement for the little Dolmans during their brief hours of play. Miss Ramsay also thought that Diana and Orion would go to the shrubbery. She went up, therefore, to the schoolroom quite contented. Mr. Dolman retired to his study, where he went to sleep, and Mrs. Dolman ordered the pony chaise, and went off to see a distant parishioner, who was very ill.

The house was wonderfully quiet, and nothing occurred to disturb Mr. Dolman in his deep slumber. The manuscript pages which were to be covered by his neatly written sermon lay in virgin purity before him. In his sleep he dreamt of little Diana, and awoke presently with a queer sense of uneasiness with regard to her. But he was by nature a very lazy

man, and it did not occur to him to inquire as to her present whereabouts. "She's a fine little soul," he said to himself. "I do wish Jane had not taken such a dislike to her. It is useless to drive that sort of child; she must be led, and led gently. 'Pon my word, I did have an entertaining morning with the little mite, and what a lot of strawberries she made me eat! I wonder Jane did not remark at dinner how poor my appetite was--I was dreadfully afraid she would do so. Certainly Jane is an active woman, an excellent woman, but just a little bit stern."

Meanwhile Diana, holding Orion by the hand, had started running up the long avenue. The little pair soon reached the lodge gates. Diana and her brother went out through the postern door which was at the side, and the next moment found themselves on the highroad. This road led in the direction of the shady woods where Apollo had hidden the bow and arrows a few weeks ago. It was a pretty road, a couple of miles in length, and well shaded by trees, a kind of outgrowth of the forest itself. As she was not likely to meet any of the Dolman family on the road, Diana did not wear her sun-bonnet, but kept it hanging on her arm. "It is nice to be out," she said, as she tripped along. "I love hot sun; I love twees; I love blue sky; I love dust."

"I don't," replied Orion; "this road is horrid dusty, and it gets into my shoes. I have only my house shoes on, you know, Diana."

"Oh, never mind!" answered Diana. "If you is a giant, you isn't going to g'umble. What is the use of g'umbling? You be all wight soon. We'll be in the wood soon, and we'll have got the bow and arrows, and then we'll have to pwactice shooting. Oh, I say, there's a turnstile and a path, and I believe the path leads stwaight to the wood. Let's leave the woad and go to the wood that way."

"All right," replied Orion. He always did say "all right" to every single thing Diana asked him to do.

The children now found themselves in a shady lane, between high hedgerows. It was a pretty lane, only very sultry at this time of day; but Diana, seeing butterflies flying about, began to give chase to them. She also stopped many times to pick flowers. Orion shouted as he ran, and neither of the little pair minded, for a time at least, the fact that the sun was pouring on their heads, and that their small faces were getting redder and redder.

"It's stweaming down with hotness," said Diana, at last. "I must stop a bit or I'll melt away. I don't want to melt till I has shotted my enemies. Is you stweaming with hotness, Orion?"

"Yes," said Orion.

They stood still, took out their handkerchiefs, mopped their faces vigorously, and then continued their walk. The time seemed to drag all of a sudden; they were both very tired. How glad they were when they finally reached the friendly shelter of the Super-Ashton woods. Here it was deliciously cool, and here Diana, thoroughly exhausted, threw herself on her face and hands, and, before Orion could say a word, had dropped off into sound sleep. He thought she looked very comfortable, and it occurred to him that he could not do better than follow her example. Accordingly, he also stretched himself on the ground, and, with his head resting on one of Diana's fat little legs, also visited the land of dreams. For two hours the children slept. When they awoke at last they found that the sun was no longer high in the heavens; it was veering rapidly towards the west, and was sending slanting and very beautiful rays of light through the wood. Diana rubbed her eyes and looked around her.

"It's awfu' hung'y," she said. "How does you feel, Orion?"

"My tumtum's empty," answered Orion.

"We'll pick berries in the wood," said Diana; "that'll sat'sfy us. Berries is wight for wunaway sildrens. Do you 'member what we has come here for, Orion?"

"To amuse ourselves, I suppose," replied Orion.

Diana gave him an angry flash from her black eyes.

"What a silly little boy you is!" she said. "We has come for most solemn, 'portant business. I is Diana--the gweat Diana what lived years and years ago--and you is Orion. I is the gweatest huntwess in all the world, and I's going to shoot Aunt Jane and Miss Wamsay. Now, come 'long, Orion, and let's look for the bow and arrow."

The children searched and searched, and after a long time did actually discover the crooked and badly made bow and the blunt arrow.

"Here they is, the darlin's!" cried Diana. "My own bow, my own arrow--how I loves 'em! Now, Orion, I is going to shoot you--for pwactice, you know, and then you shall shoot me for pwactice too. You stand up there against the twee, and I'll make good shots. You don't mind if I does hurt you a bit, does you?"

"But I don't want to be shotted down dead," replied Orion.

"No, I won't go as far as that. It's only Aunt Jane and Miss Wamsay who is to be shotted dead; but you'll have to be shotted, 'cos I must pwactice how to do it."

"But couldn't you practice against the tree without me standing there?" said Orion, who had no fancy to have even this very blunt arrow directed at his face.

CHAPTER XV.

MOTHER RODESIA.

After some very slight persuasion Diana induced Orion to put his back up against an oak tree and to allow her to shoot at him. He quickly discovered that he had little or no cause for fear. Diana's arrows, wielded with all the cunning she possessed, from the crooked bow, never went anywhere near him. They fell on the grass and startled the birds, and one little baby rabbit ran quite away, and some squirrels looked down at the children through the thick trees; but Orion had very little chance of getting hurt.

"It's awfu' difficult," said Diana, whose face grew redder and redder with her efforts. "If it don't shoot pwoper, Aunt Jane won't get shotted to-night. What is to be done? Suppose you was to twy for a bit, Orion?"

Orion was only too anxious to accede to this proposition. He took the bow and arrow and made valiant efforts, but in the course of his endeavors to shoot properly, the badly made bow suddenly snapped in two, and Diana, in her discomfiture, and the dashing to the ground of her hopes, burst into tears.

"You is bad boy," she cried. "See what you's done. Back we goes to slav'ry--to Aunt Jane and Miss Wamsay. You is a bad, howid boy."

"I aren't," said Orion, who had a very easily aroused temper. "It's you that's a horrid little girl."

"Come, children; what's all this noise about?" said a voice in their ears.

They turned abruptly, forgetting on the instant their own cause of quarrel, and saw a tall, swarthy-looking woman coming towards them. By this time it was beginning to get dark in the wood, but they could see the figure of the woman quite distinctly. She came close to them, and then,

putting her arms akimbo, surveyed them both with a certain queer expression on her face.

"Well, my little dears," she said, "and what may you two be doing in this part of the wood?"

"We is pweparing to have our enemies shotted," answered Diana, in a calm, but sturdy, voice. "What's your name, gweat big woman?"

"Mother Rodesia Lee," replied the woman, "and I'm fond of little children. I like to meet them in the wood. I often come into the wood, and when I see little strange children I love 'em at once. I'm a sort of mother to all little strangers who get into the woods without leave." Here she flashed a pair of black eyes full into Diana's face. But Diana met their gaze without a vestige of shrinking, with eyes as black.

"We has not come without leave," she said; "you is naughty to talk that way. We has got a whole holiday to-day from our Uncle William. He didn't say nothing 'bout not going into the woods, and we has been here for lots of hours. We is going home now 'cos we is hung'y, and 'cos my bow has got bwoke. We is awfu' unhappy--we is mis'ble, but we is going home. Good-night, woman; don't keep us talkin' any longer."

"I aint going to keep you," said the woman; "only, p'r'aps, if you two are so hungry, p'r'aps I could give you a bit of supper."

"Oh, yes, Diana! Do let her," said Orion.

"What sort of supper?" asked Diana, who never allowed herself to be taken unawares. "Would it be stwawberries and k'eam, or would it be cake and milk?"

"Strawberries and cream, and milk and cake, plenty and plenty," said the woman. "And what do you say to delicious soup and honey, p'r'aps? Oh, come along, my little loves; I'll give you something fine to eat."

"Do let's go," said Orion; "my tumtum's so empty it feels like a big hole."

"I know," said the woman, in a very sympathetic voice. "I have had it myself like that at times. It's sort of painful when it's like that; aint it?"

"Yes," answered Orion. He went up to his sister, and took her hand.

"Come along, Di," he said. "Do let this nice woman give us our supper."

"You may be sure I won't give it," said the woman, "unless both you little children ask me in a very perlite voice. You must say, 'Please, Mother Rodesia.'"

"I can't say that keer sort of name," said Diana.

"Well, then, call me mother without anything else. They often does that at home--often and often. All the little kids is desp'ate fond of me. I dote so on little children. My heart runs over with love to 'em."

"You would not let a little girl be beated?" said Diana.

"Be beaten?" replied the woman. "No, that I wouldn't; it would be downright cruel."

"I was beated to-day," said Diana; "it was an enemy did it, and I'm going to have her shotted."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that!" said the woman. "You might be hanged up for that."

"What's being hanged up?" asked Diana.

"It's something very bad--I need not tell you now; but there are laws in this country, and if you shoot your enemies you are hanged up for it. You are not allowed to do those sort of things in this country."

"Yes, I are," answered Diana, "'cos I are the gweat Diana. You underland, don't you?"

"I don't know that I do; but, anyhow, I have no time to stand talking now. Come along, and you can tell me afterwards. I have got such a nice supper--plenty of strawberries and cream, plenty of milk and cake."

"Oh, my tumtum," said Orion, pressing his hand to that part of his little body with great solemnity.

"How soon will the supper be over? and how soon can we get back home?" asked Diana.

"That depends on where your home is, my pretty little dear," said Mother Rhodesia.

"It's at Wectory, stoopid woman."

"I don't know that place, miss."

"Don't you know my Uncle William Dolman?"

"What! the rector?" said the woman. "And so you come from the *Rectory*?" She looked frightened for a moment, and her manner became hesitating. "Are you one of the rector's children, my little love?" she asked.

"No; he's only an uncle; he belongs to an aunt. I hate aunts. He's not a bad sort his own self; but I hate aunts!"

"Then you wouldn't mind if you was to leave her?"

"No. But I can't leave Uncle William, and I can't leave Iris, and I can't leave Apollo. We would like some supper 'cos we is hung'y, and it's past our tea hour; but then we must go stwaight home."

"All right, my little love; everything can be managed to your satisfaction. My son has got a pony and cart, and he'll drive you over to the Rectory in a twinkling, after your appetites are satisfied. I can't abear to see little

children real hungry. You come along with me this minute or the supper will be eat up."

Diana hesitated no longer. She carried her broken bow on one arm, and she slung her arrow, by a string, round her neck; then, taking one of Mother Rodesia's large brown hands, and Orion taking the other, the two children trotted deeper into the dark wood. They all three walked for over a mile, and the wood seemed to get darker and denser, and the children's little feet more and more tired. Orion also began to complain that the hole inside him was getting bigger and bigger; but Mother Rodesia, now that she had got them to go with her, said very few words, and did not take the least notice of their complaints. At last, when they suddenly felt that they could not go another step, so great was their fatigue, they came out on an open clearing in the wood, in the center of which a great big tent was pitched. Several smaller tents were also to be seen in the neighborhood of the big one, and a lot of children, very brown and ugly, and only half-dressed, were lying about on the grass, squabbling and rolling over one another. Some dogs also were with the children, and an old woman, a good deal browner than Mother Rodesia, was sitting at the door of the big tent.

As soon as ever the children saw the little strangers, they scrambled to their feet with a cry, and instantly surrounded Mother Rodesia and Orion and Diana.

"Back, all of you, you little rascallions," said Mother Rodesia; "back, or I'll cuff you. Where's Mother Bridget? I want to speak to her?"

When Mother Rodesia said this the old woman at the door of the principal tent rose slowly and came to meet them.

"Well, Rodesia," she said, "and so you has found these little strangers in the wood? What purty little dears!"

"Yes, I have found them," said Mother Rodesia, "and I have brought them home to supper. After supper we are to send them home. They hail from the Rectory. Is Jack anywhere about?"

"I saw him not half an hour back," said the old woman; "he had just brought in a fat hare, and I popped it into the pot for supper. You can smell it from here, little master," she said, stooping suddenly down and letting her brown, wrinkled, aged face come within an inch or two of Orion's. He started back, frightened. He had never seen anyone so old nor so ugly before. Even the thought of the strawberries and cream, and the milk and cake, could not compensate for the look on Mother Bridget's face.

Diana, however, was not easily alarmed.

"The stuff in the pot smells vedy good," she said, sniffing. "I could shoot lots of hares, 'cos I is the gweatest huntwess in all the world. I is Diana. Did you ever hear of Diana, ugly old woman?"

"You had best not call Mother Bridget names," said Mother Rodesia, giving Diana a violent shake as she spoke.

But the little girl leaped lightly away from her.

"I always call peoples just what I think them," she said; "I wouldn't be the gweat Diana if I didn't. I has not got one scwap of fear in me, so you needn't think to come wound me that way. I do think she is awfu' ugly. She's uglier than Aunt Jane, what I *used* to think was the ugliest person in the world. You had best not twy to fwighten me, for it can't be done."

"What a spirited little missy it is!" said Mother Bridget, gazing with admiration at Diana. "Why, now, she is a fine little child. I'm sure, dearie, I don't mind whether you call me ugly or not; it don't matter the least bit in the world to me. And how old may you be, my little love?"

"I is five," answered Diana. "I's a well-grown girl, isn't I?"

"That you are, missy, and hungry, too, I guess. You shall have some beautiful hare soup."

"I don't want hare soup," answered Diana; "I want what that woman pwomised--stwawberries and k'eam, and milk and cake--and then, perhaps, a *little* soup. I don't want soup to begin."

"Well," said the old woman, "we hasn't got no strawberries, nor no milk, nor no cake--we are very poor folks here, missy. A little lady must be content with what she can get, unless, my dear, you would like to pay 'andsome for it."

"I has nothing to pay with," answered Diana. "I would, if I had the money, but I hasn't got none. I's sossy," she continued, looking full at Mother Rodesia as she spoke, "that you big, big woman told such awfu' lies. But, now that we has come, we'll take a little hare soup. Orion, you stand near me, and don't any of you dirty peoples come up too close, 'cos I can't abear dirty peoples. I is the gwreatest shot in all the world, and Orion, he's a giant."

Two or three men had approached at that moment, and they all began to laugh heartily when poor little pale Orion was called a giant.

"You can see him in the sky sometimes on starful nights," continued Diana, "and he has got a belt and a sword."

"Well, to be sure, poor little thing," said Mother Rodesia, "she must be a bit off her head, but she's a fine little spirited thing for all that. I think she would just about do. You come along here for a minute, Jack, and let me talk to you."

The man called Jack moved a few steps away, and Mother Rodesia followed him. They began to talk together in low and earnest voices. At first the man shook his head as he listened to Mother Rodesia, but by

degrees he began to agree with some suggestion she was making, and finally he nodded emphatically, and at last was heard to say:

"It shall be done."

Meanwhile Diana, with one arm clasped protectingly round Orion's waist, was partaking of the soup which old Mother Bridget had ladled into a little bowl. Orion was provided with a similar bowl of the very excellent liquid. The soup contained meat and vegetables, pieces of bread and quantities of good gravy, and, as Diana and Orion were very hungry indeed, they ate up their portions, while the gypsy children clustered round them, coming closer and closer each minute. Diana's eyes, however, were as black as theirs, and her manner twice as spirited. She would not allow them to approach too close.

"You had best not take lib'ties," she said. "I is a gweat lady; I is Diana, the biggest shot in all the world."

"Oh, lawk! hark to her," cried one of the boys. "I wonder if you could shoot me, little miss?"

"Shoot you, boy?" cried Diana. "That I could. You would be shotted down dead if I was to take up my bow and use my arrow."

At last the children had finished the contents of their bowls, and rose solemnly to their feet.

"Now," said Diana, going up to Mother Bridget, "I are vedy obliged to you; you has been kind; you has gived us good supper. We'll 'scuse 'bout the stwawberries and k'eam and the milk and cake, 'cos you didn't know that the other big woman told lots of lies. And now, p'ease, we are going home. We isn't glad to go home, but we is going. P'ease tell the man to put pony to cart, and dwive us home as fast as he can."

"Yes, indeed, my little dear," said Mother Bridget; "there aint one moment to be lost. You just come inside the tent, though, first for a minute."

"I don't want to go inside that dirty tent," said Diana; "I don't like dirt. You had best not twy to take lib'ties. I is Diana, and this is Orion, and we is both very big peoples indeed."

At that moment Mother Rodesia came forward.

"They need not go into the tent," she said to the old woman; "I can manage better than that. Just you help lift 'em into the cart; it's a dark night, and there'll be no stars, and we can get off as far as----" Here she dropped her voice, and Diana could not hear the next words.

"I'm going with them," she continued, "and Jack will drive. They are exactly the kind of children Ben wants. Now then, little missy, jump in. Ah, here you are! You'll be glad of the drive, won't you?"

"When will we get back to Wectory?" asked Diana.

"In about an hour, missy."

"Come 'long, Orion," said Diana, "you sit next me. Hold my hand, poor little boy, case you is fwightened. Diana never was fwightened; that isn't her."

Orion scrambled also into the cart, and the two children huddled up close together. Mother Rodesia got in with them, and sat down at the opposite side, with her knees huddled up close to her chin. The man called Jack mounted the driver's seat, whacked the pony with two or three hard touches of his whip and away they bounded.

The night was very dark, and the cart rattled roughly, and jolted and banged the children about, but Orion felt comforted and contented after his good supper, and Diana's fat little arm felt warm round his neck, and

soon his head rested on her shoulder and he was sound asleep. Not so little Diana. She sat wide awake and gazed hard at the woman, whose dark eyes were seen to flash now and then as the party jolted over the roads.

"Tell him to go k'icker," said Diana. "I must get home afore Uncle William goes to bed. Aunt Jane might beat me again, and I don't want to be beated. Tell him to go k'icker, Mother 'Odesia."

CHAPTER XVI.

UNCLE BEN.

Mother Rodesia was most kind and obliging. The pony was whipped up, and now it seemed to Diana's excited fancy that they quite flew over the road. She felt for her broken bow, which she had laid by her side, then she cuddled up closer to Orion, and whispered to herself:

"Mother 'Odesia's a good woman when all's said, done. She has gived us supper and soon we'll be home; and Uncle William won't be in bed, and he won't let c'uel Aunt Jane beat me. It's all wight; I may just as well go to s'leep, 'cos I is drefful s'leepy, and it's late. I wonder if the night will be starful, and if I'll see Orion up in the sky. Anyhow, there's no stars at pwesent, and I had best go to s'leep."

So the little girl cuddled herself up close to her brother, and soon the big dark eyes were shut, and she was happy in the land of dreams.

When this happened, Mother Rodesia softly and stealthily changed her position. She stretched out her hand and touched Jack on his arm. This seemed to have been an arranged signal, for he drew up the pony at once.

They were still under the shelter of the great woods which extended for miles over that part of the country.

"We had best begin to change their clothes now," said Mother Rodesia.

"They are both as sound as nails, and I don't want the clothes to be seen by Ben, for he's safe to pawn 'em, and if he pawns 'em the police may get 'em, and then the children may be traced, and we may get into hot water."

"But, mother," said Jack, "do you dare to disturb them now when they are asleep? That young 'un with the black eyes is such a fury; seemed to me as if she was never goin' off."

"She's all right now," said Mother Rodesia. "She's just dead tired. Of course, if I had had my way, I'd have put a little of that syrup into their soup--Mother Winslow's Syrup--but Mother Bridget wouldn't have it. She took quite a fancy to the little gal, and all on account of her firing up and calling her names."

Jack laughed.

"I never seed sech a little 'un," he said, "sech a sparky little piece. Ben's in rare luck. I'd like to keep her for a sort of little sister of my own--she'd amuse me fine."

"Well, well, you aint a-goin' to have her," said Mother Rodesia. "I'm goin' to ask thirty shillin's for her and thirty shillin's for the boy. That'll be three pund--not a bad night's work; eh, Jack?"

"No," replied Jack; but then he continued after a pause, "You'll tell him, won't you, mother, to be good to the children. I wouldn't like to think that little 'un was treated cruel, and her sperit broke--she has got a fine sperit, bless her; I wouldn't like it to be broke. I don't care for the little boy. There's nothing in 'im."

"Well, stop talking now," said Mother Rodesia. "They must be missed at the Rectory by this time, and they'll be sendin' people out to look for 'em. It's a rare stroke of luck that nobody knows that we are camping in the Fairy Dell, for if they did they would be sure to come straight to us, knowin' that poor gypsies is always *supposed* to kidnap children. Now, Jack, you just hold the pony as still as you can, and I'll slip the clothes off the pair of 'em."

Little Diana, in her deep sleep, was not at all disturbed when stout hands lifted her away from Orion, and when she lay stretched out flat on a large lap. One by one her clothes were untied and slipped off her pretty little body, and some very ugly, sack-like garments substituted in their place. Diana had only a dim feeling in her dreams that mother was back again,

and was undressing her, and that she was very glad to get into bed. And when the same process of undressing took place on little Orion, he was still sounder asleep and still more indifferent to the fact that he was turned sometimes over on his face, and sometimes on his back, and that his pretty, dainty clothes, which his own mother had bought for him, were removed, never to be worn by him again.

"Now, then," said Mother Rodesia, when she had laid the two children back again upon the straw, "when they awake, and if Ben is not there, we must dye their faces with walnut juice; but we can't begin that now, for they are sure to howl a good bit, and if folks are near, they will hear them and come to the rescue. Jack, have you got that spade 'andy?"

The man, without a word, lifted a portion of the straw in the cart, and took out a spade.

"That's right," said the woman. "You make a deep hole under that tree, and put all the clothes in. Bury 'em well. I'll rescue 'em and pawn 'em myself when we go to the West of England in the winter, but for the present they must stay under ground. See, I'll wrap 'em up in this good piece of stout brown paper, and then perhaps they won't get much spoiled."

Jack took the little bundle (there were the soft, pretty socks, the neat little shoes, even the ribbon with which Diana's hair was tied), and twisted them all up into a bundle. Then his mother wrapped the bundle in the piece of brown paper, and gave it to him to bury.

This being done the pony was once more whipped up, and the cart proceeded at a rapid rate. They were now on the highroad, and going in the direction of a large town. The town was called Maplehurst. It was fifteen miles away from the Rectory of Super-Ashton.

Little Diana slept on and on, and the sun was beginning to send faint rays of light into the eastern sky, when at last she opened her eyes.

"Where is I?" she said with a gasp.

"With me, my little dear; you are as safe as child can be," said Mother Rodesia. "Don't you stir, my love; you are just as good as you was in your little bed. See, let me lay this rug over you."

She threw a piece of heavy tarpaulin, lined with cloth, over the child as she spoke.

Diana yawned in a comfortable manner.

"Isn't we at Wectory yet?" she asked.

"No, dear; the pony went lame, and we had to stop for a good bit on the road; but if you like to go to sleep again, you'll be there when next you wake."

"I isn't s'leepy any longer," said Diana, sitting bolt upright in the cart. "Oh, what a funny dwess I has on. Where is my nice b'ack dwess, and my pinafore, and my shoes and socks?"

"Well, dear," said Mother Rodesia, "you were so dead asleep, and the pony got that lame we couldn't stir hand nor foot, so I thought it best to put a little nightdress on you."

"But what a funny one," said Diana, gazing with curious admiration at the stout, sack-like garment.

"It's the best poor Mother Rodesia has, my dear. I'm awful poor, you know."

"Is you?" asked Diana.

"Yes, dear."

"And does you mind?" asked Diana.

"Yes, dear; 'cos when people are poor they can't get bread to eat, and then they can't get nice clothes like you, little missy. You are a very rich little gal; aint you, little dear?"

"My faver's awfu' rich," said Diana. "We used to live in a most beaut'ful house, and we had a beaut'ful garding to play in. We had animals there--lots and lots. Woman, is you fond of animals--mices and that sort?"

"Love--I just adores 'em."

"Then you *is* a nice sort," answered Diana. She left her place by Orion and crept up close to the woman.

"May I sit on your lap?" she said.

Mother Rodesia made a place for her at once.

"Put your arm wound me, p'ease; I is still a teeny bit s'eeepy."

"You lay your head against my breast, little love, and you'll go off into a beautiful sleep, and I'll keep you nice and warm, for hot as the days are, it's chilly in the mornin's."

"When my faver comes home I'll ask him to give you lots of money, Mother 'Odesia," said Diana.

She closed her eyes as she spoke, and in another moment was once again slumbering peacefully.

When little Diana next opened her eyes all was completely changed. She was no longer in the funny cart with the straw. Her nightdress was still on her, it is true, and there were neither shoes nor stockings on her bare feet; but she and Orion found themselves in a dirty room with a nasty smell. Both children looked at one another, and both felt cold and frightened. The broad daylight was lighting up the room, and Diana could perceive that there was scarcely any furniture in it. Her bow was also gone, and

her arrow no longer hung round her neck. She clutched a firm hold of Orion's hand.

"Don't you be afeared, Orion," she said. "Don't you forget you is a big giant. Don't you forget you has got your belt and your sword."

"But I haven't, that's just it," replied Orion. "Diana, I aren't a giant, and I'm awfu' frightened."

"Where can us be?" said Diana. "What a keer room! But there's one good comfort; there isn't no aunts anywheres 'bout."

"I can't remember nothing," said Orion. "Why aren't we in bed? It's too early to get up. How have we got into this horrid little room?"

"I don't know more nor you," said Diana, "only I do know that we has got to be bwave. Don't you forget, Orion, that mother gived you your name, and that you is a giant, whether you likes it or not. Don't you forget that, and I won't forget that I is Diana, and that mother gived me my name too, and that I is the bwavest huntwess in all the world."

"But you haven't got a bow and arrow," said Orion.

Diana was silent for a moment.

"Anyhow," she said, with a little shake, "I isn't going to be fwightened. Let's sit close together, and let's think."

"Why can't we open that door and go out?" said Orion. "Why should we stay in this horrid room?"

"'Cos our foots is bare," said Diana.

"But don't let's mind that," said Orion; "let's go to the door and open it, and let's run back to Rectory. I'd rather have Aunt Jane and Miss Ramsay than this horrid room--and oh, Diana! my tumtum has got a big hole in it again."

"And mine has too," answered Diana. "I could eat a whole loaf, that I could."

"Hush!" whispered Orion; "somebody's coming. Oh, come close to me, Diana!"

"Now, you isn't to be fwightened, little boy," said Diana. "I is near you, and I isn't fwightened of nobody."

At that moment the door was flung open, and Mother Rodesia, accompanied by a tall, dark man, with a scowling face, came in.

"Mornin', little dears," said Mother Rodesia. "Now I have got something to say to you."

"P'ease, where's Wectomy?" asked Diana.

"You are not going there just for the present, my dear. This man, Ben is his name--you told me last night that you were fond of uncles--you can call 'im Uncle Ben; he's very kind and very, very fond of children."

"Oh, yes! I'm very fond of children," said the man. He spoke in a gruff voice which seemed to come right from the bottom of his chest.

"And as you don't like aunts," continued Mother Rodesia, "I have brought an uncle. You can call 'im Uncle Ben; and if you do just what he says, why, you'll be as happy as the day is long."

"Look here," said the man; "you stop your talk, Rodesia. Before I makes myself an uncle to these kids I must see what sort they are. You stand up along here, little gal, and let me examine you."

Diana scrambled instantly to her feet and went straight up to the man. She gave him a keen glance from her piercing black eyes.

"What wight has you to speak to me in that sort of style?" she said. "You isn't my uncle, and I isn't going to have nothing to do with you."

"There," said Mother Rodesia; "did I say one word too much for her?"

The man burst into a loud laugh.

"No, that you didn't," he said; "and aint you frightened of me, missy?"

"Fwightened?" replied Diana; "that aren't me." She turned her back and strode back to Orion.

"Member you is a giant," she said, in a whisper; "and giants never is fwightened."

The man laughed again.

"Well, they are a queer little pair," he said. "I tell you what it is, Rodesia Lee; I'll give you a pund apiece for 'em. Come, now; not a penny more."

Diana stared very hard indeed when these words were uttered. She had not the faintest idea what a "pund apiece" meant. Mother Rodesia seemed to consider.

"And you may think yourself in rare luck," continued the man; "for, remember, if it is known--" Here he walked to the farthest end of the room, and Mother Rodesia followed him.

"You had best close up the bargain and be quick about it," he said; "for not one penny more will you drag out of me. I'll give you a gold sov. for each of 'em, and that's as much as I can manage. They will take a sight of training, and then there's the risk."

"Very well," said Mother Rodesia, "I suppose I had best do it; only they are worth more. There's a fortune in that little gal, and whenever you are tired of her, why, there's a rich father to fall back on. I spect he would give a sight of money to have her back again. Very well, we'll agree; only, if ever you do get a fortune out of that child, Ben Holt, you might remember poor Rodesia Lee."

The man laughed and patted Mother Rodesia on her shoulder. Then the pair left the room, locking the door behind them.

"What does it all mean?" said Orion.

"I don't know," said Diana; "but I aren't fwightened; that aren't me." Her little voice shook as she spoke, and she had great difficulty in keeping the tears back from her big, black eyes.

CHAPTER XVII.

GREASED LIGHTNING.

At the end of half an hour the door of the small room was again unlocked, and a woman with a thin, pale face, and somewhat frightened manner, appeared. She carried a tray in her hand, which contained two little bowls of porridge, and a small jug of milk. "So you are the two young 'uns," she said. "Well, you had best be quick and eat up your breakfast. Uncle Ben is going to have a rehearsal, and he wants you to see what they are all doing."

"We hasn't got no Uncle Ben," said Diana; "don't be silly, woman. What's your name?" she added.

"I'm generally called Aunt Sarah," was the reply; "and now, look here, you two little mites; I'll be good to you if you'll let me. I'm real sorry you has come, and it's against my wish, you remember that. Now, eat up your breakfasts, both of you. Uncle Ben, he don't know that I have brought you porridge and milk; but children as young as you are can't eat coarse food. Sup up your porridge, my dears."

"Thank you very much indeed, Aunt Sawah," said Diana, slipping down from her seat close to Orion on the bench, and preparing to attack her breakfast. "P'w'aps," she continued, as she put great mouthfuls of porridge into her mouth, "when we has finished this nice bekfus you'll take us back to Wectory? You see, you isn't our aunt weally, not by no manner of wights, and Uncle Ben isn't our uncle, and so we ought not to stay here; and if we go back to Wectory, why, Uncle William, what's our weal uncle, p'w'aps he would pay you money, if it's money you wants."

"Yes; it's true enough, it is money we want," replied the woman; "but, my dear," she added, the tears springing to her eyes, "I can't take you back to no Rectory. You have just got to stay here and to watch Uncle Ben when he's going through his rehearsal, and then this afternoon we are going on

a very long journey, and you are coming with us--and oh, I forgot to say that, when you have finished your breakfast, I must put something on your faces."

"Something on our faces?" said Diana.

"Yes, my little love; it has to be done. But when we get to another part of the country I'll wash the ugly stuff off again, and you'll look as fair and pretty as you do now. It won't make much difference after all to you, little missy," she added, gazing fixedly at Diana, "'cos you are very dark by nature. Yes, I had a little kid of my own, a little gal, and she wasn't unlike you--no, not by no means. I'll be kind to you for her pretty sake, my little dear. Now, eat your breakfast, and be quick, the pair of you."

"Has your little girl what was like me got deaded?" asked Diana, in a very thoughtful and earnest voice.

"She is dead, my dear. Yes, yes, she is dead," replied the woman. "Eat up your breakfast now; I have no time to answer questions."

Orion did not need a second bidding; he had already plunged his spoon into the porridge, and soon his little bowl was empty, and also the jug of milk. Diana also finished her breakfast, but more thoughtfully. She was a wonderfully wise little girl for her tender years, and at the present moment she was dreadfully puzzled to know what to do. She was quite shrewd enough to guess that Mother Rodesia was a bad sort of woman, and that she, Diana, had done wrong ever to trust herself to her. Uncle Ben, too, in spite of her brave words, terrified her more or less. All things considered, therefore, she would not have been at all sorry to find herself back again at the Rectory, with Miss Ramsay to teach her, and Aunt Jane hovering in the background. "Isn't it funny, we has got our nightdresses on?" she said suddenly. "Woman, it's not pwoper to have our bekfus in our nightdresses; and these are such keer nightdresses, not at all what they ought to be. Our mother would not like us to be dwessed in this sort

of style. Can you get our day dwesses, p'ease, for us to put on, Aunt Sawah?"

"No; I can't get the dresses you wore yesterday," replied Aunt Sarah; "but for all that you shall wear a very pretty little frock. I have got a blue one for you with white wings. What do you say to that?"

"B'ue, with white wings?" echoed Diana. "It sounds pwetty; but I must have a b'ack bow, p'ease, woman, 'cos our mother has gone away to the angels, you underland; and when mothers go to the angels little girls wear b'ack bows--at least, that's what Iris says. Oh, I say, Orion," suddenly concluded Diana; "what is we to do without Iris? She is our little mother now. You underland what I mean; doesn't you, Orion?"

The only answer Orion made was to fling himself flat down on the floor and begin to howl with all his might.

"You had best not do that, young sir," said Aunt Sarah, "for if Uncle Ben hears he'll be awful angry. He is a terrible man when he's angered. It's only right I should tell you the solemn truth, you poor little kids."

"We isn't kids; we is sildrens," said Diana.

"Well, you poor little children, then. Now, young master, if you'll take my advice, you'll do exactly what I tell you. I'm going to be a friend to you and to your little sister. I'll give you, by hook or by crook, the very best food I can get, and the prettiest dresses to wear, and I'll see that my husband, Ben Holt, aint rough to you, and I'll see, also, that Molly and Kitty and Susan, the circus girls, are kind to you, and that Tom, the clown, behaves as he ought; but I can do nothing if you won't obey me. And if you begin by angering Uncle Ben, why, it'll be all up with you, my little dears."

"I don't know what you mean by all up," answered Diana, her eyes sparkling brightly; "and what's more, I don't care. But I'd like to know if

you has a weal live clown about, 'cos I like clowns and I love pant'mimes. I went to a pant'mime 'fore mother was took to the angels."

"Our show is something like a pantomime, and yet it's different," replied Aunt Sarah. "Now then, missy, stop talking, for we has no time to waste. Come over here and let me put this nice stuff on your face. It won't hurt you one little bit--it's just to make you look a little browner than you do now, you and little master. Now, come along here, and let me do it at once. Afterwards, I'll dress you in real pretty things. You, little missy, shall wear some of my own child's clothes--the little Rachel what died. My heart broke when she died, missy, and if I didn't mean to be real kind to you I wouldn't put her pretty little dress on you, that I wouldn't."

Orion stepped back in some alarm when he saw the woman stirring something very brown and ugly in a tin can.

"I don't want that horrid stuff on my face," he said.

"But you must have it, master; if you don't, Uncle Ben will use you dreadful," said the woman. "Now, missy, tell your little brother to be guided by me. If he don't do what I tell 'im he'll suffer, and I won't be able to help either of you."

"Don't be silly, Orion," said Diana. "What do a little bwown stuff matter? And Aunt Sawah's wather a nice sort of woman. I'll do what you wish, Aunt Sawah." She came up as she spoke, pushed her black, tangled hair away from her charming little face, and allowed Aunt Sarah to cover it with the walnut juice. "It's sort of sticky, and it don't smell nice," said the little girl; "but I spects you can't help it. I spects you is kind about your heart; isn't you?"

"Yes, my little dear; I try to be," said the woman. "Now, call your brother over, and let me dye his face and neck and little hands."

"Come 'long, Orion," said Diana; "don't be silly."

"You do look so ugly, Diana," answered Orion.

"Well, what do it matter?" said Diana. "I has to p'ease Aunt Sawah; she's a nice sort of a woman. I wather like her."

Orion, who had always submitted to Diana, submitted again now as a matter of course. The walnut dye was not pleasant; he felt quite sticky and uncomfortable, but he allowed it to cover his little face and his white neck and hands.

The dye dried very quickly, and the children looked as like two gypsies as possible when they surveyed one another.

"Now, I'm going to fetch the clothes," said Aunt Sarah.

She left the room, returning in a very few moments with a pretty spangled suit of knickerbockers, which she put on Orion, and which quite enchanted him.

"If you are a good boy," she continued, "you won't dislike the life with us. I wonder if you are fond of horses?"

"Horses!" said Orion, his eyes sparkling. "Rather!"

"Well, Uncle Ben will teach you to ride, and to jump, and to do all kinds of things. Now, just stand back, and let me dress little missy, for Ben is waiting to begin the rehearsal. Missy, you let me put on your dress."

Diana was only too willing to be attired in a flimsy skirt of white tarlatan, which stuck out from her little figure; she also wore wings on her shoulders, and her black hair was rendered gay with bows of crimson ribbon. She felt quite excited and pleased with herself.

"I spects I look awfu' pwetty," she said. "I'd like to see my own self in a looking-glass. Has you got a looking-glass in your pocket, Aunt Sawah?"

"Yes, dear; a small one."

Aunt Sarah whipped her hand into a deep pocket and took out a glass. Diana surveyed herself critically in its depths.

"I like my dwess," she said, "but I don't like this howid bwown stuff on my face."

"Never mind, dear; bear it for the present. When we get down to the southwest of England it shall all be taken off; but up here Uncle Ben thinks it best for you both to have it on."

"Why?" asked Diana.

Aunt Sarah was puzzled for a moment.

"Cos it's wholesome," she said at last.

"And isn't it wholesome in the southwest of England?" asked Diana.

Aunt Sarah was puzzled how to reply. Diana, who was gazing at her very intently, burst into a clear, childish laugh.

"Do you know you *is* a humbug?" she said. "You know perfect well why you is using that. You want to hide us, that's why. What a silly old Aunt Sawah you is!"

Before Aunt Sarah could make a suitable reply, the loud voice of Uncle Ben was heard in the distance.

"Come, Sarah," he called, "bring those kids along. I can't be kept waiting another minute."

"Now then, dears," said Aunt Sarah, "I'll take you to the circus."

"The circus!" cried Diana. "Is we going to a circus? I love 'em!"

"Well, my dear, you are not only going to *see* a circus, but you are going soon to be part of a circus. Uncle Ben owns one; it's a sort of traveling

circus. He takes it about with him from one part of the country to another. You'll be part of the circus in the future, little miss."

"And may I ride horses?" asked Diana.

"Surely, my dear, and perhaps other animals as well. Oh, never fear! you'll be taught all kinds of queer things. You'll have quite a nice time if you keep on the buttered side of Uncle Ben."

"The buttered side! That must be g'easy," said Diana.

"Well, you keep on it, miss. If he's kind to you, why, all will be right, and, for my part, I'll see you want for nothing."

"I do believe," said Diana, her eyes sparkling; she turned as she spoke and clasped one of Orion's hands--"I do weally b'lieve this is better nor aunt's. Do come 'long, Orion; I always did love circuses."

Aunt Sarah led the children down a long, narrow passage, and then across an open court, until presently they found themselves inside the entrance of a huge circular tent. Here seats were arranged for a crowd of people, all of which were, of course, empty at present; but the whole of the center of the tent was occupied by a wide arena covered with sand. In the middle of this space stood Uncle Ben. He had a big whip in his hand, and looked very fierce and terrible.

"There you are at last, Sarah!" he called out. "Oh, and there are the kids!" He stepped forward as he spoke. "Now, little missy," he said, looking full at Diana, "what would you say if I was to put you on top of a horse's back? You wouldn't be frightened, would you?"

"No," replied Diana.

"I don't believe you would. I believe you are a plucky little girl. Well, I'd just as lief give you a lesson straight away, for you'll have to take your

part in the show in a week from now. We'll let her ride round the arena on Greased Lightning; eh, Sarah?"

"Oh, I wouldn't! Not on that 'orse," said the woman. She clasped her hands imploringly together. "Remember, Ben," she continued, speaking in a timorous voice, and her color coming and going, "remember that Greased Lightning is a very wicious sort of 'orse, and this is only a little child. Has you ever been on a 'orse's back afore, little love?"

"Sometimes," replied Diana. "And my faver said when I got older he would give me a horse of my own to wide. He said I was too young yet, you know; but I aren't fwightened," she added. "I don't mind a bit sitting on the back of G'eased Lightning. But what a funny name!"

"Right you are!" said the man. "You shall have your ride. I can see that you have plenty of pluck, young 'un. Come along, then, little missy. Tom, you go and bring out Greased Lightning this minute."

A tall lad, with red hair and a cast in one eye, now made his appearance in the arena of the circus. At Uncle Ben's words he turned abruptly, disappeared through a curtain, and a moment later re-entered, leading a very graceful chestnut horse by a bridle. The creature pawed the ground as it walked, and arched its stately neck.

"You had best have a saddle, guv'nor," said the boy.

"None of your sauce, Tom. The young 'un must learn to ride bare-back, and at once. I'll walk round with her the first time. Now then, missy."

Diana was clapping her hands; her eyes were blazing with excitement.

"It's kite 'licious," she said, jumping up and down. "I aren't fwightened," she continued; "that aren't me."

The next moment she was lifted on to the back of Greased Lightning. In all probability the horse which bore that title had never carried such a

feather-weight as little Diana before. Uncle Ben began to lead him round and round the circus. Diana sat perfectly upright; she did not attempt even to clutch a hair of his mane. Uncle Ben praised her.

"You are a plucky little missy," he said. "Why, you'll do fine. Now, do you think you can stand on the horse?"

"Course," replied Diana. "What's foots for, you silly man, if not to stand? You is silly, Uncle Ben."

"I never!" said Uncle Ben, bursting out laughing. "Well, missy, if I am silly, you has got a lot of sauce. 'What's good for the goose is good for the gander.'"

"That sounds howid vulgar, and I don't underland," answered Diana, in a dignified tone. "I'll stand on my two foots if you'll hold G'eased Lightning k'ite still."

"Woe! stay quiet this minute," said the man to the horse. The pretty creature instantly obeyed, and little Diana, nothing loath, scrambled on to her small feet. The horse moved gently forward, and the little child managed to keep her balance. She went the entire round of the circus two or three times in this position, and then Uncle Ben, saying that she was a very fine little creature, and would answer his purposes to a nicety, lifted her down in the height of good humor.

"Take care of her," he said, bringing her back to Aunt Sarah; "there's a fortune in her, little mite that she is. She need not do any more to-day. Why, I'll have her trained in no time when we get down to the west of England. She'll do her work beautiful, and will take the house by storm. Now then, master, it's your turn. We must have a pair of you, you know--a boy and a girl. It's the very thing to draw crowds in the west."

But alas! Orion, notwithstanding his brave name, was made of very different stuff from his sister. He felt fear, where Diana, in all truth, did

not know the meaning of the word. He shivered visibly when he was lifted on to Greased Lightning's back. Diana called out to him in an encouraging and cheery voice.

"Don't forget you is a giant," she said. "Think, of yous sword and yous belt. Now then, gee up! pretty horse; I only wishes I was widing you."

"Come, young master, don't clutch the mane so hard," said Holt. "Hands off, I say! Greased Lightning won't stand that kind of treatment."

But the more the manager spoke the tighter did Orion grasp the black mane of the chestnut horse. Greased Lightning began to paw the ground and to show many signs of discomfort; whereupon Orion uttered a piercing cry and began slipping backwards, towards the tail of the beast.

"Come," said the man; "get back to your seat this minute. I have a whip in my hand, and it can sting; come, young sir!"

"Don't you dare to stwike my bwother!" said Diana, running across the arena.

Some girls, who had just come in, and several men, all burst out laughing.

"You had best come back, miss; you had best not anger him," said a fair-haired girl, stretching out her hand to the little child as she spoke.

"Anger him?" said Diana. "I doesn't know what you mean. Does you think I are going to let Orion be hurted? Listen to me, man. You had best let Orion jump off this morning, 'cos he's tired. I'll talk to him all about widing to-morrow. Let him get down now, p'ease, big man."

"Not until he has been twice round the circus," said Uncle Ben. "You stand aside, missy, or Greased Lightning may tread on you."

But Diana was not to be so easily restrained. She now flew up to Uncle Ben and tried to pull his big whip from his hand.

"You don't dare to stwike my bwother!" she repeated, her eyes flashing. Her determined attitude, the fearlessness of her whole little nature induced Uncle Ben to yield to her for the nonce. This he did more, particularly as he saw that the little boy was really incapable of keeping his seat another moment.

"Well, then, look here, little miss," he said; "you has behaved very well indeed yourself, and so I'll let the little chap off this morning. Now you know, sir, it is 'cos of your sister, for she's a plucky 'un; so you may go back to my wife. Here, Sarah; take the pair of 'em. You can go and sit on one of them chairs over there, children, and see us as we go through our rehearsal."

The rest of the morning was a truly exciting, not to say breathless, time to Diana. She had not an instant to regret her absence from Iris and Apollo. The exploits, the feats performed by the three circus girls, and by Tom the clown, to say nothing of the advent of the elephant and of the donkey who could perform numberless tricks, and finally, the performances of the troop of dogs, who seemed more human than most human beings, all fascinated the little girl. Even Orion forgot his terrors as he looked on; his cheeks flamed through their walnut dye, and his dark eyes grew brighter than ever.

When the rehearsal was at last over, the whole party rushed back to their rooms, where a hasty meal was served; and little Diana sat between two of the circus girls and was petted, and laughed at, and made much of, and Orion kept close to Aunt Sarah, who took care that he should have as many tit-bits as she could manage to secure for him.

At three o'clock there was a public performance, but now neither Diana nor Orion was allowed to be present. They found themselves shut up once more in the ugly little room, where Mother Rodesia had first taken them. From this place they could hear as a sort of distant echo the shouts

of the men and women who were performing, and the cheers of the people who were looking on.

At six o'clock the performance came to an end, and then, indeed, began a fearful bustle and excitement. People were running here, there, and everywhere, and, two hours later, the great vans were all packed, the animals properly secured, and the party, with the exception of Aunt Sarah, Diana, and Orion, had started *en route* for the west of England.

"Why isn't we going with the others?" asked Diana.

"Cos the train is faster, little miss," answered Aunt Sarah. "And now the cab is at the door, and, if you will jump in at once we will be at the station in no time."

"I calls it lovely," said Diana, turning to secure Orion's approval. "I like it miles better nor lessons with Miss Wamsay nor being beaten by Aunt Jane. Only, course," she added, in a meditative voice, "I's twuly, twuly sossy for Uncle William and Iris and Apollo."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HEART OF THE LITTLE MOTHER.

It may seem almost impossible to believe that two little children could be kidnaped in the England of to-day. Nevertheless, such was the case.

Mother Rodesia had managed her theft with great skill. The gypsies had appeared unexpectedly in the Fairy Dell--no one knew they were there, therefore no one looked for them. Having kidnaped the children, Mother Rodesia took care immediately to bury their clothes, and then she sold them to Ben Holt, the great circus manager, who took them within a few hours right away to the southwest of England. The little children had not accompanied the *troupe*, but had gone with Aunt Sarah by train. There had been little fuss and no apparent attempt at hiding the pair, therefore no one thought of looking for them in the large southwestern town where Holt established his great circus.

It was the most popular time of the year for performing shows of all sorts, and Ben Holt expected to make a considerable sum of money out of the pretty and vivacious little pair.

Meanwhile, the police were on their track; advertisements about them were scattered all over the country--considerable rewards were offered, and there was more than one nearly broken heart in the pretty Rectory of Super-Ashton.

Even Aunt Jane felt by no means herself. She would not own to having done anything wrong, but she became wonderfully gentle to Iris and Apollo. She was unremitting, too, in her efforts to recover the lost children, and began to look quite peaky about the face and lined round the mouth.

As to Uncle William, he preached nothing but old sermons, finding it beyond his powers to devote his attention to anything fresh or new. He hated the study window where little Diana had lain in his arms--he hated the memory of the whip which he had used over her. On one occasion he even went the length of saying to his wife:

"Jane, it was your doing--she was too spirited a child for the treatment you subjected her to. She ought never to have been whipped. But for you she would not have run away."

This was a very terrible moment for Aunt Jane, and she was too much cowed and stricken to reply a single word to her husband. He could not help, notwithstanding his great anxiety, having a momentary sense of pleasure when he found that he had got the upper hand of his clever wife; but Aunt Jane had it out with the servants and the parishioners afterwards, and so revenged herself after a fashion.

As to Iris, a very sad change came over her. She grew thin and very pale; she scarcely ate anything, and scarcely ever spoke. Even Apollo, even little Ann quite failed to comfort her. She did not complain, but she went about with a drooping look, somewhat like a little flower which wants water.

"Iris is not well," Miss Ramsay said one morning to Mrs. Dolman. "She does not eat her food, and when I went into her bedroom last night I found that she was wide awake, and had evidently been silently crying. I think she ought to see a doctor!"

"Dear, dear!" replied Mrs. Dolman. "Do you know, Miss Ramsay, I am almost sorry I undertook the charge of the little Delaneys. They certainly have turned out, as their poor father expressed it, a handful. If Iris is really ill, I had better see her. Send her to me. You don't suppose she is--fretting?"

"Yes; of course she is fretting dreadfully," replied Miss Ramsay. "And no wonder, poor little girl! For my part, I consider it perfectly awful to contemplate the fate of those poor lost children."

"Oh, they will be found--they are likely to return here any day," replied Mrs. Dolman. "It is just like you, Miss Ramsay, to go to the fair with things, and to imagine the very worst. Why, for instance, should not some very kind people have found the children? Why must they, as a matter of course, have fallen into the hands of cruel and unprincipled folk? Some of the very sharpest detectives in Scotland Yard are on their track. For my part, I have not the slightest doubt that they will soon be brought back."

Miss Ramsay uttered a sigh.

"I will send Iris down to speak to you," she said.

This conversation occurred between three and four weeks after little Orion and Diana had disappeared. Mrs. Dolman was in her study. It was a very ugly room, sparsely furnished. There was a large, old-fashioned desk in the center of the room, and she was seated in an armchair in front of it, busily engaged making up her different tradesmen's books, when the door was softly opened and Iris came in.

Mrs. Dolman had not had any special conversation with Iris since the mysterious disappearance of the two younger children, and now, as she raised her eyes and looked at her attentively, she was startled at the great change in her appearance. The child was reduced almost to a shadow. She was dressed in her heavy black, without a touch of relieving white. Her lovely hair hung over her shoulders, and was pushed back from her low brow, bringing into greater contrast the small, pinched, white face, and the great brown eyes, which looked now too big for the little countenance to which they belonged.

"Come here, Iris," said Mrs. Dolman. She had always liked Iris the best of the children. "Come and tell me what is the matter."

Iris came slowly forward.

"Miss Ramsay says that you do not eat and do not sleep. If that is the case, I must send for the doctor to see you," continued Aunt Jane.

"Yes, Aunt Jane," answered Iris.

She hung her head listlessly. Mrs. Dolman put her arm round the slender waist and drew the child close to her side. Iris submitted to this embrace without in any way returning it.

"And when you see the doctor he will, of course, order you a tonic, and perhaps tell us to take you to the seaside. If that is the case, we must do so, Iris--we must do our duty by you, whatever happens. It would never do for you to be ill, you understand."

"Yes, Aunt Jane," answered Iris; "that's what I think myself--it would never do."

"Then you will try to get well, dear? You will do exactly what the doctor says?"

"Yes, Aunt Jane."

Mrs. Dolman looked earnestly into her little niece's face.

"You know," she said, in a brisk voice, "I am, for my part, quite certain that we shall get tidings of the lost children either to-day or to-morrow. We are not leaving a stone unturned to get them back."

Iris raised her delicate brows, and for a moment there came a flashing light of hope into her eyes; but then it died out. She lowered her lashes and did not speak.

"You are pale, and your hands are hot," said Mrs. Dolman.

"I feel hot," answered Iris, "and I am thirsty," she added.

"Oh, come! this will never do," said Aunt Jane. "I shall just take you away this minute to see the doctor."

She rose impatiently as she spoke. The apathy which was over Iris irritated her more than she could express. If the child had only burst into tears, or even defied her as little Diana used to do, she felt that she could comprehend matters a great deal better.

"If we are quick, we may see Dr. Kent before he goes on his rounds," she said. "Run upstairs at once, Iris, and fetch your hat."

Iris immediately left the room.

"The child looks as if something had stunned her," thought Mrs. Dolman to herself. "I never saw such a queer expression on any little girl's face. Now, I am quite certain if Philip or Conrad had been kidnaped, that Lucy and Mary would be a great deal too sensible to act in this silly way. The worst of it is, too, that there is nothing really to lay hold of, for the child does not even complain--she simply suffers. What am I to do? How am I to tell the children's father that two of them have disappeared, and the eldest, his favorite, too, is very ill?"

Iris re-entered the room, with her sun-bonnet hanging on her arm.

"Put it on, my dear, put it on; and brisk up a little," said Mrs. Dolman.

"There is no good in giving way to your feelings."

"I never give way to them, Aunt Jane. I try to be patient," answered Iris.

Mrs. Dolman tied on her own bonnet with her usual vigor. She then took one of the hot little hands in hers, and, a few moments later, the aunt and niece were standing outside Dr. Kent's door in the pretty little village street.

Dr. Kent was at home. He was a young man, and a clever doctor, and he gave Iris a good overhauling. He listened to her lungs and heart, put several questions to her, was kind in his manner, and did not express the least surprise when he heard that the little girl could neither eat nor sleep.

"I perfectly understand," he said. "And now, my dear, I hope soon to have you as right as a trivet; but, in the meantime, I should like to have a little talk with your aunt. Can you find your way into my dining room? You have only to turn to the left when you leave this room."

"Thank you," answered Iris. She went to the door, opened it, and shut it behind her.

"Now, what do you think about her?" said Aunt Jane. "Out with the truth, please, Dr. Kent. You know I never can stand any beating about the bush."

"There is nothing of the ordinary nature the matter with your little niece," began the doctor.

Mrs. Dolman raised her brows in surprise and indignation.

"How can you say that?" she remarked. "The child looks seriously ill."

"Please allow me to finish my speech. There is nothing the matter with the child in the form of organic or any other disease; but just at present there is such a severe strain on her mind that, if it is not completely relieved, she is very likely to die."

"Doctor! What a terrible thing to say!"

"It is true. The child needs rousing--she is losing all interest in life. She has been subjected to a terrible shock."

"Of course she has," replied Mrs. Dolman; "but the extraordinary thing is that a child of ten years of age should feel it so much."

"It is not extraordinary in that sort of child," replied the doctor. "Can you not see for yourself that she has a very delicate and a very nervous organism. She has lately, too, lost her mother, has she not?"

"Yes; and I believe the child was very fond of her; but, indeed, I may as well say that I never saw anyone more sensible than little Iris about that. She scarcely seemed to grieve at all. Of course, I dare say she was very sorry, but she did not show it."

"All the worse for her," answered Dr. Kent. "If she had given way about her mother, and allowed her grief to get the upper hand, she would not be so ill as she is now. Then came the second blow--the extraordinary loss of the children."

"Then you really think her very ill?" said Mrs. Dolman. "I would do anything to save her, doctor. These four children were put into my care by their father."

"Where is the father now?" asked Dr. Kent.

"He must have nearly reached the Himalayas by this time."

"Is it possible for you to communicate with him?"

"To say the truth, I have hesitated to do so. He suffered terribly at the death of his wife. It would be fearful for him to learn that two of the children are missing, and one very ill. I have waited, hoping for better news."

"You did wrong. He ought to know of this calamity. Each day that does not give you tidings of the missing children lessens the chance of your ever recovering them. I must say their disappearance is most mysterious."

"So it is," answered Aunt Jane suddenly. "And in my heart of hearts," she added, "I am greatly alarmed."

"Well, if I were you, I would send a cablegram to the address most likely to find Mr. Delaney."

"If you think it right."

"I do. It is the only thing to do. He ought to come home immediately. That little girl ought to have her father with her."

"Then your opinion is that Iris is very ill?"

"She is on her way to be very ill. At the same time, if her mind is relieved, she will be well in a week. Under existing circumstances, however, there seems but small chance of that. You ought to communicate with the father, and if I were you I would let the child do something herself--even if that something is useless--to try to recover her lost brother and sister."

"What do you mean? It really is impossible for the child to go over the country looking for Orion and Diana. Oh, what trouble I brought upon myself when I undertook the care of my brother's family!"

"I am very sorry for you, Mrs. Dolman, but I must give you my true opinion. Please act on my suggestion; I am sure you will not regret it. Communicate with the father in the quickest way possible, urge him to return to London without fail, and give little Iris something to do which will occupy and satisfy her mind. In the meantime I will order her a tonic, but medicines are not what she needs. She requires mind rest, and nothing else will make her well."

Mrs. Dolman left Dr. Kent's house, feeling very uncomfortable. She took Iris home, was wonderfully gentle to her during the walk, and sent her up to the schoolroom with a message to Miss Ramsay to say that she was not to do any more lessons that morning. Having got rid of Iris, she went immediately to have an interview with her husband in his study.

"Well, William," she said, "I own myself beaten."

"My dear Jane--beaten? In what way?"

"Here's a pretty mess," continued Mrs. Dolman; "Orion and Diana cannot be found, and Dr. Kent says that Iris is going to be very ill."

"Iris going to be ill?" repeated Mr. Dolman. "Has she caught anything taking. If so, Jane, it would be our duty to separate the children immediately."

"Oh, nonsense, William! Where would she take a catching complaint in a wholesome, well-sanitated rectory like this? Have you never heard of nerve troubles?"

Mr. Dolman opened his sleepy eyes and stared full at his wife.

"My dear," he said, "I often thought that *you* had never heard of them. So you really believe in them at last?"

"I am forced to when that pretty child is dying from the effects of them."

Mrs. Dolman then repeated to her husband all that Dr. Kent had said.

"I cannot stand the responsibility any longer," she said. "I will send a cablegram to David this very day. What will he think of me? Of course he will never forgive me. In the meantime, William, have you anything to propose about little Iris?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Dolman. "There may not be much in my suggestion; but the fact is, I feel dreadfully restless, sitting here day after day, doing nothing."

"William, what do you mean?" answered his wife. "Sitting here day after day, doing nothing! Have you not your parish to attend to?"

"Oh, I don't mean that--you attend to the parish, my love."

"Thank you, William, for acknowledging that fact at last."

"I frankly acknowledge it. Then, too, we have no sick poor in the parish, and everything is really in a prosperous condition; but the fact is, I hate sitting down to my comfortable meals, and lying down at night on my comfortable bed, not knowing in what part of the world dear, spirited little Diana may be. I don't think half so much about the boy as little Diana."

"You are like all the rest of your sex, William; you are taken by a child because it happens to be a girl and has a pair of black eyes. For my part, I never could bear little Diana."

"Please don't say that now."

"Oh, it is not that I am not sorry for her; of course, I am dreadfully sorry, and I acknowledge--I do acknowledge--that I have been more or less to blame. But now, please, come to the point--you always were such a man for going round and round a subject."

"Well, then," said Mr. Dolman, "this is it. The doctor wishes Iris to be roused. Let me take both her and Apollo, and let us begin to look for the lost children."

"And do you suppose," answered Mrs. Dolman, with a laugh, "that you will be more likely to find the children than the clever detectives who are on their track?"

"We can go to London and take a detective with us. Iris will at once feel happier if she is doing something. The fact is this: I am certain the inaction is killing her."

"It is an extraordinary plan," said Mrs. Dolman; "but after all, if it is the only way to keep Iris alive, I suppose we must consider it. But, William, I am the suitable one to take Iris and Apollo about. Indeed, why should Apollo go at all? He at least is in perfect health."

"The person to consider is Iris," said Mr. Dolman. "She will confide in Apollo when she will not confide in anyone else; and I think, Jane," he added, looking very strong and determined, "that she would rather go with me than with you." Mrs. Dolman flushed. "You know, Jane," continued her husband, "you have been a little hard on these children."

"Perhaps so," answered Mrs. Dolman, "and when I have tried to do my duty, too. But, of course, Evangeline's children were likely to be unmanageable; they had such extraordinary training when they were babies. However, as matters stand, I have not a word to say."

"Then, my dear, we will consider the thing arranged. We can easily get John Burroughs to lend us one of his curates for Sunday, and you will do all the rest. Now, shall I see Iris and submit the plan to her?"

"An extraordinary plan it is," answered Mrs. Dolman; "but perhaps you are right, William. At any rate, I have proved myself so completely in the wrong that I am willing on this occasion to be guided by you."

She rose from her seat, left the room, and went up to the schoolroom.

"Iris," she said to the little girl, "I want you and Apollo to come downstairs immediately."

Iris sprang to her feet; she grew white to her lips.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked.

"No, my dear, nothing--nothing whatever; only your uncle wishes to speak to you. Now, come at once, for he is not the sort of man to be kept waiting."

Mrs. Dolman left the room and the children followed her. When they reached the study, Iris went straight up to her uncle.

"What do you want with me, Uncle William?" she asked.

"The fact is this," he answered, scarcely looking at her, and speaking with great eagerness and emphasis for him; "you and I, Iris, have got to do something, and there is not a moment to delay."

A great flood of color filled Iris' cheeks, a new light darted into her eyes.

"Oh, yes, Uncle William," she said, panting as she spoke, "we have been doing nothing too long. It has nearly killed me, Uncle William," she added.

"Then, my dear, we will just be our own detectives--you and I and Apollo. We will start this very afternoon; we will look for the children ourselves. Why, what is the matter, my dear; what is the matter? What are you doing?"

For little Iris had fallen on her knees, had caught her uncle's hand in both of hers, and was pressing it frantically to her lips.

"Oh, Uncle William," she said, "how can I thank you? I promised mother the day she died that I would be a little mother to the others, and I have failed, I have failed dreadfully, and it is killing me, Uncle William. But oh, if I can find them again, and if you will really help me, and if we do start to-day--oh, if this is true, then I am happy again."

"You observe, my dear Jane," said Mr. Dolman, "that my proposal seems to be correct. Now, run off, Iris, and get Simpson to pack some clothes for you and Apollo. We will leave Super-Ashton by the three o'clock train."

CHAPTER XIX.

"A PIGMY I CALL HIM."

The seaside town of Madersley was crowded to excess. It was the height of the summer season, and Holt's circus was doing a roaring trade. There were two exhibitions daily, and every available corner in the great tent was crammed to excess. The spectators said that they came principally to see the little dark-eyed girl ride. For Diana had taken to the life almost as kindly as a young duck takes to the water. She had learned her part quickly, and in a very short time she could ride even the most spirited horse. She was really almost destitute of fear, and was even seen to laugh when she was put upon the back of a buck-jumper, who did his utmost to toss her off. There were always men or women close by to catch her if she did fail to go through any of the rings, the large paper balloons, or the other obstructions put in her way. Her piquant little face, the bold expression of her eyes, her fearless manner, and the unmistakable look of babyhood about her, roused the spectators to a frenzy of admiration.

But though Diana did well and delighted Ben Holt, Orion by no means followed her example. Put to the test, poor little Orion had little of the real giant about him. He was an ordinary little boy, with pretty black eyes and a good-humored, somewhat touching expression of face, but Diana was anything but an ordinary girl.

Orion, having slipped once or twice from the back of Greased Lightning, became terribly afraid of the beast, and always turned white to his little lips when he was going through his exercises. As a rule, Ben Holt always trained the novices himself, and although he was kind to Diana, he soon began to have a thorough contempt for little Orion.

"He's a peaky little chap," he said to his wife. "Why, he aint even worth the twenty shillin's I paid for 'im. Now the little 'un--the gal--there's a fortune in her; but the boy--I have no patience with the boy."

Meanwhile, he began to use rough language and threats to the child, and once or twice he even touched the little fellow with his great whip. On this occasion Orion lost every scrap of nerve he possessed, and fell flat down upon the sanded floor of the arena, shivering and crying painfully. Diana did not happen to be present. When she was by, small child that she was, Uncle Ben never showed at his worst, and Orion, looking round now in vain for his sister, gave himself up for lost.

"Now listen to me, you young villain," said the tyrant; "I'll force you to do what I want. You get on Greased Lightning's back this very minute."

Little Orion struggled painfully to his feet. A good-natured girl, who stood near, tried to say a word in his favor.

"Don't you forget that he's very young, Ben Holt," she said. "It will be all the worse for you if you are too hard on the little kid."

"I'll thank you not to give me any of your sauce, Susan Jenkins," was the angry reply.

Susan Jenkins, a pretty, slight, fair-haired girl, who went by the graceful name of Ariel in the circus programme, did not venture to say anything further, but in her heart she resolved to give Diana a hint of the true state of the case.

Orion was once more lifted on Greased Lightning's back, and the manager cracking his whip, the beautiful horse began to trot round and round the arena. At first the creature went fairly quietly, and Orion managed to keep his seat. His piteous white face, the black shadows under his eyes, his little trembling hands were noticed, however, by Susan. She kept near on purpose and tried to encourage him by smiles

and nods. When he passed close to her he heard her hearty voice saying, "Well done, little chap! You jest stick on and you'll be as right as a trivet."

A strangled sob by way of answer rose in Orion's throat. Alas! he knew only too well that he could not stick on. Louder and faster grew the crack of the manager's whip, and faster and fleeter trotted Greased Lightning. It was impossible for Orion to keep his seat; he had nothing to cling to, nothing to hold on to.

"You will have to do all this before the company to-morrow," called out the manager; "and now, no more of that easy sitting still. You jest scramble to your feet and *stand* on the 'orse's back."

"I can't! I'll be killed!" cried the child, whose face was white to his very lips.

Crack went the great whip.

"Stand up this minute, or you'll have a taste of this about your legs," said the man, in a brutal tone.

In deadly fear the little fellow struggled to his feet; he looked wildly round him, the horse trotted forward, the child fell on his face and hands and clutched hold of the black mane. This enraged the spirited beast, who began to dance and curvet about, and the next moment, but for the speedy interference of Susan Jenkins, little Orion would have measured his length upon the floor. Even as it was he was hurt and shaken, and lay weeping and trembling in her arms.

"Now, Susan, you jest listen to me," said Holt, in an enraged voice. "I aint a-goin' to stand this sort of thing. That little chap has got to learn his lesson or he don't stay here; he is not a patch on his sister, but he shall learn his part. I has it all arranged that them two children is to appear in public to-morrow, and the boy must help the gal. The gal will do her

work right well, but the boy must help her. It's the look of the two, and they so young, that I reckon on to fill the house. I'm determined that a mite of that sort shan't beat me. He could have stood on the horse's back if he had had a mind. He has disobeyed me and he shall be punished. You take 'im and lock 'im up in the black cage."

The black cage was a terrible place, in which some of the fiercer animals were put from time to time to train them. It really consisted of a huge box without windows, but with one or two small ventilating shafts in the door. On rare occasions, when thoroughly enraged, the manager had been known to lock a refractory member of the troupe up there; but such a punishment had never been given to a child before.

"Oh, no, Ben Holt! You can't mean that," said Susan. "Why, it'll frighten him awful, and it do smell so bad of the last leopard."

But for this answer the poor girl only got a crack of the whip round her ankles.

What might have really happened at the end is not known; but suddenly at this juncture the swing door was flung open and little Diana marched in. She held her head well back, and trotted boldly into the center of the arena.

"Dear, dear, what's all this fuss?" she cried out in her frank, hearty voice. "Uncle Ben, is anybody a-vexing of you?"

"Yes, my dear; that little brother of yours. You jest tell him to do his duty."

"Oh, Diana, Diana! he's killing me!" sobbed little Orion. He struggled out of Susan's arms, flew to his sister, flung the whole weight of his little body against her, and gave way to a fresh agony of howling and weeping.

Diana's black eyes flashed.

"You stay k'iet. Orion; 'member you is a giant," she said, speaking in a whisper to the boy. "It's here, and I'll look after you. You stay k'iet. Now, Uncle Ben, what's all this?"

"Only that silly boy won't ride Greased Lightning. He won't even stand on the 'orse, let alone leap through the rings and the balloons."

"Is that all?" said Diana, her eyes gleaming. "But I can do all that; I can do all that beautiful. *Dear Greased Lightning!*" She unclasped Orion's arms from her neck and trotted across the stage. She ran up to the great chestnut and began to stroke its nose. The creature licked her little hand and looked affectionately down at her small figure.

"Uncle Ben," she said suddenly, "I isn't going to have Orion punished; you isn't to do it; give him to me. You can't do anything with a little sild like that if you fwighten him. Give him to me, Uncle Ben; I'll manage him."

"But what are you but a little child yourself?" said Uncle Ben.

"Yes, but I is made different. Nothing fwightens me. I aren't afeared of nothing, and I aren't afeared of you, Uncle Ben, so don't you begin to think I is."

"Never seed sech a child," said Uncle Ben, once more restored to good humor. "Jest notice that perfect demon of a 'orse, how 'e takes to 'er. Never seed anything like it afore. Well, missy, and if you can manage your brother I'm sure I'll be only too pleased, but jest you remember this--you are both to go before the footlights to-morrow for the public to see. I has never had that young 'un on the stage yet, but he's to ride with you to-morrow."

"So he shall, Uncle Ben; course you will, won't you, Orion?"

"With you, Di," sobbed Orion; "if you are close to me, Di."

"Course I'll be close to you, Orion. I is the gweat Diana. Well, Uncle Ben, you isn't going to punish him. If you punish him he can't wide, 'cos he'll be ill. He's a giant."

"A pigmy I call him," said Uncle Ben.

"You talk silly," replied Diana; "he's a giant, 'cos mother said he was, and on starful nights you can see him shining in the sky."

"Bless you, child, don't take up any more of my time talking that gibberish."

"Well, he's not to be punished, 'cos I say he isn't. He's coming with me now to his dinner. Come 'long, Orion, this minute; I has come to fetch you. Good-by, Uncle Ben."

Uncle Ben did not utter a word. Orion and Diana left the arena, hand in hand.

"What about the black cage now, mister?" said the circus girl, with a sneer.

"Hang me, if I know what the world's coming to!" said Uncle Ben, scratching his head. "I can do nothing agen that little gal--she's the 'cutest, sharpest, bravest little cuss I ever come across."

"She's got the upper hand of you, leastways," said Susan, with a laugh; "and, for my part," she added, "I am right glad. I don't want that pore little kid to be used hard."

CHAPTER XX.

"LET'S PERTEND," SAID DIANA.

The circus was crowded that evening, but neither Diana nor Orion put in an appearance. They were to make their grand *debut* together on the following day, for hitherto only Diana had ridden in public. They were left now in the little room, all alone, but as they were together that did not matter at all to them. Orion's weary head rested against his sister's shoulder. Her stout little arm was flung round his waist; he was fast asleep, but there were traces of tears on his pale cheeks. It seemed a very long time now to little Orion since all the world had altered for him. From being a beautiful place, full of lovely gardens, and lovely homes, and kind people--from being full of snug little beds to sleep in, and nice food to eat, and loving services of all sorts--it had suddenly turned and shown its black face to the tenderly nurtured little boy. Rough words were now his portion; he had a hard bed to lie on, very insufficient and very poor food to eat, and in addition to these things, blows and kicks were measured out to him with a very liberal hand. Besides these fearful things, he was expected to do what terrified him into the very core of his somewhat timorous heart. Until he had been kidnaped by Mother Rodesia he had never known that he was really timid, but now this side of his nature had come to the fore. Day by day he grew more and more frightened, and for the last fortnight he really lost his appetite, and his health began to fail. He refused to eat the coarse and insufficient food, and when he slept his sleep was broken by bad dreams. Little Diana knew that there was something very wrong the matter, but she could not quite tell what. She had a very energetic little brain, however, and it was working now hard in Orion's behalf.

The noise and shouts made by the circus people were distinctly audible to the two little children. Orion raised his head, looked around him with a terrified glance, and began to cry feebly.

"Is Uncle Ben coming? Have I got to ride Greased Lightning? Di, are you there? are you close to me?"

"Course I is," answered Diana. "Orion, don't you be such a silly; I is with you. There's nothing going to happen."

"Nothing? Are you certain sure?" asked the child.

"K'ite. I is with you, Orion; don't you be fwightened; there's nothing going to happen."

Orion leaned comfortably back against the fat little shoulder.

"P'w'aps you is a bit hung'y," said Diana. "There's bwead and milk on the table; Aunt Sawah left it. Shall we eat our supper afore we talks?"

"I can't eat," replied Orion. "I'm not a scrap hungry; I am never hungry now. I wonder you can eat, Diana."

"Course I can eat," replied Diana; "I aren't a silly. I has got to wide G'eased Lightning. I love G'eased Lightning. Don't know why you is fwightened of him."

"But I am to ride Pole Star, and he's worse than Greased Lightning," replied Orion.

"Well, you listen to me," said Diana, speaking in a very firm and authoritative voice. "See, I am eating up my supper, and you had best have some with me. I'll sit by you on the floor, if you like, and feed you same as if you was a baby."

"But you are younger nor me," said Orion, with a little laugh; "seems, though, as if you were much older."

"Can't help that," answered Diana; "can't help feelin' old, whether we is nor not. You is almost a baby--I is k'ite a big girl. Now, open your mouth; I am going to pop in some food. Here's a vedy nice piece of bwead."

Orion did what Diana wished, but he could scarcely eat. Tears came suddenly into his eyes.

"I wish I was dead, like poor Rub-a-Dub," he said, after a pause; "I wish I was lying in the beautiful garden, in the cemetery part with Rub-a-Dub."

"Oh, don't be such a silly!" said Diana. "You has a lot to do afore you is deaded. Don't forget that you is a star and a giant."

"No, that I aren't," said the child. "Oh, Di! if mother was here she would be disappointed, for I am not a star, nor yet a giant. I'm just the frightenest little boy in the world."

"I has thought of a plan," said Diana very calmly. "You shan't wide Pole Star to-morrow; you shall wide G'eased Lightning."

"But I am nearly as frightened of one horse as the other."

"I know G'eased Lightning k'ite well by this time," continued Diana, "and if I are there he'll be gentle. You shall wide him, and I'll wide Pole Star."

"But I heard Uncle Ben say that I was to have the other horse."

"Never you mind that. What does that si'nify? I'll manage. I'm not fwightened of any horse that ever walked. If I are there, and if I look at G'eased Lightning, he'll be as good as good can be, and you must just keep looking at me, Orion, and do the things that I do. When you see me standing on Pole Star you must stand on your two foots on G'eased Lightning, and when we fly faster and faster you must still keep looking at me, and when I jump through the wings you must do the same, and then, Orion, then, why, it will be over. Now, bend down; I'm going to whisper something to you."

Orion bent his ear with deep interest.

"You don't mean it?" he said, when Diana had said some very energetic words in a low voice.

"Yes, I does. Does I say things I doesn't mean? I means it twuly, twuly. You wide G'eased Lightning, and then--then it'll all be over."

"Oh, I really think I can, if you are *quite* sure," said Orion. His little face brightened up, two fever spots came into his cheeks; his eyes shone.

"Are you quite sure, Di?" he said.

"Pos'tive certain. Now, lie down if you like, and go to s'leep."

"I could eat a bit more supper," said Orion. "I'm kind of hungry now that you has told me you is positive, Di."

"All wight," answered Diana. "There's a teeny dwop of milk left. Course I was hungry and thirsty, and my trof was dry, but you shall drink up the last dwop of milk. Here now, isn't you better?"

"I am really, truly," said Orion; "but are you quite certain it's true, Di?"

"K'ite. Do you think I would tell a lie? I is the *gweat* Diana. You is sort of forgetting, Orion."

"No, I aren't," said Orion. "Oh, I am happy now!"

"Well, lie down. I'll make up your bed, and you shall go to s'leep. We has a lot to do to-morrow, hasn't we?"

"Yes, a lot," answered Orion, with a little laugh. "Oh, Di! will they let us?"

"Course they'll let us," said Diana. "I has it all settled beautiful. Now, go to s'leep, p'ease, Orion."

Orion did very soon enter the land of dreams, but little Diana lay broad awake. She was thinking hard, and her thoughts were wonderfully sensible for such a baby.

The performance at the circus had turned out a great success. Diana had already appeared once or twice on Greased Lightning's back, but Ben Holt now kept her out of sight on purpose. He had caused rumors to be spread about her wonderful riding; his aim was to make people very anxious to see her again. He wanted the public to have a sort of craving for her. He hoped that when she finally appeared, dressed as the great Diana, with the bow and arrows, and when little Orion accompanied her with his girdle round his waist, and a sword in his hand, and when the two children rode round and round the circus on the fleetest horses in the company, that they would in very truth bring down the house--in short, that crowds would come to see them.

Uncle Ben was full of hope with regard to Diana, but he was by no means so sure as far as Orion was concerned. If Orion would not play his part well, and look what he was--one of the prettiest boys in England, and one of the very youngest who had ever appeared in a circus--why, half the effect would be lost. He began to perceive, however, that cruelty had little or no effect on the child, and he was inclined to allow that little genius, Diana, to manage him in her own way.

That night when the entertainment had come to an end, and Uncle Ben was seated at his cozy supper, he was much surprised when the door of the room was pushed suddenly open and a small girl, clad in a little white nightdress, made her appearance.

"Is my dear Uncle Ben anywhere about?" called out the clear little voice.

"My word! if that aint little Diana," said the man. "Come here this minute, you little romp, and get on my knee."

Diana flew up to him, climbed on his knee, put her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

"You's sort o' fond of me, I'm thinking," she said.

"Yes, that I be, missy," he answered; "you are the 'cutest little gal I ever seed, and you are fond of poor Uncle Ben, eh?"

"It all apends," replied Diana.

"Now what do you mean by that, missy?"

"It all apends," she repeated.

"Wife, can you understand her?" questioned the man.

"I think she means that it all depends, Ben."

"Oh, depends--on what now, my dear?"

"On whether you is good to my bwother or not."

"Oh, is that all? Well, I'll be good to 'im."

"He's awfu' fwightened of you."

"Well, he needn't be. If you'll manage him I won't say a word."

"Won't you twuly? Then I love you," said Diana. "Now, listen to me--I has been a-talking to him."

"That's right, missy. Have a sip of my stout, won't you?"

"No; I don't like it; it's black, nasty stuff. Put it away; I won't touch it. Well, now, listen to me, Uncle Ben. It apends altogether on whether you is good to Orion to-morrow or not whether he wides well, or whether he wides badly, and what I think is this--"

"Well, missy, you are a very wise little miss for your age."

"What I think is this," repeated Diana. "Let Orion wide G'eased Lightning and let me wide Pole Star."

"But you can do anything with Greased Lightning," said the man. "Why, the 'orse fairly loves you, and Pole Star's a rare and wicious sort of beast."

"I aren't fwightened; that aren't me," said Diana, in her usual proud, confident tone. "Orion isn't to wide a wicious sort of beast."

She slipped down from the man's knees and stood before him.

"It aren't me to be fwightened of any horse," she said. "I never was and I never will be."

"I believe yer, miss," said Uncle Ben, gazing at her with great admiration.

"But Orion he is--he is awfu' fwightened of Pole Star, and he sha'n't wide him. Now, G'eased Lightning, he'll do anything for me, and so what I say is this--let Orion wide him, and if he begins to dance about and get sort of fidgety, why, I'll stwoke him down. You know I could pwactice widin a little on Pole Star in the morning."

"To be sure you could, missy."

"Oh, my dear Ben," said Aunt Sarah at that moment, "you are never a-going to let either of them little kids ride a 'orse like Pole Star?"

"You let me manage my own affairs," said the man, scowling angrily.

"Well, I call it a shame," answered the woman.

"Poor Aunt Sawah! you needn't be fwightened," said Diana. "I is never fwightened; that aren't me. I'll wide Pole Star, and Orion, he'll wide G'eased Lightning, *only*--now, Uncle Ben, is you listening?"

"Yes, to be sure I am, missy," said Uncle Ben, taking another deep draught from his big glass of stout. "What's the 'only,' little miss?"

"Let's pretend," said Diana.

"Pretend what, missy?"

"That after Orion has done it, after he has wode G'eased Lightning, he may go 'way."

"Go away, missy?"

"Yes, let's pretend it. If he thinks he's going away after he has done it, why, there's nothing he won't twy to do, 'cos, you see, he's longing to go. Let's say this to him: 'Orion, you's good boy, you's darlin' boy, and when you has done what I want you to do, you shall go way'--then he'll do it beaut'ful."

"But he aint a-going," said the man, "he's my property. I has bought him; I has bought you both. You are sort of slaves to me."

"No, I aren't a slave to nobody," said Diana, whose fierce little blood could not brook this word.

"Well, you are a very good little gal, and so I am to pretend to Orion that he's going away; but now, when I don't mean him to go, that seems sort of cruel."

"Oh, you leave it to me!" said Diana; "let him think he's going away and I'll manage. Tell Susan to tell him, and tell Aunt Sawah to tell him, and you tell him, and I'll tell him, and then he'll be as good as good, and as bwave--as bwave as a big giant."

"Well, my dear, manage it your own way," said Uncle Ben; "but, all the same, it seems a shame. I aint what's called a very soft sort of man, but it seems a shame to deceive a little kid; only you manage it your own way, little missy."

"I'll manage it my own way," echoed Diana. "I'm awfu' 'bliged."

She tripped gayly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

POLE STAR.

The next day, at an early hour, the different performers had a grand rehearsal of their parts. It was a dress rehearsal. Holt was in high spirits, and Aunt Sarah, who stood just in front of the circus, petted and encouraged both Diana and Orion as much as possible. Orion felt shaky and looked very white, but the delicious thought that, after he had gone through those few minutes of agony, he might really be free to run away, to leave the dreadful, terrible circus forever, sustained him wonderfully. Diana had assured him that this could be managed. She had told him that Uncle Ben had promised that if he was a brave boy and sat well on Greased Lightning, and stood up when necessary, and, in short, went through the ordeal set him to do, without a murmur, he should be allowed to leave the circus that evening. It mattered nothing at all to little Orion that he did not know where he was to go, that he was a penniless and very small, very ignorant boy. The one object on which all his hopes were centered was the desire to get away from Uncle Ben and the terrible horses which he was forced to ride.

"Now, 'member, you is to be bwave," said Diana; "you isn't to be fwightened. If you's fwightened, Uncle Ben won't let you go. You just be as bwave as possible, and never mind nobody. Now, then, it's your turn. Come 'long."

Orion looked charming in his pretty dress. He wore a little sky-blue tunic, with small, tight knickers of white; his little legs and feet were bare, round his waist was a crimson girdle, and at his side was attached a toy sword.

Diana wore a silk skirt and tights, her curling black hair fell partly over her forehead; her bold, black eyes were full of a strange mixture of frolic, affection, and defiance. She looked the personification of healthy life and

courageous fire. In her hand she held the bow of Diana, and round her neck was slung a couple of arrows. She was a wonderfully graceful child in all her movements, and looked charming in her picturesque dress.

The call for the children came, and the two bounded on the stage. The moment they did so, Diana ran up to Uncle Ben and took hold of the great whip which he carried.

"You must let me do it my own way," she said; "you have pwomised. Orion won't be bwave boy if I don't manage him. Give me that whip."

"Oh, but I say, little missy----"

"Give me that whip," repeated Diana, flashing her eyes up at the man. "I is the gweat Diana and I order you. Give me the whip; I'll slash it; I know how. Ah, here comes G'eased Lightning. Come 'long, you beauty; come 'long, you darlin'."

Diana ran fearlessly up to the horse, fondled its nose, and looked into its eyes; the creature stood perfectly still, bent its graceful head, and licked her little hand.

"And it's a perfect brute to everyone else," thought Uncle Ben to himself, but this time he did not utter a word.

The horse stood perfectly motionless until little Orion was mounted on its back.

"Now, G'eased Lightning, you has got to be a good horse," said Diana, speaking to him in a confiding voice. "You isn't to fwighten Orion; 'member he's a giant, and it's a gweat honor for you to carry him, 'cos most times he lives up in the stars."

"Come, missy, we have no time for that sort of nonsense," said Uncle Ben, who began to get impatient. "Give me back my whip."

"No; I is going to slash the whip. Come, G' eased Lightning; twot, twot, p' ease."

The horse began to amble gently forward. Little Diana went and stood by Uncle Ben's side.

"I's managing," she said; "you shall have whip to-night; but I's managing now."

The other performers stood round in breathless silence. Orion kept his seat manfully. Greased Lightning was as gentle as a lamb.

"Good boy!" called out Diana; "vedy good little boy. Good horse, G' eased Lightning! you is a vedy good horse. Now then, go faster." Diana gave the whip a crack.

The horse looked at her out of his big, intelligent eyes, and began to trot, but still very gently, round and round the circus.

"Good boy," repeated Diana; "good horse! Now then, Orion, get up on to yous two foots; don't be fwightened. 'Member what will happen when it's over. Get up on to yous foots this minute."

Poor little Orion scrambled in deadly terror on to his small feet; but the horse still went swift and smooth, neither budging nor turning to the right or the left. Diana once again cracked her whip. He went faster and faster. Orion began to lose his fear; he even laughed with excitement; the rose bloom came out on his delicate little face. The terrible hoops were brought, and the child made a manful effort to get through them. Diana cracked her whip and called out and encouraged him, and finally brought him successfully through the ordeal. He was taken off the stage wet with perspiration, and trembling all over, but at the same time he had a wild sort of triumph in his little heart.

"I did it well; didn't I, Aunt Sarah?" he said.

"You did it splendidly, my little love," said Aunt Sarah; "but I never did see a little gal like your sister. Oh, merciful Heavens! that man aint never a-going to let her ride Pole Star!"

A black horse of immense strength and size was now brought upon the stage. This horse seemed to paw the air as he walked; his eyes were bloodshot and full of a dangerous light.

"Remember it's your own fault, missy," said Uncle Ben; "this aint the 'orse I'd give you. I don't want any harm to come to you; but if you insist on that little chap, that aint a patch on you, riding Greased Lightning, why, there aint nothing for it but for you to ride Pole Star."

"You don't 'uppose I's fwightened of Pole Star? Why, he's a weal beauty," said Diana.

"He's the----" The man arrested the words on his lips.

Diana had thrown down her whip and rushed across the stage. With just the same fearless confidence as, half an hour before, she had gone up to Greased Lightning--she now approached Pole Star.

"You's pwetty, you's a darlin'," she said. She held out her tiny brown hand. "Give me a bit of sugar, somebody," she demanded.

A girl who stood near ran away to fetch a lump. The child offered it to the horse. He looked at her, pawed the ground restlessly, and then, stooping, licked the sugar off her hand as tenderly as if he were a kitten.

"Well, I never!" said Uncle Ben, breathing a great sigh of relief.

"It's a beauty horse," repeated Diana; "I like it better nor G' eased Lightning. Pole Star, I's going to wide you; you's a dear, good horse." She stroked the creature's nose--the fierce eyes grew gentle--a moment later the child was mounted on its back.

"Now, gee up, gee up!" called Diana. "P'ease, Uncle Ben, don't cwack your whip; I can manage Pole Star." She pulled at the reins, and the creature began, at first gently and then more rapidly, to run round and round the stage. After all, notwithstanding her bravery, it was an ordeal, for Pole Star could run double as fast as Greased Lightning. Soon, from running he seemed to take to flying, and little Diana gasped and lost her breath; but she sat firm as a statue, and never touched a hair of the creature's mane.

"Now, Pole Star," she called out, when the horse had stopped for want of breath; "It's going to stand on you, and you must be vedy good." She patted the animal on its head; then she scrambled to her feet, and, holding the reins taut, stood firm as an arrow, while the creature once more flew round the stage. When her ride was over she had won the applause of the whole house.

After this Diana and Orion were taken away to rest until the evening. They were given the best food and a great deal of petting from Aunt Sarah. As to Diana, she was in excellent spirits.

"Oh, please, Di; nothing will make you stop, nothing will make you break your word?" said little Orion once to her.

"What I pwomise I do," replied Diana, with dignity.

And so the hours flew by, and at last the time arrived when the children were to appear before the footlights.

The huge circus tent was packed to the highest gallery. There was, in short, not standing room in the audience part of the house. Uncle Ben, in the highest spirits, was darting here and there behind the wings, giving directions, gesticulating, ordering, rearranging. Little Diana flew up to him and took his hand.

"What is you 'cited about?" she asked. "Is you fwightened 'bout anything?"

"No, little gal, no--that is, provided you and your brother do your parts well."

"We has pwomised," said Diana, with great firmness; "you needn't be fwightened; we has pwomised."

The children were to appear as the last item of the first part of the performance. Uncle Ben felt that on them really turned the success of the evening. At last the crucial moment arrived. Two beautiful horses were led into the circus, and immediately afterwards little Diana, holding Orion by the hand, skipped on to the stage. She came lightly forward, almost up to the footlights, dropped a somewhat pert little courtesy, turned round, and, taking Orion's hand, danced up to where the two horses were impatiently pawing the ground. Uncle Ben, with his big whip in his hand, dressed in evening clothes, was standing at one side. A man came forward to help Diana to mount Pole Star--another gave his hand to Orion.

"'Member, Orion, you has pwomised, and it all apends," said Diana, in a low, but very clear, voice.

The little fellow looked at her. Her spirited action, the splendid color in her cheeks, the glow of excitement in her great big eyes, inspired him. He would not ride for those horrid people who were crowding all the seats in front, those horrid, terrible people who seemed to rise from the floor to the ceiling. He did not care anything about those faces, those cruel, staring eyes, those smiling lips; but he did care for Diana. He would ride his best for her.

"Steady, G'eased Lightning," said the little girl; "you's to be good horse, 'member. Now, Pole Star, beauty, darlin', do just what Diana wants."

The horses began to canter forward, going briskly and swiftly side by side. Greased Lightning's coal-black eye was fixed upon Diana as she sat on Pole Star's back. Pole Star felt the feather-weight of the hot hand on his mane, the touch of the little feet somewhere near his neck. There was a magnetic current of sympathy between the horse and the child.

"Think you's a giant," she said once to Orion, as she shot past him in the race.

The crowd, speechless with astonishment and delight for the first moment or two, now began to clap and cheer loudly. Crack went Uncle Ben's whip. The circus girls in the wings, the men, the clown, all watched the little pair with beating hearts. Diana they felt sure of, but what of little Orion? And yet a change had come over the child. His face was no longer pale; some of Diana's spirit seemed to have entered into his soul.

The signal came for the pair to stand upon the bare, backs of their horses. Little Orion scrambled as quickly and nimbly to his feet as Diana herself. He caught the reins; crack again went the whip; the horses flew round and round. Now and then Diana said a soft word to Greased Lightning; now and then she stamped her small foot on Pole Star's neck. Each movement, each glance of the child, seemed to thrill through the willing beast. Incomprehensible as it may seem, both these wild, half-tamed creatures loved her. They kept straight, veering neither to left nor right, for her sake.

The first part of the performance went safely through, but now came the more difficult and dangerous time. The children were now not only to ride the horses standing, but they were obliged to ride holding one foot in the air, then to keep on their steeds standing on tiptoe, and finally they had to spring through great rings made of tissue paper, and leap again upon the horses as they galloped through. Diana performed her task with unfailing exactness, always reaching the horse's back at the right moment, springing up, sitting down, standing first on one foot, then on

the other, being apparently on wires, afraid of nothing, triumphant through all. Orion made a gallant effort to follow her example. In two minutes now the whole thing would be over.

"Don't be fwightened, Orion; time's nearly up," whispered the gay, brave little voice in his ear.

The horses flew, the children moved as if they were puppets, and all might now have been well if at that moment Diana herself--Diana the fearless, the brave, the unconquerable--had not slipped, slipped at the very moment when she was springing through one of the rings. The horse galloped on without her, and she lay prone upon the floor of the circus. Uncle Ben rushed madly to the rescue, and before Orion's horse had reached the spot he had caught the child in his arms. She was stunned by the fall, and lay white as death in his embrace. The house thought the fall had killed her, and there was a horrified murmur; but Diana was only stunned. In a moment she raised her cheery little voice.

"I's awfu' sossy; I's all wight now," she said. "Where's Pole Star?"

"Nay, little gal," said Uncle Ben, knowing well the temper of the house, "you must do no more to-night. The company, I know, will excuse you."

Seating the child on his shoulder, and patting her hand affectionately, as if he were her father, he brought little Diana to the front.

"I hope, ladies and gentlemen," he called out, "that you will excuse this great lady huntress to-night. But if you wish her to take another turn round on the back of the great Pole Star, she is willing to comply."

"No!" shouted voice after voice in the gallery; "let little missy off. We'll come to see little missy another night. Three cheers for little missy!"

The next moment Diana and Orion found themselves at the back of the stage.

"Is it true, Di?" gasped Orion. "Is it all over?"

"Yes; it's all over," answered little Diana. She leaned against the wall. "It's a bit giddy," she said; "but I'll be all wight by and by."

Aunt Sarah, with tears in her eyes, brought the child a restorative.

"Drink this, little love," she said; "you'll soon be much better, I'm sure."

The curtain had fallen on the first half of the performance, and Uncle Ben came up in a huge good humor.

"Missy, I hope you aint hurt," he said.

"Hurt?" answered Diana. "What do a fall matter? I's as wight as wain. Didn't Orion do well, Uncle Ben?"

"Yes, all things considerin'," said Uncle Ben. "We has a full house, missy, and I'm very much obliged to you. Now you had best go straight to bed. Sarah, take the kids off and give them a good supper, for they has earned it."

Aunt Sarah took Diana's hand and led her to their bedroom.

"But aren't we going away now?" said Orion.

Aunt Sarah sat down at the foot of one of the beds with a white face.

"Come to me, little missy," she said to Diana.

The child went to her.

"It's k'ite well," she said, "only a little giddy. Why, Aunt Sawah, you's kying."

"I thought you were dead for a minute, my little miss; you that is the image of my Rachel, what the good God took from me. I thought you were dead, and it 'most broke my 'eart--oh, little missy, little darlin'!"

"But, Diana, aren't we going away?" Said Orion. "You promised, and you never broke your word."

"I pwomised, and I never break my word," said Diana. "Yes, Orion, yes; we is going away."

"I declare," said Aunt Sarah, "I believe it would be the right thing to do. It would kill me if you was killed, missy--and them 'orses!"

"They is darlin's," interrupted Diana.

"Well, go to sleep now, and I'll fetch some supper," said Aunt Sarah.

She shut the door behind the children, returning in a few minutes with bowls of bread and milk. Diana sat listlessly down on the nearest bench.

"I's awfu' s'leepy," she said.

She did not quite know what was the matter with her; it seemed as if something had suddenly knocked all her spirit away. She did not know herself without the brave spirit which God had put into her little breast. Orion gazed at her anxiously.

"You do look queer," he said; "your eyes are bigger than ever, and they stare so. What's the matter, Di?"

"Nothing," said Diana.

"Aren't you going to eat your supper?"

"I's wather sick," said Diana; "I don't want to eat. You had best eat all you can, Orion."

"Yes, I had best," answered Orion, "'cos I won't have strength to run away if I hasn't plenty of food."

He began to eat up his own basin of bread and milk, and, as it was not too large, he thought he might attack Diana's also; then he gave her an

anxious glance. She was sitting strangely still, her hands lying idly in her lap, her eyes staring straight at the opposite wall.

"Member we is going away, and that you promised," he said. "Isn't it time for us to be off?"

"Yes, Orion," she answered.

"Well, drink off this teeny drop of milk; it will strengthen you." He brought the bowl to Diana, who sipped of a few spoonfuls; but then she shook her head.

"I's sick," she said; "it aren't good to eat when you is sick."

"Well, do come now," said Orion. "If you don't go at once they will find us; and you promised, and you never broke your word yet."

"I underland," said Diana; "I would not bweak my word; that would be mean."

"Well, let us go now."

Diana slipped off the little bench on which she had seated herself. She was still in her circus dress; her little bow was hung at her side, her arrow slung round her neck. Orion was also in his pretty dress, with his tiny sword and belt, his blue jacket and little white knickers.

"Let's put on our shoes," he said; "we can't go far in bare feet."

"We can't go far in bare foots," echoed Diana, in a dreary sort of voice.

"I's s'leepy. Shall we wun away in the morning, Orion?"

"No; to-night! to-night!" he said, in terror. "You'll break your promise if we don't go to-night."

"All wight," she answered.

He brought her shoes, slipped them on her feet, buttoned them, and put on his own; then he took her hand in his. They opened the door of their bedroom and ran down a long passage, at the end of which was another door; it was on the latch. Orion opened it, and the little children found themselves at the back of the stage. There were no people about to see them, even Aunt Sarah was far away in one of the wings.

"There! we is safe," said Orion. "We has runned away, and we are safe."

"We has wunnen away and we is safe," echoed Diana, in that dreary little voice. "But, Orion, I's drefful s'eeepy."

"Never mind," said Orion; "we'll sleep in the fields."

"We'll s'leep in the fields," echoed Diana, in a vague manner.

Orion took her hand; they ran as fast as they could down a shady lane, for the great circus tent had been put outside the town.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MILKMAN.

It was a lovely summer's night, and as the children ran, Orion looked up at the stars.

"Why, it's a starful night!" he cried, in a joyful voice, "and there's me. Do look at me, Di! There I am up in the sky, ever so big and 'portant."

"So you is," said Diana, laughing and then checking herself. "Is it far to----"

"To where, Di?"

"To the garding," said Diana; "to the dead-house where Rub-a-Dub is. Let's go and sit on the little bench and see the dead 'uns--let's count 'em; I wonder how many there is!" She stopped suddenly and gazed around her.

"What do you mean?" said Orion, in some alarm. "We are nowhere near the garden. Don't you know where we are, Diana?"

"Yes, I do now, course," she answered, with a laugh. "I think I was dweaming; it's my head; it's keer. I want to s'leep awfu'."

"Well, here are the fields," said Orion; "here's a beautiful green field, and the moon is shining on it. Oh, and there's a hole in the hedge; let's creep in."

"Let's k'leep in," said Diana.

They pushed their way through the hole and found themselves in a clover field. The clover, slightly wet with dew, felt very refreshing to their hot little feet.

"Isn't this 'licious?" said Diana. "Let's lie down on the g'een g'ass; let's s'leep here; I's awfu' s'leepy."

"It's very near the circus," said Orion. "I'm rather frightened for fear Uncle Ben will find us."

"No, he won't; it's all wight," said Diana.

She allowed her little brother to lead her as far as the hedge, and then nothing would persuade her to go any further. Down on the damp grass she flung herself, and then next moment was fast asleep.

Orion, aged six, did not think it wrong for Diana to sleep on the wet grass. The moon shone all over her bare little legs. She folded her arms when she lay down, and now there was not a stir, nor a movement from her.

Far away, or at least it seemed far away to little Orion, he could see the blinking lights of the town, and when he stood on tiptoe he could also see the lights of the merry-go-rounds and the other accompaniments of the great circus. He knew that he was dreadfully near his tyrants, and he longed beyond words to awaken Diana and make her go farther away; but she was asleep--dead tired. He never could master her. There was nothing, therefore, but for him to lie down also, close to her.

Accordingly, he flung himself on the grass, laid his head on her shoulder, nestling up close to her for warmth and protection, and in a few moments he had also forgotten his fears, and was calmly living in the blessed land of dreams. The great Orion overhead looked down on his tiny namesake, and the little boy dreamt that he was a giant in very truth, and that he and Diana were fighting their way through the world.

The children slept, and presently the creatures of the night came out--the owls, and the bats, and the night moths--and looked with wonder at the queer little pair lying prone amongst the green clover. Thousands of

wonderful night noises also began to awaken in all directions--the merry chirp of the cricket, the whirl of the bat on its circling flight, the hum of the moths--but the children heard nothing, although the creatures of the night were curious about these strange little beings who, by good rights, ought not to be sharing their kingdom.

At last, just when the first peep of dawn began to tinge the east, little Orion opened his eyes and rubbed them hard. With a great rush memory returned to him. He had run away; he had ridden Greased Lightning and had not fallen from his back; his terrible life in the circus was at an end. Uncle Ben was nowhere near to chide him. He and Diana had got off; but it was true that they had not put a great distance between themselves and Uncle Ben. Perhaps Uncle Ben, who had promised that he might go away if he did his part well, might change his mind in the morning. It was most important that he and his sister should go farther away as quickly as possible.

Accordingly, he proceeded to wake Diana. Diana was very sound asleep indeed. He could see her face distinctly, for the first faint return of day was spreading a tender glow over it. She did not look pale; there was a hot spot on either cheek--a spot of vivid rose.

"I am cold enough," thought the little fellow, "but Diana seems warm. Wake up, Di; wake up!" he said. "We has runned away, but we has not run far enough. Wake up, Di, and let's go on."

Diana did not stir at all at his first summons. He spoke loudly, looking around him as he did so in some terror. A night owl, preparing to go home, was seated on a tree near by. The owl looked at Orion and hooted in a very melancholy manner. His voice seemed to say:

"I never saw two greater little fools than you children in all my life."

Orion felt rather afraid of the owl. Having failed to awaken Diana by words, he proceeded to shake her. This device succeeded. She opened her great, big, sleepy eyes and stared around her in bewilderment.

"So you is our little mother now, Iris?" she said. "All wight; I's coming."

She sat up on her grassy bed and rubbed her eyes, then stared at Orion and burst out laughing.

"What are you laughing at?" said Orion. "We are in awful danger here. Uncle Ben may catch us any minute."

"Who's Uncle Ben?" asked Diana.

"Why, Di! how very queer you are. Don't you remember Uncle Ben, the awful man who has the circus?"

"No, I don't," said Diana. "Is it true that Rub-a-Dub's dead?"

"Oh, Di! Rub-a-Dub died weeks ago. What does it matter about a mouse? I'm frightened about Uncle Ben. If he catches us he'll change his mind, perhaps, and I cannot ride Greased Lightning again. Don't speak so queer, Di. Do rouse yourself. We must get out of this as fast as we can."

"As fast as we can," echoed Diana. "All wight, Orion; I's k'ite sati'fied."

"Well, come, then," said Orion; "get up."

"I don't think I care to."

"But we can't run away if you are lying there."

"No more we can," said Diana. She laughed again. "Isn't it fun?" she said. "And so Rub-a-Dub isn't dead after all?"

"Yes; of course he is."

"Orion, look!" said the child; "look!"

"Look at what?" answered the little fellow. "Oh, Diana! don't say it's Uncle Ben!"

"I don't know nothing 'bout no Uncle Ben; but didn't you see something flash there?--something white, just over there? I know who it was; it was mother. Mother has gone to the angels, but she has come back. Mother! mother! come here! Call her, Orion; call her, call her!"

"Mother! mother!" said the little boy; "mother, come here!"

But there was no answer to this cry, which, on the part of Orion at least, was full of agony. No answer either from the heaven above or the earth beneath.

"It was a mistake, I s'pect," said Diana. "Mother is in heaven; she's a beautiful angel, singing loud. Well, let's come 'long." She staggered to her feet, and, supported by Orion, began to walk across the field. "Let's go into the garding," she said.

Poor little Orion was quite in despair.

"We are miles from the garden," he said. "I think you have gone silly."

"S'pect I has," said Diana. "What fun!"

"And you have got such a queer look on your face."

"A k'eer look on my face?" repeated Diana.

"Yes; and your eyes, they are ever so big; they frighten me."

"My eyes k'ite fwighten you, poor little boy," said Diana. "Well, let's wun; let's get to the garding. Why, it's the day mother went away to the angels, and we has got no lessons. Where's Iris? I want Iris."

"So do I," said Orion. "Oh, Di! what is to become of us? You frighten me."

"K'ite fwighten poor little boy," echoed Diana. "I's sossy, but I can't help it. I's giddy in my head. Does this way lead to garding, Orion?"

"No. What are we to do?" said Orion. "Oh, I am so frightened!" He really was. Diana's strange behavior was more than he could understand. "Oh, I'm so bitter hungry!" he cried. He flung himself on the grass.

Diana stood and looked at him with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Why, you is a poor little boy," she said. "Now, if you'll take my hand we'll go indoors, and Fortune will give us a lovely bekfus. Come, Orion; don't be fwightened, poor little boy."

They walked across the field. By this time the sun was up and the place felt warm and dry. Little Orion, shivering in his queer circus dress, was glad of this, and a faint degree of returning courage came into his heart.

Diana did not seem to feel anything at all. She walked along, singing as she walked.

"We's going to the dead-house," she said. "Rub-a-Dub's dead."

"You'll never know fear any more, Little dear; Good-by, Rub-a-Dub."

"Oh, don't Di! You make me feel so frightened," said Orion. "Why do you talk like that? Can't you 'member nothing?"

"Course I 'member," said Diana. "Rub-a-Dub's dead."

"Never know fear, Little dear; Rub-a-Dub's dead."

"Come this way," said Orion, taking her hand.

She was quite willing to follow him, although she did not in the least know where she was going.

"S'pect I aren't well," she said at last. "Don't be fwightened, poor little boy. S'pect I aren't k'ite well."

"I's so hungry," moaned Orion.

"Well, let's go into the house; let's have bekfus. Where's Fortune? Come 'long, Orion; come 'long."

They had reached the highroad now, and were walking on, Orion's arm flung round Diana's waist. Suddenly, rattling round a corner of the country road, came a man with a milk cart. He was a very cheery-looking man with a fat face. He had bright blue eyes and a kindly mouth.

"Hullo!" he said, when he saw the two little children coming to meet him. "Well, I never! And what may you two be doing out at this hour?"

Diana gazed up at him.

"I's going to the garding," she said. "I's to meet Iris in garding. We is to 'cide whether it's to be a pwivate or a public funeral."

"Bless us and save us!" said the man.

"Don't mind her," said Orion; "she's not well. She fell off a horse last night, and there's something gone wrong inside her head. I s'pect something's cracked there. She's talking a lot of nonsense. We has runned away, and we is desperate hungry. Can you give us a drink of milk?"

"Well, to be sure," said the man, smacking his lips as he spoke. "I never saw anything like this afore, and never heard anything like it, neither. Why, it's like a page out of a printed book. And so you has run away, and you belong to the circus, I guess. Why, you are in your circus dresses."

"See my bow and arrow," said Diana. "I is the gweat Diana; I is the gweatest huntwess in all the world."

"To be sure; to be sure!" said the man.

"And I am Orion," said the boy, seeing that Diana's words were having a good effect. "You can watch me up in the sky on starful nights. I am a great giant, and this is my girdle, and this is my sword."

"I never heard anything so like a fairy tale afore," said the man. "Are you sure you are human, you two little mites?"

Diana took no notice of this.

"I want to get into the garding," she said. "I want to lie down in the garding; I want Iris; I want mother. Man, do you know that my mother has gone away to the angels? She is playing a gold harp and singing ever so loud; and once we had a little mouse, and it was called Rub-a-Dub, and it's deaded. We gived it a public funeral."

"Oh, do let us have some milk, and don't mind her!" said Orion.

The man jumped down off the cart, and, turning a tap in the great big can, poured out a glass of foaming milk. He gave it to Orion, who drank it all off at the first draught. He then filled out a second measure, which he gave to Diana. She took it, raised it to her lips, took one or two sips, and then gave it to Orion.

"There's something sick inside of me," she said. "I don't know what's the matter; I isn't well."

"She had a bad fall last night at the circus," said Orion. "She fell from one of the rings. I s'pect something's cracked inside her head."

"I s'pect something's c'acked inside my head," echoed Diana, looking up piteously. "I want to go to the garding; I want to lie down."

"Well, look here," said the man; "this is more than I can understand. You had best, both of you, go back to the circus, and let the people who has the charge of you see what's the matter."

"No!" screamed Orion; "never! never!"

He suddenly put wings to his little feet, and began to fly down the road, away from the milkman.

Diana stood quite still.

"Aren't he silly little boy?" she said. "But he mustn't go back to circus, milkman; it would kill him. I isn't able to wide to-day, 'cos I's c'acked inside my head; and he mustn't wide without me, 'cos it would kill him. Couldn't we go to your house, milkman, and rest there for a bit?"

"Well, to be sure; I never thought of that," said the man. "So you shall, and welcome. Jump up beside me on the cart, missy."

"I can't, 'cos my head's c'acked," said Diana.

"Then I'll lift you up. Here, you sit there and lean against the big milk can. Now, we'll set Peggy going, and she will soon overtake little master."

Diana laughed gleefully.

"Do you know, you's an awfu' nice man?" she said.

"I am glad you think so, missy."

The man took the reins and Peggy started forward. They soon overtook little Orion, who was lifted also into the milk cart. Then the milkman turned swiftly round and carried the children back to a small house on the outskirts of the town. When he got there he called out in a lusty voice:

"Hi, Bessie! are you within?"

A woman with a smiling face came to the door.

"Now, what in the world is the matter with you, Jonathan?" she answered.

"Only this, wife. I met the queerest little pair in all the world on the road. Can't you take them in and give them rest for a bit? I believe the little miss is hurt awful."

"It's c'acked inside my head, but it don't matter," said Diana.

The woman stared from the children to the man; then something in Diana's face went straight to her heart.

"Why, you poor little mite," she said, "come along this minute. Why, Jonathan, don't you know her? Course it's the little missy that we both saw in the circus last night. Didn't I see her when she fell from the ring? Oh, poor little dear! poor little love!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FORTUNE.

Uncle William took the children straight up to London. They spent the night at a great big hotel, and in the morning he went alone to have a long consultation with one of the best detectives in New Scotland Yard. When he returned after this interview, Iris came to meet him with a wise look on her face.

"I know what to do," she exclaimed.

"Well, then, my dear, it's more than I do," replied Uncle William.

"It's the only thing," repeated Iris. "Let's go straight home."

"Home? Do you mean to the Rectory? Why, we have just come from there."

"I don't mean the Rectory. I mean our real home," answered Iris. "Let's get back at once to Delaney Manor."

"I don't see much use in that," answered Uncle William.

"It's all a feel I have inside of me," replied Iris. "Often and often I get that feel, and whenever I obey it things come right. I have a feel now that I shall be nearer to Diana and to Orion in the old garden than anywhere else. I always try to obey my feel. Perhaps it's silly, but I can't help it. Do you ever get that sort of feel inside of you, Uncle William?"

"If I did," replied Uncle William, "your Aunt Jane would say that I was the silliest old man she had ever come across."

"But you aren't, you know. You are a right good sort," answered Apollo, in a patronizing tone.

"I am glad you think so, my boy," replied Uncle William. "Well, now," he added, "I always did hate London, and in the middle of summer it seems to me that it is wanting in air. I once heard a countryman say that he believed people only breathed turn about in London, and it really seems something like that this morning. The place is so close and so used-up that there is not a breath anywhere; so, Iris, if you have got that feel, and if you will promise not to tell your Aunt Jane that *that* is your reason for returning to the Manor, why, we may just as well do so--only, I suppose, the place is all shut up."

"Fortune, at any rate, is there," replied Iris; "and if anybody can help us to find Diana and Orion, it's Fortune; for she had them, you know, Uncle William, from the moment the angel brought them down from heaven. She had to do for them and nurse them, and tend them from that moment until Aunt Jane took them away. Oh, yes!" continued Iris; "if there is a person who will help us to find them, it's Fortune."

"She partakes of the strange names which seem to run in your family," answered Uncle William. "But there, it is as good an idea as any other, and we shall at least each of us have our proper number of breaths at Delaney Manor. That certainly is in favor of the scheme."

Accordingly, that very afternoon, Uncle William, Iris, and Apollo took the train into Devonshire. They arrived at the Manor in the evening. Nobody expected them, and the place looked, to Uncle William, at least, very dull and desolate. But when Iris saw the quaint old gateway, and when Apollo felt his feet once again upon the well-known avenue, the sadness of heart which had oppressed both children seemed to lift itself as if it had wings and fly right away.

"Let's go to the garden this very instant," exclaimed Iris, looking at her brother.

They clasped each other's hands and, flying along the well-remembered haunts, soon reached their favorite garden.

"Oh, Apollo! I live; I breathe again," said Iris, panting as she spoke. "Oh, I am happy once more!"

"Let us see if anything has been injured while we were away," said Apollo. "Oh, I wonder if anybody has watered our pretty gardens. I planted a lot of mignonette the day before I went away. I wonder if it has come up."

The children wandered about the garden. The dead-house was now empty; the four little gardens looked sadly the worse for want of watering and general looking after. The cemetery, however, looked much as usual; so also did the greenswards of grass, the roses, the different summer flowers; and finally Iris and Apollo visited the little summer-house, and seated themselves on their own chairs.

"The garden has not run away," said Apollo. "That's a comfort. I'm real glad of that."

"It's exactly like the garden of Eden," said Iris, panting as she spoke. "I don't think anybody," she continued, "could be naughty in this garden."

Apollo kicked his legs in a somewhat impatient manner.

"I feel dreadfully hungry, Iris," he said. "Suppose we go to the house now and have some supper."

"Who is that coming down the walk?" said Iris.

It was dusk by this time, and in the little summer-house all was dark; but Iris, as she spoke, sprang to her feet, and the next moment found herself clasped in Fortune's motherly arms.

"My darling!" said the woman. "Why, it drives me near mad to see you again. And now, what in the world is up with the two of you, and where

are the others? There's an elderly gentleman--a clergyman--in the house, and he said I was to look for you here, and that you were going to spend the night. What does it mean, Iris? Oh, my dear! I can't see your face, for it is too dark; but you are very light. Why, you are no weight at all, my honey."

"I expect I'm rather worn out," replied Iris, in her old-fashioned tone.

"You know, Fortune, when mother went away she told me to be a mother to the others, and--oh, Fortune, Fortune! I have failed, I have failed."

Iris' little arms were clasped tightly round her old nurse's neck; her face was hidden against her bosom; her heavy sobs came thick and fast.

"Why, my poor dear, you are exactly like a feather," said Fortune; "it aint to be expected that a young thing like you could be a mother. But what's gone wrong, dearie? what's gone wrong?"

"They are lost. That's what has gone wrong," said Iris. "Orion and Diana are lost, Fortune."

"Sakes alive, child! stand up and speak proper," said Fortune. "Your little brother and sister lost! Impossible; you are joking me, Iris, and that aint fair, seeing I was with you since you drew the breath of life."

"Do you think I could joke upon such a subject?" said Iris. "You say I am like a feather--that is because I have all wasted away from--from fretting, from--from misery. Yes, Fortune, they are lost, and I wish I were dead. I feel it here so dreadfully." The child pressed both her hands against her heart. "I have not been a mother," she continued. "Oh, Fortune! what is to be done?"

"You jest sit down on my lap and stop talking nonsense," said Fortune.

"Why, you are trembling like an aspen. You jest rest yourself a bit alongside o' me. Now then, Master Apollo, tell me the whole truth, from

beginning to end. The two children lost? Now, I don't believe it, and that's a fact."

"You'll have to believe it, Fortune," said Apollo, "for it's true. They went out one day about a month ago--we think they must have gone to some woods not far from that horrid Rectory, but nobody seems to know for certain--and they just never came back. We missed them at tea-time, and we began to look for 'em, and we went on looking from that minute until now, and we have never found either of 'em. That's about all. They are both quite lost. What I think," continued the little boy, speaking in a wise tone, "is that Diana must have met the great Diana of long ago, and gone right away with her, and perhaps Orion has been turned into one of the stars that he's called after. I don't really know what else to think," continued Apollo.

"Fudge!" said Fortune. "Don't you waste your time talking any more such arrant nonsense. Now, the two of you are as cold and shivery as can be, and I doubt not, as hungry also. Come straight away to the house. This thing has got to be inquired into."

"Oh, Fortune! can you do anything?" asked Iris.

"Can I do anything?" said Fortune. "I have got to find those blessed children, or my name's not Fortune Squeers. Did your mother bring me all the way from America to be of no use in an emergency like the present? You needn't fret any more, Iris; nor you either, Apollo. Just come right along to the house and have your cozy, warm supper, the two of you, and then let me undress you and put you into your old little beds, and I'll sleep in the room alongside of you, and in the morning we'll see about getting back those two children. Lost, is it? Not a bit of it. They are mislaid, if you like, but lost they aint--not while Fortune is above ground."

Fortune's strong words were of the greatest possible comfort to Iris. It is true that Aunt Jane had told her somewhat the same, day by day--Aunt Jane was also sure that the children were certain to be found--but, as far as Iris could gather, she only spoke, and never did anything to aid their recovery; for Iris had no faith in detectives, nor secret police, nor any of the known dignitaries of the law. But she put the greatest possible faith in the strong, cheery words of her old nurse, and she returned to the house clasping Fortune's hand, and feeling as if the worst of her troubles were at an end.

The greater part of Delaney Manor was shut up, and Fortune and two other old servants were left in charge; but very soon a comfortable meal was spread for the travelers, a room was provided for Uncle William, and Iris and Apollo slept once more in the dear old nursery.

How very sound Iris did sleep that night! How happy she felt once more!

Fortune had dragged in her bed, and laid it on the floor close to the little girl's side, and the sound of Fortune's snores was the sweetest music Iris had listened to for a long time.

"Fortune will find the others, and I can be a real mother once more," she whispered over and over to herself.

And so she slept sweetly and dreamed happily, and awoke in the morning with color in her cheeks and hope in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE TRAIL.

It was on the very evening that Orion and Diana had left the great circus that Uncle William and the two children arrived at Delaney Manor, for Delaney Manor was only five miles distant from the prosperous seaside town of Madersley.

Now, Uncle Ben had very little idea, when he brought the two children to the southwest of England, that he was really taking them back to their native country. These things, however, are ordered, and the wisest man in the world cannot go against the leadings of Providence. Uncle Ben thought to hide the children from their best friends, whereas, in reality, he was taking them home once more.

But two little circus children might wander about at their own sweet will at Madersley, and be heard nothing whatever of at Delaney Manor, and these little children might never have been found, and this story might have had a totally different ending, but for Fortune.

When Fortune, however, lay down on her mattress by Iris' side, she thought a great deal before she went to sleep. She thought, as she expressed it to herself, all round the subject, to the right of it, and to the left of it. She thought of it in its breadth, and she thought of it in its height, and, having finally settled the matter to her own satisfaction, she went to sleep, and soothed little Iris with the comforting music of her snores.

On the following morning she had an interview with Mr. Dolman.

"I want to ask you a straight question, sir," she said. "What is it the police are doing? It seems a mighty strange thing to me that two little children should be lost in the middle of a civilized country like England."

"It seems a stranger thing to me," replied Uncle William. "I am dreadfully puzzled over the whole matter. We have now four detectives at work, but up to the present they have not got the slightest clew to the children's whereabouts."

"As like as not," said Fortune, "these two have been stolen by gypsies."

"We thought of that at once," said Uncle William.

"Yes," interrupted Fortune, "and then, when you couldn't make the thing fit, or find your clew, you dropped it. Now let me tell you, sir, that aint our way in America. When we get the faintest ghost of a clew we cling on to it as if it were grim death, and we don't let it go, not for nobody. It's my belief that gypsies are at the bottom of the matter, and why have not you and your detectives looked in every gypsy encampment in the length and breadth of England?"

"There were some gypsies in our neighborhood, only we did not know it the first day," continued Mr. Dolman, "and their camp was of course thoroughly examined, but no little people in the least resembling the children were found there."

"Then of course it goes without saying," continued Fortune, "that the gypsies passed on the little dears to other folk. Now the question is, What sort of folk would be interested in a little pair like them? They was both young, both lissom, both handsome, and Miss Diana was the bravest child I ever come across--maybe they was sold to someone to train 'em to walk on the tight rope."

Uncle William smiled indulgently.

"The detectives would certainly have found that out by this time," he said. "Besides, there were no traveling companies of any sort within a radius of quite fifteen miles."

"Very well," said Fortune; "then, perhaps, sir, you'll allow me to manage things my own way. I aint a detective, but I'm bent on detective work for the time being. I'm going straight off to Madersley this morning. I'm going to have descriptions of those children printed in very big characters, and posted all over Madersley."

"And why specially all over Madersley?" asked Mr. Dolman.

"'Cos Madersley is, so to speak, their native town," answered Fortune.

"Why, there aint a person in Madersley who don't know Delaney Manor; and strangers, when they come there, drive out to see Delaney Manor as they would any other big place, and folks at this time of year travel from far to stay at Madersley, because the place is bracing and the coast good for bathing. So you see, Mr. Dolman, there'll be lots of people who will read my descriptions, and when they read 'em they'll begin to talk about the children, and there's no saying what may happen."

"It doesn't sound a bad idea," said Mr. Dolman.

"Bad!" repeated Fortune. "It's a first-rate idea; it's an American idea. In America we never let the grass grow under our feet. I'm off to Madersley this minute to see after those posters. Why, we post up everything in America, every single thing that is lost, let alone children, and we do it in big type, as big as they make it, and we put the posters on the walls, and wherever there's a scrap of available space. By your leave, sir, I'm off to Madersley now."

Fortune was as good as her word. She not only went to Madersley and interviewed some of the best printers in the place, but she also visited the police station, and told the police to be on the lookout.

"For the two youngest little Delaneys are missing," she said, "and found they must be, if heaven and earth are moved to accomplish the job."

The superintendent of police remembered that he had already had notice of two children being missing somewhere in the North of England, but as he thought it extremely unlikely that such children would come to the southwest, he had not troubled himself much about them. Fortune's words, however, stimulated his zeal, and he promised to keep a sharp lookout. The printer also was full of enthusiasm, and agreed to print posters which should even satisfy Fortune. He certainly did his best; and a day or two later flaming posters, in red and black ink, were pasted up all over the little town. In these, Fortune had given a most accurate description of little black-eyed Diana and Orion. Their ages were mentioned, their sizes, the color also of their eyes and hair.

The immediate effect of these posters was to frighten Uncle Ben Holt considerably. He had been in a dreadful rage when first he discovered that Diana and Orion had taken him at his word and had decamped. He had been very cruel to every member of the troupe, and in especial to his poor wife. He vowed, and vowed, loudly, that he would not leave a stone unturned to find the children, and he also informed his wife that he would start off the following morning to acquaint the police with the fact that two of his troupe were missing.

"Why," he said, "there's a fortune in that little gal; I must have the little gal. I don't think nothing at all of the boy. She was quite the most sperited little 'un I ever come across. Fact is, I would not lose her for a fifty-pund note."

For two days Uncle Ben stormed, and the performances at the circus went languidly; but when, on the third morning, he saw the posters about the town, and when one happened to be pasted up exactly opposite his own circus, he began to cool down and to change his mind.

"Where are you, Sarah?" he called out.

His wife flew to answer the fierce summons of her lord and master.

"I'm here, Ben," she answered.

"I'm here, Ben," he retorted, mimicking her tone. "There you are, Sarah, without the spirit of a mouse. Have you seen, or have you not, what's up all over the town?"

"Yes, to be sure," replied Sarah Holt; "and it's a faithful description of the children. Why, they are as like what that description says of 'em as two peas, Ben."

"I'm not saying they aint," snapped Ben, in a very indignant voice; "but what I do want to know is this--what's to be done if they are found and we are discovered to have bought 'em? We had all our plans arranged, and we have taken this field for a fortnight; but, bad as the loss will be to ourselves, it'll be better than the perlice discovering that we had anything to do with them children. The fact is this, Sarah: I'm going to pack our traps and be off out of this, to-night at the latest."

"Perhaps you are right, Ben," said the woman, in a very sad tone; "only," she added, with a sigh, "if we are really going, may not I run up to Delaney Manor and just give 'em a hint? It seems so dreadful to me if anything should happen to them little kids, more particular to little Diana, who was the mortal image of my Rachel who died."

"If you do anything of the kind I'll kill you," roared the man. "Do you want to see me locked up in prison for kidnaping children? No; we must be out of this to-night, and I must lose the ten pund I paid for the use of the field."

By this time the news of the posters had spread not only through the whole town, but amongst the members of Ben Holt's troupe. The men and women in the troupe were all interested and excited, and whenever they had a spare moment they used to run out to read the poster which Fortune had been clever enough to dictate.

Meanwhile, that good woman herself was by no means idle.

"I have done something," she said to Iris, "and what I have done at Madersley ought to have been done before now all over the length and breadth of England. But now, Miss Iris, having put the posters up, it doesn't mean that we are to be idle. We have got to do more. I have my eye on that circus. They says it's a very pretty circus indeed, and there are a lot of entertaining spectacles to be viewed there. Now, what do you say to you and me and Mr. Dolman, if he likes to come, and Master Apollo going this afternoon to see the performance?"

"I don't think I much care," answered Iris. "I don't seem to take any interest in anything just now."

"Well, all the same, dear, I would like you to go. The best of us can but take steps, and when we has taken the steps that Providence seems to indicate, there's no use a-fretting ourselves into our graves. Folks are coming to Madersley now from the length and breadth of England, being such a pretty and such a favorite seaside resort. Let's go to the circus this afternoon, Miss Iris, and see what is to be seen."

Iris could not follow Fortune's reasonings, but she submitted to her desire to pay a visit to the traveling circus, and, accordingly, that afternoon, the very last of Holt's stay at Madersley, two other little Delaneys entered the large tent and took their places in the front row. The children were accompanied both by Uncle William and Fortune. The curtain rose almost immediately after their entrance, and the performance began.

For some reason or other it was sadly lacking in spirit, and a neighbor who sat not far from Fortune began to remark on the fact.

"I wouldn't have paid three shillings for my seat if I had known the thing was so poor," she said. "Why, my husband was here last week and said it was downright splendid. But I suppose that was owing to the performances of the children."

"The children?" inquired Fortune. "I see no children about."

"Oh, well, there were two the other night--a little girl and boy; and they said the girl rode splendidly, and was the life of the whole thing. She was simply wonderful; she----"

But here the curtain rose and the performance began anew. Fortune longed to question her loquacious neighbor, but when she turned presently to speak to her she found that she had left the tent.

"Ho, ho!" thought the American woman to herself; "they had a boy and a girl here, had they, and they aren't here no longer. Now I wonder if I can strike that trail? Being from America it would be hard if I didn't, and also if I didn't succeed."

CHAPTER XXV.

FOUND!

When the performance came to an end Fortune suggested to Uncle William that he should go to the best hotel in the place, and give Iris and Apollo some tea. Iris was loath to leave Fortune's side, but Fortune bent down and whispered to her to obey.

"I am on the trail," she said, "and I don't want to be interrupted. I don't mind telling you, Iris, that the tea is all an excuse. You get your uncle to take you to the hotel, and keep him there until I join him. Now, go off this minute, like a good girl."

Iris looked into Fortune's small, but honest, eyes, and felt once again that her feel was leading her in the right direction.

"Uncle William, I should like some tea very much," she said.

"Well, then, my dear, if you want tea you shall have it," replied Uncle William.

He hailed a fly, and took the children immediately to the best hotel in the town.

When Fortune found herself alone she turned round, and gazed to right and left of her. The great tent was almost empty, for the spectators had all departed; a few, however, were standing in little groups talking to one another. Fortune edged near one of these. It consisted of a good-looking young man and two pretty girls. They were standing opposite the poster which gave such a lifelike account of little Diana and Orion.

"I see you are reading that poster," said Fortune, "and maybe you're interested?"

"Why, of course we are," said one of the girls, turning and looking at Fortune.

"Now, I wonder," continued Fortune Squeers, "if it lies anywhere in your power to give me a bit of help? Fact is, I'm interested in the children described in that poster, and as I was sitting inside the circus, I heard a neighbor say that the children belonging to your show were not present. Being an American, I never lose any clews, and there may be just the ghost of a chance that the children who were not at the performance to-day are the very identical same children that are written about in that there poster. Maybe you has heard of those children--that is, if you are Madersley folk?"

"Yes, yes; we are Madersley folk," said the young man, now turning and speaking eagerly to Fortune.

"Well, sir, do you know anything about the children who were not in the circus to-day?"

"I have heard of them, of course," said the man. "Don't you remember, Amelia," he added, "when I came home last Saturday night how I told you we must go and see Holt's circus, for he had got a little girl who was riding wonderfully? I could not manage it on Saturday, and to-day, it seems, she's off."

"And he had a boy as well, hadn't he?" said Fortune.

"Yes, there was talk of a boy; but he didn't seem to have the spirit of his sister. Anyhow, they are neither of them playing to-day, and, for my part, I thought the performance lame."

"Well, that's my opinion," said Fortune. "No American would go the length of the road to see anything so poor and common. And so the children are off--but the children were on. Now, I wish to goodness I could see those children."

"I don't suppose they have anything to do with the lost children who are spoken of in these posters," said the man. "They say they were brown as gypsies, that the boy was timid, and the girl rode wonderfully. She must have been trained for some time to ride as well as she did."

Not being able to get anything more out of these folks, Fortune turned on her heel and wandered in another direction. She crossed the entrance to the great tent, and made for the exit at the opposite side of the field. In doing this she ran right up against a fair-haired, rather pretty circus girl.

"My dear," said Fortune, "you'll excuse my stopping to speak to you, but will you tell me if I can get into the town by the gate yonder?"

"It's rather a roundabout way," answered the girl, "but you can go, of course. You will have to walk quite a way down a country lane, then turn to your left, and it will bring you to the other side of the town."

"Fact is," continued Fortune, "I'm anxious to see some more of those posters. I'm mighty took with them. They seem to describe a most elegant little pair of children."

The girl uttered a sigh and changed color.

"Maybe, miss," said Fortune, fixing her with her keen eyes, "you can tell me something about 'em? Now, if you could, and would, it would be worth your while."

"Oh, I know nothing at all," said the girl, in alarm. "What should I know?"

"How is it," continued Fortune, "that the little children belonging to your circus were not present this afternoon? It seems a sort of cheating of the public."

"The little children belonging to our circus?" repeated the girl. "But we hasn't no children." She turned very white now, and suddenly leaving Fortune, ran as fast as ever she could in the direction of the tent.

Fortune followed her with her eyes. She saw a dark man peeping out.

"That girl is frightened; she's hiding something," thought the woman. "There's no doubt the trail strengthens, and I, being an American--well, well, 'taint likely I'm going to leave off now. Yes, hot grows the trail."

Fortune pursued her way. She had just reached the gate of the opposite exit of the field when a light hand was laid on her arm. Turning quickly, she saw the same girl.

"For the love of God, madam," she said, "don't you tell on me--it's as much as my place is worth--he would kill me, if he knew--but we had two little kids here, and that poster in front of the circus gives their very description to a hair. But they have run away--they ran away some days ago, and God in heaven only knows where they are now."

"What were their names?" asked Fortune.

"Diana was the name of the girl----"

"Diana!" cried Fortune. "You need not tell me any more; and so it was *you* who stole 'em?"

"I!" said the girl; "I had nothing to do with it. I was kind to 'em when I could, and nothing would ever frighten Diana. But oh, please, promise you won't tell on me--you won't let out that I said anything?"

"No, my dear; I won't injure you," said Fortune; "but I must know this: When was it they ran away?"

"Three nights ago, madam; and Ben Holt, he's fairly wild at losing the girl. He doesn't think anything at all about the boy, but the little

girl--why, she won us all, she was so plucky and fearless. But they ran away three nights back, and no one knows where they are."

"Don't keep me," said Fortune. "I'm much obliged to you; but don't keep me now."

She left the field where the tent was, and began to walk rapidly down the lane.

"Now, am I an American or am I not?" she thought. "Do I, or do I not, want the police to interfere in this matter? Do I, or do I not, want to find those children my very own self? They were here three nights ago, and they have run away. What can be the meaning of it?"

Fortune pressed her hand to her forehead.

"Well, if there's one thing more evident than another," she muttered after a pause, "it's this: I must not leave Madersley at present. I'll just go to the hotel and tell Mr. Dolman that I am on the trail, and that not all the coaxing and all the worriting in the world will get me off it until I have found those children."

No sooner had this resolve formed itself in Fortune's stalwart mind than she hailed a fly and desired the man to drive her to the Madersley Arms. When she reached the big hotel she was shown at once into Mr. Dolman's presence.

"Now, sir," she said; "I hope you have all had a good tea and enjoyed it."

"Very much, thank you," replied Uncle William, who really, if the truth must be known, was having quite a delightful time--no Aunt Jane to pull him up, no sermons to write, and a vast amount of variety to occupy his mind. "We have enjoyed our tea, all of us," he said; "and now, Fortune, would not you like a cup? Iris, my dear, we'll ring the bell for some more hot water."

"Thank you, sir" replied Fortune; "but I have no time to eat nor drink at present. I am on the trail, and no one can get me off it."

"Do you really mean that you have had news of the children?"

"I have had very positive news. Why, they belonged to the circus we went to see to-day! I had my suspicions as soon as ever I heard that woman talking and saying that the performance was miserably poor without the children. At that very instant it came right over me that it was our little Miss Di who had made things so sparkling and lively."

"Oh, Fortune! let me go to her," cried Iris. "Is she there? Please, Fortune, take me to her at once."

"Now, Iris, love, that's just what I can't do. Patience has to be exercised always in the matter of trails," continued Fortune; "and when we hurry or flurry ourselves we lose the scent, and then we are nowhere. The children did belong to the circus, for I had it from the lips of one of the circus girls. Poor innocent lambs, to think of them having anything to do with such a defiling place! But there they were, and there they would not stay, for three nights ago, Iris, they ran away, and nobody in the wide world knows where they are at the present moment."

"Well, and what do you propose to do?" said Mr. Dolman. "For my part, I think the police----"

"Excuse me, sir, this is a matter for me, not the police. I propose, sir, to stay at Madersley until I bring the children back. I hope to bring them back to-night."

"To-night!" cried Iris. "Oh, Fortune! do you mean it?"

"Yes, my love. I am an American, and I generally do what I say. I mean to bring the little dears back to their rightful home to-night. And now I'm off, and please expect me when you see me."

Fortune turned abruptly and left the hotel. She walked down the High Street.

"Now," she said to herself, "why should not I just go and pay a visit to my old friend and neighbor, Matty Bell. I want a woman that is a gossip just now, and if there is a gossip in the whole of Madersley, it's Matty Bell. As a rule, I can't abear her, but there are times when a gossiping woman comes in handy; and Matty's neither very low nor very high up in the world, so she's acquainted with all that goes on in both circles, the high and the low. Yes, I'll go to Matty this very moment; and as there's not any time to lose, I'll take a fly and drive there."

Fortune hailed the first fly she came across, and was quickly borne to the abode of her old neighbor, Matty Bell.

Matty Bell was a woman of about sixty years of age. At one time she had been a servant at Delaney Manor, but having married, and then lost her husband, she had set up in the laundry line. In that interesting trade she had done a thriving business, and kept a comfortable roof over her head. She had never had children, and consequently had plenty of time to attend to her neighbors' affairs.

"Well, to be sure, Fortune, and what brings you here?" she said, when Fortune alighted from the fly. "Dear heart! I didn't know that you would care to leave Delaney Manor with all the troubles about."

"And what troubles do you mean now, Matty Bell?" said Fortune, as she paid a shilling to the driver, and then tripped lightly into Matty's little front parlor.

"Why, the death of the poor missus, Heaven bless her memory! and then the master going off to the other end of nobody knows where, and all them blessed little children took from their home and carried--oh, we needn't go into that, Fortune--it's been a trouble to you, and I see it writ on your face."

"You are right there, Matty," said Fortune; "it has been a bitter trouble to me, and there's more behind, for the lady who took the children had no right to interfere, not having a mother's heart in her breast, for all that Providence granted her five babes of her own to manage. What do you think she went and did, Matty? Why, lost two of our children."

"Lost two of 'em? Sakes alive! you don't say so!" replied Matty. "Have a cup of tea, Fortune, do; I have it brewing lovely on the hob."

"No, thank you," replied Fortune. "I'm in no mood for tea."

"Well, then, do go on with your story, for it's mighty interesting."

"It's simple enough," replied Fortune. "Two of the children are lost, and now I have traced 'em to a circus in the town."

"A circus here--what, Holt's?" said the woman.

"No less. Why, Matty; you look queer yourself. Do you know anything?"

"I know nothing for certain," said Matty. "I can only tell you--but there, perhaps I had better not say--only will you excuse me for a minute or two, Fortune?"

"I'll excuse you, Matty, if you are on the trail of the children, but if you aren't, you had better stay here and let me talk matters over. You always were a fearful one for gossip, and perhaps you have picked up news. Yes, I see you have--you have got something at the back of your head this blessed minute, Matty Bell."

"That I have," replied Mrs. Bell. "But please don't ask me a word more, only let me get on my bonnet and cloak."

Mrs. Bell left the room, and quickly returned dressed in her widow's weeds, for though Bell had been dead for over ten years, his widow was still faithful to his memory; she slipped a thick crepe veil over her face, and went out, looking the very essence of respectability. She was not

more than twenty minutes away, and when she came back she looked much excited. On each of her smooth, pasty cheeks might even be seen a little flush of color, and her dull blue eyes were brighter than their wont.

"Fortune," she cried, "as there's a heaven above me, I've found 'em!"

"Bless you, Matty; but where--where?"

"Why, at no less a place than Jonathan Darling's."

"Jonathan Darling? Who may he be?"

"He's as honest a fellow, Fortune, as you can find in the whole of Madersley--he drives a milk cart. He found the two little dears three mornings ago, wandering about in their circus dresses, and he took 'em home."

"Well," said Fortune, "well--then *that's* all right. It was a trouble, but it's over, thank the good God. I could fall on my knees this moment and offer up a prayer; that I could, Matty Bell."

Fortune's small, twinkling eyes were full of tears; she caught her neighbor's hand and wrung it hard.

"And I bless you, Matty," she continued, "for you have put me on the right trail. I'll never blame a gossiping neighbor again, never as long as I live."

"But you haven't heard me out to the end," said Matty, "for one of the little 'uns is very ill. You have found 'em, it is true; but it isn't all beer and skittles, Fortune Squeers."

"One of the children ill?" said Fortune.

"Yes; little Miss Diana. You come along and see her at once. They say she fell on her head out of a ring at the circus, and she must have hurt

herself rather bad. Anyhow, she don't know a word she is saying, poor little dear."

When Fortune heard this news she shut up her mouth very tight, tied her bonnet-strings, and followed her neighbor out of the house.

The Darlings' humble little domicile happened to be in the next street, and in less than five minutes Fortune was standing over little Diana's bed. The child was tossing from side to side, her big eyes were wide open; she was gazing straight before her, talking eagerly and incessantly.

"Is it to be a pwivate funeral?" she said, when Fortune entered the room, and, falling on her knees, clasped the hot little hands in hers.

"Oh, my little darling!" said the good woman, "and have I really found you at last?"

She sank down by the child and burst into more bitter tears than she had even shed when Mrs. Delaney went away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LITTLE MOTHER TO THE RESCUE.

Yes, the lost children were found, but little Diana was very ill. The blow she had received on her head had developed into inflammation of the brain. She was highly feverish, and did not in the least know what she was saying. Fortune immediately made up her mind not to leave her. After standing by her bedside for a minute or two, she went into the next room and asked Mrs. Darling if she would take a fly and go with little Orion to Delaney Manor.

"You are going to your own home, my poor little boy," said the nurse, "and please tell your uncle and Iris and Apollo that I am staying here to look after Diana."

The little boy was so excited at the prospect of being home once more that he forgot any small anxieties which he had experienced with regard to Diana. He started off, therefore, with Mrs. Darling in the highest spirits, and Fortune returned to the bedside of the sick child. Within a couple of hours after Orion's departure, Mr. Dolman arrived in person. When he saw Diana he immediately insisted on the best doctor in the place being sent for to see her.

The medical man arrived; but, when he did so, he shook his head.

"The child is dangerously ill," he said. "I could not hear of her being moved at present. She must have absolute quiet and good nursing."

"I'm going to nurse her," said Fortune.

"A properly trained nurse would be best," said the doctor.

"I and no other am going to nurse her," repeated Fortune.

She had taken off her bonnet and mantle and was seated quietly by the bedside. No one could look more capable, more determined, than the American woman did on this occasion. The doctor saw that he must give way.

"Haven't I done for her from the blessed moment when she was sent from heaven into her mother's arms?" continued Fortune. "I shall nurse her now, whether it's the will of the Almighty that she lives or dies."

At these words, little Diana opened her great, black eyes.

"And you'll never know fear Any more, little dear,"

she said in a voice of intense satisfaction. Then she looked up at Fortune, and raised her brow in a puzzled manner.

"I aren't fwightened of G'eased Lightning," she said. A smile broke over her little face, then the light of reason once more faded, and she entered the dark region of delirium and danger.

The doctor did all he could and Fortune did all she could, and presently Aunt Jane appeared on the scene, and insisted on seeing the child, and shook her head over her and cried a little privately; but, in spite of all their efforts to get her well again, little Diana grew weaker, day by day. She did not know Fortune, except at very rare intervals. Day and night she talked incessantly of her past life, of the beautiful garden, of the animals, of Rub-a-Dub, and more especially of Rub-a-Dub's public funeral. She also mentioned Greased Lightning and Pole Star, and Uncle Ben and the circus; but when she talked of them her voice changed; it grew high, eager, and excited, and her little breath panted out of her weary body. She often ended her delirious talk with a cry of distress.

"Oh, I has fallen," she said, with a sob. "I has fallen from the wing." Then she would clasp both her hot hands to her aching head, and moan bitterly.

The doctor was very anxious about her, and Fortune was very sad, and so was Uncle William, and even Aunt Jane.

The cablegram was sent to father, and they all earnestly hoped that he was already on his homeward way.

Meanwhile, at the Manor, Iris, Apollo, and Orion had a hard time. It is true that they were no longer fettered or coerced in any way. Aunt Jane took scarcely any notice of them, and Uncle William spent most of his time alone. The three children could come in and out of the house as they pleased; they could wander about the garden where four used to play happily; they could visit the old haunts that four used to love; but because the fourth was now absent, the joy and the mirth of the old days seemed quite to have left the remaining three.

As time went by, Iris grew whiter and whiter. Often she wandered away by herself, and flinging herself on the ground, would moan out her distress.

"Mother, mother," she used to sob, "I have not done what you told me; I have not been a little mother. Can you ever forgive me? Oh, if Diana dies, I am certain that I shall never forgive myself."

At last, when a fortnight had passed by, Iris had a dream. She never told her dream to anyone, but she got up that morning with a very determined expression on her small face. After breakfast she went straight downstairs to the library, and spoke to Uncle William.

"Uncle William," she said, "I want to say that I am going to see Diana."

"My dear," said Uncle William, who was furtively at that moment wiping a tear from his eye, "I greatly fear that you cannot do so; we have had bad news of little Diana this morning. I greatly fear, Iris, that she will not be long with us; her strength is going, and there is little chance of the fever

abating. The doctor has but a small hope of her recovery--in fact, I may almost say that he has no hope."

"It is a fortnight since Diana was found, and you have never let me see her yet," continued Iris; "but I am going to her to-day. I had a dream last night," she continued, "and in my dream I--But I'm not going to say anything more, only I must see Diana to-day."

"I am afraid you cannot do so, Iris," replied Uncle William.

"And why not, if the child has the wish?" remarked Aunt Jane suddenly.

Until that moment Iris had no idea that Aunt Jane was in the room. She started now when she heard her voice; but reading the expression on her face, she ran up to her eagerly.

"If you are for it, Aunt Jane, it will be all right," she cried. "Please have a carriage ordered this minute and let me go."

"I would not, if I were you, wife," said Uncle William. "You see how delicate Iris is already, and the sight of her little sister would shock her dreadfully."

"She may just as well go," said Aunt Jane. "In my opinion, it would be wrong to leave any stone unturned, and Iris always had a remarkable influence over the other children. Besides, my dear William, when David comes back, I should not like Iris to have to tell him that I refused what, after all, is a very natural request."

"Aunt Jane, I love you for those words," said Iris.

Aunt Jane's face quite flushed when Iris said she loved her. She went across the room and rang the bell.

"Desire the pony carriage to be sent round directly," was her order to the servant when he appeared.

Accordingly, in less than half an hour, Iris and Aunt Jane were driving into Madersley. They went straight to the humble house where the Darlings lived. The greater part of the house was given up to little Diana and her nurse.

"Please, Aunt Jane," said Iris, as they approached the door; "may I go into Diana's room by myself? I don't want anyone to be with me when I see her."

"You may have it your way, Iris," said Aunt Jane. "I interfered once, and I believe I did wrong; now you shall have it your own way."

"Thank you, Aunt Jane," answered Iris. She scarcely looked at her aunt; all her thoughts were centered on the mission which she had taken in hand. When the carriage drew up at the humble door, the child ran straight into the house.

"Who may you be, little miss?" said Bessie Darling, who had never seen her before.

"I am the sister of Diana; I am a mother to the others," said Iris.

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed the woman. "You a mother? Why, you poor little mite, you look as if you wanted a deal of mothering yourself."

"Please tell me what room my sister is in," said Iris, removing her hat as she spoke.

Bessie Darling stared at her for a moment, then she pointed to a door. Iris turned the handle and entered the room.

It was a hot day, and the window was wide open; a green blind was down to keep out the glare of the sun; there was a quantity of ice in a great pail in one corner of the room, and, as Iris softly entered, Fortune was in the act of putting a fresh cold cloth on the sick child's forehead.

Little Diana was murmuring her ceaseless refrain:

"You'll never know fear, Any more, little dear. Good-by."

"Why, Diana!" said Iris.

Iris's voice was quite fresh. It had a different note in it from all the voices which for weeks had sounded in little Diana's ears. She was lying in a partial stupor, but now she opened her eyes very wide.

"Iris," she said; "Iris." And a smile broke all over her face.

Iris ran up to the bedside. She was always quiet in her manner; great excitement only accentuated her quiet. She knelt down at once by the sick child, and took both her hot hands in hers.

"Darling," she said, "I am your little mother, and I have come back to you."

"That's beautiful," answered Diana. She uttered a very deep sigh. She had been tossing restlessly about, but now her hot hands lay quiet in Iris'.

As to Fortune, she was so amazed that she did not utter a word.

"Go to sleep, Di," said Iris, in a voice of authority; "I am your little mother, and I wish you to go to sleep."

"It's awfu' nice to be mothered again," said Diana. She opened her eyes languidly, fixed them on Iris, smiled once more, and then the thick lashes fell over the pale cheeks. In about five minutes she was sound asleep.

Little Diana had often slept during the past fortnight, but during all that time she had had no sleep like this--so quiet, so restful. Iris, kneeling by her side, never moved.

"Let me give you a chair or you'll faint, my love," said Fortune, in a low whisper.

Iris shook her head.

Soon afterwards Fortune softly left the room, and then there fell a deep and solemn silence over the little house.

Aunt Jane, Bessie Darling, and Fortune all sat in the outer room. The heat grew greater; they opened both door and window, and a gentle breeze now blew through the sick-room. The child slept on. The little mother kneeling by her side remained as still as if she was carved in marble.

About four in the afternoon the doctor came in.

"Who is this?" he whispered, looking at Iris.

"It's the eldest little sister, sir," said Fortune; "she came down here this morning quite unbidden, and she told the little one that she was her mother, and the little one smiled and went off sound asleep directly."

The doctor, too, retreated into the outer room.

"It is my belief that the little girl has saved the child's life," he said.

"Whatever you do, don't make a sound; my little patient has not slept like this since the beginning of her illness. This sleep will probably be the turning-point. I shall not be far off; send for me whenever she awakens."

The day wore on, the evening approached; and Iris still knelt by Diana's side, and Diana still slept. The sick child had no dreams in that healthful, beautiful, life-restoring slumber. Slowly, hour by hour, the fret and the worry left the little face, the burning fever departed, the little brow grew cool and calm; smiles--baby smiles--came once more round the lips; the old child-look--the old Diana-look--returned.

Iris knelt on. Her knees ached, her arms ached, her head ached; she grew stiff; she grew first hot and then cold; but never once did she move or swerve from her original position. The great joy of her spirit supported her through the terrible ordeal. At long, long last she was really a little mother; she was saving Diana's life.

Now and then Fortune approached to hold a cup of milk or other restorative to Iris' pale lips. She feared that the child might faint before Diana awoke. But great love enabled Iris to go through this time of suffering. She neither fainted nor failed.

The beautiful healing sleep lasted for nearly eight hours; then, when faint, cool shadows had stolen across the sick room, little Diana opened her eyes. She saw Iris still kneeling in the same position and looking at her with a world of love in her face. Diana smiled back in answer to the love.

"I's k'ite well, Iris," she said. "I's had a beaut'ful s'leep, and there's not going to be a pwivate nor yet a public funeral."

"No, no, Di!" said Iris, sobbing now as she spoke.

"I's hung'y," said little Diana. "I'd like my supper awfu' much."

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The crisis was over, and Diana was to live. From that hour she recovered, slowly but surely. Iris was allowed to be with her a good deal, and the mere fact of Iris being in the room always seemed to chase the irritation and the weakness of that long recovery away. At the end of a fortnight the sick child was well enough to return to Delaney Manor. Then, from being half well she became quite well, and when the autumn really came, and the cool breezes blew in from the sea, father returned to his home once more, and he and Aunt Jane had a long talk, and it was finally arranged that the four children were to remain in the old home, and were to play in the old garden, and that father was to stay at home himself and look after them as best he could.

"They are not ordinary children, and I frankly confess I cannot manage them," said Aunt Jane. "As to Iris, she is without exception the most peculiar child I ever came across; I know, of course, she is a good

child--I would not say a word to disparage her, for I admire her strength--but when a child considers that she has got a mission----"

"I know all about that," said David Delaney.

"Iris thinks that she is to be a little mother to the others--those were Evangeline's last words to her. Well, Jane, it is a heavy burden for such a little creature to carry, but the fact of her obeying her mother's last injunction really saved little Diana's life."