EXPERIENCE

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK EXPERIENCE ***

Produced by Al Haines.

This charming chronicle has no plot.

It is an attempt to present a happy, witty simple-minded woman who attracted love because she gave it out, and tried to make her home a little well of happiness in the desert of the world. After all most people live their lives without its incidents forming in any sense a "plot." However, to tell this sort of story is difficult; the attention of the reader must be aroused and held by the sheer merit of the writing, and the publishers believe they have found in Catherine Cotton a writer with just the right gifts of wit, sympathy, and understanding.

EXPERIENCE

by
CATHERINE COTTON

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TO
ARTHUR, CHARLIE, ROSS, ALEC, AND BOB
(Five very gallant gentlemen who gave their lives
for England)

PREFACE

It has been said that 'Novelists are the Showmen of life.' Perhaps because the world has passed through a time of special stress and strain it has come about that the modern novel is largely concerned with the complexities of life and is very often an unhappy and a tiring thing to read.

Yet humour, happiness, and love exist and are just as real as gloom, so need the 'realism' of a book be called in question because it pictures pleasant scenes?

For there are still some joyous souls who smile their way through life because they take its experience with a simplicity that is rarer than it used to be.

This, then, is the story of a woman whose outlook was a happy one; whose mind was never rent by any great temptations, and who, because she was NOT 'misunderstood in early youth,' never struggled for 'self-expression,' but only to express herself (in as many words as possible!) to the great amusement and uplifting of her family!

For these reasons this book, like that of the immortal Mr Jorrocks, 'does not aspire to the dignity of a novel,' but is just a story—an April mixture of sun and shadow—as most lives are; a book to read when you're tired, perhaps, since it tells of love and a home and garden and such like restful things. And if it makes you smile and sigh at times, well, maybe, that is because life brings to many of us, especially to the women folk, very much the same 'experience.'

C. C.

PART I

'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child....'

CHAPTER I

Aunt Constance was away, but, as it was my birthday, I invited myself to lunch with Uncle Jasper. Father and Ross came too. In the middle of lunch my uncle looked at me over the top of his glasses and said,—

'Well, Meg, so you are seventeen and have left school. What are you going to do now?'

An idea that had been simmering in my mind for some days suddenly came on top,—

'I'm going to write a book.'

Ross stared at me, aghast. 'Jerubbesheth!' he exclaimed, 'when you could hunt three days a week, walk a puppy, and do the things that really matter. What fools girls are!'

'Have you sufficient knowledge of any one subject to write a book about it?' Uncle Jasper inquired.

'Oh, my angel,' I exclaimed, 'I don't refer to the stuff you and father produce. I'm not going to write a treatise on architecture, or Dante, or the Cumulative Evidences of the Cherubim. I mean fiction—a story—a novel.'

'But even so,' persisted my uncle, 'you can't write about things of which you know nothing!'

'But you don't have to know about things when you write fiction. You make it up as you go along, don't you see?'

'You only want a hero and a heroine and a plot,' my brother giggled.

'And a strong love interest,' said father, and he twinkled at me; 'even Dante——'

'Oh, daddy, *must* you bring in Dante?' I said. 'He was such a terrible old bore and he didn't even marry the girl.'

Uncle Jasper gazed at me as if I were a tame gorilla or a missing link, or something that looked as if it ought to have brains but somehow hadn't. 'Dear me!' he said. 'Well, go on, Meg, but if you merely make up your story as you go along you will get your background dim and confused and your characterisation weak.'

'I can't think what you mean,' I groaned.

'Why, Meg, if you lay your plot in the fourteenth century, for instance, your characters must be clear cut, mediæval, and tone with the background, don't you see? It would require a great deal of research to get the atmosphere of your century right.'

'But I shan't write about the fourteenth century,' I said in slow exasperation. 'My book will be about the present time. I shall write of the things I know.'

'Well, but what *do* you know, little 'un? That's what we are trying to get at,' said daddy, with his appalling habit of bringing things suddenly to a head.

'It's rather difficult to say offhand, father, but I know something of the fauna

of the South Pole, and about Influenza (I've had it four times), and a lot about ski-ing——'

'If you could see yourself ski-ing you wouldn't say so,' said my brother with his usual candour, 'your methods are those of a Lilienfeldian wart-hog, and as for your Telemarks—ye gods!'

I ignored my brother and continued: 'My knowledge of flowers is extensive, and I know two bits of history and——'

'Could we have the two bits now without waiting for the novel?'

'Oh, certainly, Uncle Jasper.' (I always like to oblige my family when I can). 'The first is the one that everybody remembers: William I., 1066, married Matilda of Flanders, but I have had an expensive education, as daddy often says, so I know, too, that William II., 1087, never married.'

'Dear me,' said my uncle, again with his indulgent-to-the-tame-gorilla look.

Daddy laughed and got up. 'Well, I should think it would be a most interesting book, though how you will work in the two bits of history with the fauna of the South Pole, influenza, and ski-ing passes the comprehension of a mere male thing!'

Then he kissed me for some extraordinary reason and said that he expected I should get to know some other things as I went along, and Uncle Jasper blew his nose violently, and Ross observed that I was a funny little ass. After that we went home.

Father had a choir practice or something after dinner, and Ross said he had to see a man about a dog (he can't possibly want another), so I retired to my own special domain to start my novel.

I was rummaging in my handkerchief box for a pencil when Nannie came in with a ream of sermon paper and a quart bottle of ink, followed by a procession of servants bearing the *New English Dictionary* as far as the letter T, which Daddy thought might be useful. In the course of the next hour Ross sent up a wet towel and a can marked 'Midnight Oil,' and a note arrived from Uncle Jasper to say that he had omitted to mention that it was better 'to resolutely avoid' split infinitives (whatever they are), and that if I felt bound at times to write of things I didn't know, it was quite a good tip to shove in a quotation from the best authority on the subject, and that his library was at my disposal at any time. He said, too, that he had a spare copy of the *Record Interpreter*, if it would be of any use.

My uncle's jokes are like that; no ordinary person can see them at all.

But two can play at 'pulling legs,' so I sewed up the legs of my brother's pyjamas, put the wet towel and the can of oil in his bed, and the dictionary in father's, and, having poured the quart of ink in their two water-jugs, I sat down with great contentment to fulfil my life's ambition.

I thought over the subjects on which my knowledge was irrefutable, but a

novel inspired by any one of them seemed impossible, and by 10.30 p.m. I was suffering from bad brain fag. Then Nannie came in to brush my hair, so I confided my troubles to her, as I always do.

'I seem to be a most ignorant person, Nannie; the only thing I really know about is the family.'

'Well, write a book about that, dearie, I'm sure it's mad enough.'

'But then there wouldn't be a plot.'

'No more there is in most people's lives, not the women's, anyway.'

'Has your life been very dull, darling?' I asked.

'My life,' said Nannie solemnly, 'has been one large hole with bits of stocking round that I have had to try and draw together.'

When Ross came up his remarks about his bed were of so sulphurous a character that I swear I could almost see the brimstone blowing under my door. And in the silent watches of the night I decided that my book *shall* be about the family, from the time it was born to the day it was buried. Surely something in the nature of a plot will turn up in between.

CHAPTER II

To begin at the beginning. When I was waiting to be born I must have run up to God and said,—

'Please, *could* this little boy come, too?'

And perhaps He laughed and answered,—

'Oh, certainly, Miss Fotheringham, as you make such a point of it,' for Ross and I are twins, and we have lived all our life in this little Devonshire village that is tucked into a hollow in the hills. Daddy is the parson here and Uncle Jasper the lord of the manor. But this place is not 'clear cut,' as Uncle Jasper says my 'background' ought to be. It is just a soft jumble of ferns and flowers, of misty mornings and high hedges, of sunshine, of shadows and sweet scents, of hills and dales, of all the countless things that go to make the village so lovely and so baffling.

I think Devonshire is like a beautiful but elusive woman. You think you know her very well, you walk about her lanes and woods, but when you think to capture her soul she ripples away from you in one of her little rushing torrents, just as a woman escapes from the lover who thought he had almost caught and

kissed her!

This old-world Vicarage stands in a large and fragrant garden opposite the entrance to the park. If you walk through the great gates and up the long avenue you come to the Elizabethan manor house where my aunt and uncle live with their son, Eustace, and all the family retainers.

Oh! and they are a priceless couple. He isn't interested in anything 'later' than the Middle Ages, she in nothing 'earlier' than Heaven. But their lives are most harmonious, and together they 'wallow in old churches,' he absorbed in aumbries and piscinas, she in the prayer and praise part. Then, perhaps, he'll call her,—

'Constance, look at this floating cusp!'

She admires his treasure, her eyes limpid and sweet with saints and angels, and thinks, 'Why, if I stopped praising the very stones here would cry out,' and so they both take a deep interest in the moulding for quite different reasons.

It's the same with meals. He's always late—she's always patient. She doesn't try to be, she *is*. He'll come in half an hour after the time for luncheon. 'Constance, I'm so sorry, I'm afraid I'm late, I hope you haven't waited. I found such a fascinating bit of Norman work in that church.' She knows he doesn't mean to be discourteous, but that he's got simply no idea of time, while she is always thinking of eternity, so she says gently, 'It doesn't matter, Jasper, if you hurry now, dear. I always prefer to wait.'

She is such a stately beauty, such a very great lady. She makes all the other women feel their gloves are shabby. Her white hair shines so that I always think it's 'glistering,' and her nose is quite straight, the kind you see in a cathedral on a stone archbishop, and her clothes are 'scrummy,' so *really* beautiful that you hardly realise them. They are part of her, and she harmonises with the background. Her tweeds are just the heather she walks about in, and at night it's only her lovely old lace that shows you where her neck leaves off and her shimmering cream satin gown begins.

Uncle Jasper worships the ground she walks on, while for her, 'Jasper' comes just after God.

But although my uncle thinks her so adorable, he can't keep even his compliments quite free of his ruling passion.

'Constance,' he said one day, 'you *are* beautiful, why, you've got mediæval ears!'

And 'Constance' blushed at that because, coming from him, it was a most tremendous compliment, and she was secretly rather glad, I expect, that when ears were doled round she got a pair with the lobes left out. Funny old Uncle Jasper!

But though—

'For him delicious flavours dwell
In Books, as in old muscatel,'

he's quite a decent landlord. There are no leaky roofs on his estate. Daddy says it's because of his feudal mind. I don't know if that is why the whole village seems like a family. We are interested in all the cottage folk, and they in us, just as our fathers were before us. Uncle Jasper looks after their material interests and Daddy saves their souls; Ross bosses all the boys, and I cuddle the babies, while Aunt Constance is like that lady in E. B. Browning's poem, whose goodness was that nice, invisible sort. She too

'Never found fault with you, never implied
Your wrong by her right, and yet men at her side
Grew nobler, girls purer, as through the whole town
The children were gladder that pulled at her gown.'

Father is an Evangelical, but my Aunt Constance is what the village people call a little 'high' in her religion. She would like flowers and candles, too, in church, if daddy would have them, which he won't, and she keeps the fast days, but unostentatiously. Yet she and father live in harmony and love, and only laugh a little at each other!

But my cousin Eustace annoys me. He is so good and holy. He is short and thin and pale and vacillating, and wears overcoats and carries an umbrella. In fact, he is everything that his mother and father aren't. Ross doesn't get on with him, and finds him 'tiring.' Daddy says he is a throwback. I asked Eustace once if one of his ancestors could possibly have been a nun as he is so like a monk himself. He said I was simply abominable and wouldn't speak to me all day. In the evening he said he was sorry, as quite obviously I didn't know what I was talking about. Naturally I wouldn't speak to him then. Such a way to apologise!

Nannie was our old nurse, but since mother died she has been housekeeper. She is a comfortable kind of person. Any one who is tired, or cold, or hurt, or hungry, or very small is always Nannie's 'lamb,' though how the radiant six-foot-one and still-growing Ross can come under that category I don't know, unless it's because he's always hungry. But he has ever been, and is, and will remain, her 'lamb.'

Father is Uncle Jasper's brother and not an easy person to explain. He is a handsome, great tall thing, and a mixture of Dante and horses, dogs, humility, sport, and autocracy, but he is most adorable and has a divine sense of humour. Aunt Constance says he is a mystic, but I don't know what she means. I have

never been able to understand how he came to be a parson at all, for every inch of him is soldier. He has got a temper, too, only he doesn't lose it when most people lose theirs. He's dreadfully difficult about some things. He is so fastidious about clothes, especially mine. I think his eyes must magnify like a shaving-glass. He sees holes which are perfectly invisible to me. There is in me a certain carelessness about the things that show (I *must* be perfect underneath), but a button off my shoe doesn't really worry me unless the shoe comes off. A jag in my tweeds leaves me cold, and the moral aspect of a hole in my glove doesn't weigh with me at all. Besides, as I said to father one day when I was being rowed,—

'If I have a *hole* in my skirt it would appear as if I had just torn it, but if I have a darn it would look like premeditated poverty.'

My brother Ross is going into the army. He's awfully like father if you leave out Dante and the humility part and shove in a perpetual bullying of his sister. But he's not a mystic. Oh, dear, no! He loves this world with all its pomps and horses, adores its vanities, its coloured socks and handkerchiefs and ties. He is a radiant person with a great capacity for friendship. He is nice to every one until a chap spills things down his clothes, and then my brother slowly freezes and curls up and is 'done with him.'

He and I do not always dwell together in harmony and love. We 'fight' most horribly at times, but I adore him really, though I wouldn't let him know it. It would be frightfully bad for him. I run my male things on the truest form of kindness lines. They always loathe it.

And mother? Oh, I can't write about her at all, even though it's so long since she died; she was half Irish and so pretty and so gay. She fell off a step ladder one day when she was gathering roses, and Ross found her unconscious, and that night she died. I couldn't understand why a broken arm should kill her till daddy explained that the hope of another little son went with her, too. Father's eyes have never looked the same since; there is still a hurt look in them.

Then there's Sam. He is not a relative, but always seems like one; he is the jolly boy who lives at Uncle Jasper's lodge and is Ross's greatest friend and most devoted slave. Why, when Ross first went to Harrow Sam ran away from home and turned up as the school boot-boy (and got an awful licking from my brother for his pains), and now as Ross is at Sandhurst he has got taken on there, too. He will do anything to be within a hundred miles of Ross. I come in for a share of his devotion because I am his idol's sister. What that boy doesn't know about fishing, birds' eggs, and the Hickley woods isn't worth knowing. But Sam has been known to turn and rend Ross for his good (I love to see him doing it), just as Brown, Sam's father, who is head gardener at the Manor House, turns and rends Uncle Jasper once every ten years or so, when his ideas have become too

archaic to be borne by any man who wants to make some alterations to improve the gardens.

CHAPTER III

We have a family skeleton. It is my Aunt Amelia. She isn't illegitimate or anything like that. This book is quite respectable. Nor is she thin. She has a high stomach and is as proud as it is high. She always wears black broché dresses, even the first thing in the morning. Nannie says they are most beautiful quality and would stand alone. She adorns herself with cameo brooches and rings with hair inside, and she wears square-toed boots and stuff gloves that pull on without buttons. Daddy says all Evangelicals do, except his daughter.

She has been a widow for many years. Indeed she only lived with her husband six months from her virginity, and then he died of the 'Ammonia,' as the village children call it. My aunt never goes out without her maid, Keziah, and she carries a disgusting 'fydo' everywhere. She talks religion all day long, and quotes texts at people. She brings out my prickles.

Father says that no one will know what a 'fydo' is, and that I am not to be disrespectful, because she is a really good woman and has the missionary spirit. Father is like that, he has a kind of humility that won't let him say beastly things about any one. My brother is not so particular. He used to say that he wouldn't let the chaps at school know he had an aunt who talked about his soul like a little Bethel for anything this world could offer him. Besides, I should have thought that any one would know that a 'fydo' is any bloated dog of uncertain ancestry that stinks and pants.

Our only other relative is daddy's cousin Emily. She lives in Hampstead, next door but five to Aunt Amelia. Her parrot can say the collect for the seventeenth Sunday after Trinity.

Cousin Emily is a spinster, but she has a grand passion in her life, and it is animals. She will have nothing killed, with the result that her house is overrun with mice and the garden's full of snails. She visits the poor in the East End and gives away flannel petticoats at Christmas large enough to fit the dome of St Paul's. The last time father stayed there she caught a flea in the slums, but of course she couldn't destroy it. She was greatly agitated and went about the house with the wretched creature clasped in her arms, as it were, waiting for an

inspiration as to what to do with it. Finally she decided to put it on the cat's back, and was quite happy till father wickedly said he did not think that arrangement was fair on the cat.

Then she wished she had thrown it down the cellar stairs, but daddy teased her and said, 'the poor thing might have broken its leg and lain amid the wine bottles in anguish, unable even to help itself to brandy or anything.' The poor old dear thereupon said, 'But, dear cousin, what shall I do if I find another?' and her dear cousin advised her strongly to let the house furnished.

But I like her awfully. So does Ross. He says she is a ripping old bird. She gives us topping presents. She sent me two of the darlingest white and fawn rabbits, exactly alike, when I was a kiddie. One was called 'Nada the Lily' and the other 'dear Buckiebuckie,' but I found the mental strain of life too great when I found ten little rabbits in dear Buckiebuckie's cage. He seemed so pleased with them, too; that's what worried me so. He didn't seem to know how wrong it was, and neither did Nada the Lily, for she sat in placid indifference by her empty nest box.

Aunt Amelia was staying with us at the time, so I asked her about it, but she said it was not a nice thing for any little girl to talk about, especially a clergyman's daughter. I shed tears then and ran out in the woods, but Nannie followed me,—

'Oh, what an old fool the woman is; how much longer is she going to stay? Don't you worry, dearie, 'tisn't the first time that a buck and doe's got mixed, and won't be the last neither. I expect you got 'em muddled when you cleaned them out.'

Thus Nannie brought a situation, electric with insuperable difficulties, down to the level of homely everydayness, where I felt I could cope with it. She is always like that. I changed dear Buckiebuckie's name then to 'Adam and Eve,' because he was the mother of all living and he'd 'ad em! Somehow, when we were children there always seemed to be trouble when Aunt Amelia was in the house. We always said dreadful things in front of her, or else the things we usually said were noticed more.

The very first time she came to stay, when we were six years old, there were two ructions in as many minutes.

We had a hen at that time called 'The Old Maid,' because she was of uncertain age and used to peck the others, and as she hadn't earned her board and keep we had her boiled for luncheon. It was some one's birthday and we kids were allowed to lunch downstairs. Father carved and in great disgust said,—

'Whatever bird is this?'

'"The Old Maid," daddy,' said Ross.

'Well, it doesn't seem to have much breast.'

'But then,' as my small brother remarked, 'you wouldn't expect an old maid

to have much, would you?'

I made the next *faux pas*, but it was kindly meant. Aunt Amelia grumbled that she had been quite chilly in the night and hadn't been able to sleep, so I said,—

'Mother, couldn't we search the parish for a young virgin for Aunt Amelia like King David had when he was old and gat no heat?'

Father exploded into his tumbler. But Aunt Amelia said she had hoped that I would grow up a good, pure woman like my grandmother. Daddy lost his temper then and said he profoundly hoped his daughter wouldn't grow up 'a good, pure woman' if it meant that——'

'Anthony!' said mother.

And father said 'Sorry, Biddy,' and asked Aunt Amelia if she'd have some more bread sauce.

(Mother and daddy always called hot water bottles 'Young Virgins' after that!)

After lunch we all went down to the lake, and going through the woods I said something was 'infernal,' and there was a horrid silence. Daddy is like that, he so seldom says anything. It's what he doesn't say that's so beastly if he's displeased with one, so I said, 'Mustn't I, daddy?' and he replied, 'I think you know quite well, darling.'

'But,' I expostulated, 'surely one might sometimes.' I looked round that wood. 'Why, daddy, I might say we were in fernal regions now, look at them all up that bank.'

Daddy looked amused and his eyes all curled up at the corners,—

'Well, darling, perhaps you're right, but you must always think of Devonshire if you do.'

Aunt Amelia said she didn't know what his dear, dead mother would say, after the Christian upbringing he had had, too. Daddy seemed inclined to lose his temper again and remarked that a certain kind of Christian upbringing was only another name for spiritual slavery. Aunt Amelia threw up her hands and said 'Shocking.' Then father whispered to mother that if Aunt Amelia didn't return to Hampstead soon he'd have to go into lodgings! He always says that if he's worried.

General conversation is apt to languish in Aunt Amelia's presence and to come back like a boomerang to some exhausting topic that most people never discuss. She understands father better now and thinks he's 'one of the right sort' because he happens to be an Evangelical, but she says he is 'dangerously charitable,' and always tries to find out if he's *really* sound on the subject of candles.

I remember once daddy, gently teasing, said,—

'But, dear Amelia, I thought it was your friends Ridley and Latimer who

lighted a candle in England which should never be put out. If I were asked to celebrate at a church where they had lights what do you think I ought to do?'

And Amelia answered, 'I should hope you'd blow 'em out.' Then daddy said,—

'What a pearl you are, Amelia!' and laughed and kissed the stern old Calvinist. Somehow daddy could live with an Anabaptist or the Pope, and both would say, 'He's one of the right sort,' even though they'd disagreed with every single thing he'd said. Darling daddy!

CHAPTER IV

Well, I have got in the 'background' now, and the dramatis personæ too, but do they 'tone' with one another and how can I make them when they are all different? Is my Aunt Amelia in the least like Devonshire? Does her fydo remind one of its sweet scents? How can I reconcile my prehistoric uncle with the twentieth century?

I went to the Manor House to-day to consult him as to the 'atmosphere' of the century. Perhaps I can at any rate get that right. He wasn't particularly illuminating. I don't think clever people ever are. The more they know the less they can impart. There was a woman at school who tried to teach me German. She had heaps of letters after her name like Uncle Jasper has. She said the verb must go at the end, but she never could make me understand which part of the verb. I got so desperate at last that I used to say, 'gehabt gehaben geworden sein' at the end of *every* sentence and let her take her choice. That's partly why I left school when I did. The head mistress seemed to think parental control was what I needed.

So I said to Uncle Jasper, 'What would you say was the atmosphere of this century?'

'You have raised a point of particular perspicacity, Meg,' he replied. 'The atmosphere of this century is becoming increasingly materialistic, as is manifested in its deplorable lack of spirituality and intellectual originality. The universal diminution of intelligent ratiocination, the vacuous verbosity of a vacillating press; the decadent and open opportunism of our public men, the upward movement of the proletariat, inspired by the renegade and socialistic vampires that suck the national blood—all these are symptomatic of the recrudescence of

materialism.'

He stopped to breathe here, and I felt I must say gehabt gehaben geworden sein. He doesn't always talk like that. Sometimes I think he does it to aggravate me, but I know anything modern upsets him. I offered to go with him to look at the Saxon work in the church, as it usually has a calming influence on him, but he said he was better and he hoped he had made himself clear!

When I got home I asked Nannie.

'The atmosphere of this century, dearie,' she said. 'Oh, the same as it's always been, I should think—three white frosts and a wet day, or three fine days and a thunderstorm.'

I observed that she had made a remark of particular perspicacity, and she asked me if I felt feverish. It is trying when I am trying to increase my vocabulary. Still, on the whole she was helpful, for she said why didn't I do what I said I was going to and write of the things I know about. 'Tell about the Hickley woods and how you fell in the water, dearie.'

'But will the general public like that, Nannie?'

'I should think they'd prefer it to the stuff your uncle writes.'

I feel that she's right. I must take a firm stand with my relatives. I cannot be blown about by every breath of their doctrine. Besides, my family's views differ. Uncle Jasper says,—

'The general public is at its best in Oxford and Canterbury.'

'At Epsom or Ascot,' my brother asserts.

'Hunting,' says daddy.

'At early celebration on Easter Day,' says Aunt Constance, with eyes like a Murillo Madonna.

But *I* like the general public, always, everywhere. It sort of twinkles at one, so I shall tell about the Hickley woods and hope that it will like them just as much as I do.

Oh, if only I could get the splendour of the woods down on my paper—the flaming beeches in the autumn, the fairyland of hoar frost later on, the gradual waking of the trees and birds and flowers in the spring, the scent of clover, and the sheets of daffodills, the mist of bluebells and the clouds of lilies. I know where the earliest primroses blow and the hedge where the birds build first. I could show you where to find the biggest blackberries and the bit of bog covered with the kingcups and milkmaids. There are ant hills, too, and a wasps' nest in a hollow tree. The little paths and lanes are carpeted with moss and the undergrowth is sweet with honeysuckle. The woods are always lovely, but in the evening they grow 'tulgy,' and the trees take fantastic shapes and the mossy lanes seem hushed and filled with mystery. When I was little I used to be glad then that the boys were with me, though I wouldn't have admitted a creepy feeling down my spine

to any one but father. The beautiful Hickley woods!

They have a strange effect upon me. They seem to 'wash' my mind. I never found it easy to be obedient, my bit of Irish blood always making me 'agin the government.' I've got claws inside me, and feathers underneath my skin that get ruffled when I'm crossed. So when I was little and rebellious I always ran out of the house and across the garden into the woods. And sometimes Ross would come flying after me with comfort and advice.

'Why do you always run out in the woods Meg, when you're naughty?'

"Cos they wash me.'

'Oh, you are funny, darling,' and then with a little air of protection that is always associated in my mind with Ross and sticks of chocolate, he would give me one and say,—

'But you *were* raver naughty, you know; I think you'd better come in now and be sorry.'

So when the woods had 'washed' me sufficiently I would go in and say I was dutiful now if father pleased. But once when I was five and some reproof of daddy's had cut me to the heart, I added,—

'But my quick still hurts me. It's all bluggy.'

I seem to have lived the best part of my life out in the woods. In them we played our games and had our endless picnics. In them I had the great adventure which caused me to become a doormat and let my brother trample on me all his life.

When Ross and I were twelve we went out very early to spend a long day in the woods with Sam and all the dogs. We made for the lake. It was always the first item on our programme to dump the lunch and tea in a special hidyhole. While the boys were busy I decided that the one and only thing I wanted to do was to climb out and sit on the branch of a tree that overhung the water. I got halfway across it when Ross shouted to me angrily to come back, and Sam said the branch was rotten.

'I'm going to the end,' I said, 'it isn't rotten.'

'*Will* you come back, Meg?'

'No, I won't,' I cried, my Irish grandmother at once 'agin the government.' I just loved that crawl across that tree, because the boys were simply furious and could do nothing. It was no use coming after me if the branch were rotten, it would only have made things worse. When I got to the end I said elegantly, 'Yah, I told you it wasn't,' and as I said it the beastly thing snapped and I went into the lake with a splash. I could swim all right but hadn't had any practice with my clothes on. Sam and Ross were in after me like a flash and got me back to land, and we stood three dripping objects, two in a perfect fury with the third. Then, as my luck was dead out, we heard the horses, and there were mother and

daddy, Uncle Jasper and Aunt Constance out for a morning ride. Uncle Jasper was suddenly jerked back out of the Middle Ages: Aunt Constance tumbled out of heaven, mother looked frightfully worried, and daddy lost his temper, and said it was simply abominable that two big boys of their age couldn't look after a little girl of mine. But how he reconciled that remark with his Christian conscience I don't know, seeing there was only six months difference between the eldest and the youngest—but those boys would always grow so.

Daddy ordered them to go home at once, and when they had got into dry things to wait in his dressing-room till he had leisure to give them the biggest thrashing they'd ever had yet.

Then mother wrung out my clothes, and Uncle Jasper remarked that the children who lived before the Reformation never behaved so badly; Aunt Constance had got to that bit of the General Thanksgiving where you bless Him for preservation, especially of nieces and nephews and boys who live at lodges; Ross and Sam were just turning to go home when I—honestly it was the first minute I could speak, I had swallowed such a lot of water—exclaimed,—

'Father, how dare you be so wickedly unjust?'

Every one looked at me as I hurled that bombshell. People didn't usually speak so to father—least of all his children, but daddy never gets angry at the things you'd think he would, and all he said was,—

'What do you mean, little 'un?'

'Why, father, they told me not to go.'

'It was my fault, sir; I ought to have seen she didn't,' Ross interrupted.

'I don't suppose she heard me say the branch was rotten, sir,' said Sam.

But I exclaimed,—

'Oh, daddy, they are telling frightful lies; I did hear Sam say that it was rotten, and Ross told me not to go.'

So father said, 'Sorry, old chaps,' to Ross and Sam, and they said, 'It was quite all right, sir.' So father said, 'Well, run her home, boys, so that she doesn't catch cold,' and mother called after us, 'Give her some hot milk.'

So Ross and Sam ran me home and said I was a jolly decent kid, which was drivel. And after Nannie had got me dry, I went and waited in father's dressing-room. As he and mother came upstairs I heard daddy say,—

'Well, I suppose I must get into a dog collar as I've got this beastly clerical meeting.'

And mother laughed,—

'I don't think the collar makes much difference when the rest of you smells so of dogs and stables.' And then she added in her delicious Irish brogue, 'I know it isn't seemly to ask a parson to leave the Word of God and serve tables, but *do* you know a savoury that would do for to-night?'

And daddy said,—

'I've just seen a beauty in the woods.'

'What *do* you mean, Anthony,' laughed mother. And father replied,—

'An angel on horseback, darling,' and told her not to blush. He came in then, and saw me, and said,—

'Hallo, little 'un, what are you doing here?'

'I thought *I* had to come, father, as I did it.'

'Oh—ah, yes, of course—I've got to give you the biggest thrashing you've ever had in your life, haven't I?' And he sat down and pulled me on his knee.

'Why did you do it, Meg? No, don't say it was your Irish grandmother' (taking the very words out of my mouth) 'it was pure, unadulterated devil, and mother doesn't feel that she can ever let you go out in the woods again, and I don't think the boys will take the responsibility of you any more, either.'

'Father!' I exclaimed, going cold all over.

'Well, you see, darling, it isn't the first time is it? There was that wasps' nest, for instance. You know those boys do understand that sort of thing. And unless you promise in future you will do exactly what they tell you, I won't let you go, but shall keep you chained up in my dressing-room. I really can't let my only daughter drown, I shouldn't mind so much if I had dozens. Promise?'

So I said, 'Yes, daddy, sorry, I——'

But father interrupted. 'I've simply got to give you a thrashing as well, little 'un, because once or twice before you've said you were sorry, but it will have to be a moral one. I can't thrash a thing your size; why *don't* you grow? I'm sure you could if you really tried, it's just cussedness. Now you go down to Sam and Ross, they're in the harness room, and tell them you're sorry and that you're going to do what they tell you in future.'

And I said, 'Daddy, I simply couldn't; why, I'd never hear the last of it, I couldn't get it out.'

So father said, 'Well, you can take your choice between your pride and the Hickley Woods, darling.'

So I went down to the harness room and got it out somehow. Ross said, 'Oh, I say, Meg, *don't* say any more, it won't make a scrap of difference, but if you wouldn't mind about wasps' nests and that kind of thing, we would be so obliged, wouldn't we, Sam?'

And Sam said 'Rather' and gave me a red apple. I always got one from Sam if I were in a row.... Of course, I've had a dog's life with the pair of them ever

since.

CHAPTER V

When Ross and I were fifteen we got to know a topping boy named Charlie Foxhill. He is amphidextrous. His father is most frightfully rich. He made his money in cement, but this is never mentioned because Mrs Foxhill is the daughter of an impecunious peer, and she is as proud as the cement is hard. The Foxhills came to live in the next village to ours. My great friend, Monica Cunningham, lives there too, at least she is there sometimes. Her father is a baron, but you would never know it to look at him. He takes a great interest in patent manures and the ten lost tribes.

Charlie is two years older than Ross, but so much shorter that they seem the same age. He is an agnostic. His mother has driven him to it, she is so 'steeped in saints.'

'It's bad enough to be steeped in poets like my sister,' said Ross, 'but saints! I never can imagine how people can stomach all that crowd. They bore me stiff. The only one I like is the chap that finds lost things.

'St Elian?'

'Fat lot you know about saints, Foxhill,' remarked my brother politely.

'I know an awful lot; I've not lived with my mother for nothing,' said Charlie lugubriously.

'Well, I never could see that a saint was anything more than a dead sinner,' remarked my brother, 'and some of them make a perfect nuisance of themselves—look at St Vitus.'

'Oh,' I giggled, but my brother was wound up and ignored my interruption.

'And St Swithin—isn't he the absolute limit? Look how he mucks the summer up if he gets the chance! All because he thought he was going to be buried where he didn't want to be—keeping the feud up all these years, too.'

Charlie admires my friend Monica awfully and calls her a Greek poem because she is so graceful, but Ross says that it is a pity she suffers from pride of race and spends her time in looking up people's pedigrees. Her brother is the Master of Rullerton. Daddy asked her once if she had ever looked up the pedigree of the Master of the Universe, as He was a gentleman on his mother's side, and daddy showed her a funny old book where it said, 'He might, if He had esteemed of the

vayne glorye of this world, have borne coat armour.'

That took Monica's fancy frightfully. She said it made Him seem quite interesting. Aunt Amelia thought it 'shocking,' of course, but daddy said,—

'We don't all travel by the same road, Amelia.'

'There is only one way, and it is narrow,' groaned my aunt.

'Yes, but not narrow-minded,' daddy retorted. He is funny.

Though Charlie Foxhill is such a friend of Ross they are not a bit alike; Charlie is so diffident, Ross so sure of everything. But then Charlie has had one of those unfortunate 'Christian upbringings' that daddy calls only another name for spiritual slavery, when square parents try to shove their round children into square holes, and of course the children hate it and some of them go to the devil in the process. Mrs Foxhill actually insists on reading all her children's letters, and expects them to think and feel just as she does about everything.

But Charlie won't be put into his parents' mould, he refuses to be shoved into their square hole, he utterly declines to be steeped in saints. If he differs from his mother on any subject he is answered with a mass of words and arguments, reproaches, or worse still, tears; consequently Charlie says nothing now and veils all he really feels in a cloak of absurdities or feigned indifference.

At first we couldn't get him to give an opinion about anything, especially in front of father, but gradually as he got to know us better and found that Ross expressed his views quite freely and that daddy treated them with respect and consideration, even if they were diametrically opposed to his own, Charlie began gradually to develop and say what he really thought, but always with a certain diffidence as if he half expected a storm of opposition. But he is always courteous about his mother—'steeped in saints' is the only criticism he ever makes. For the rest he is silent and suppressed, but the cold politeness with which he treats his people is quite different from the deference Ross pays to daddy.

Monica, too, is not a bit like me. I always know exactly what I want; she never does—till afterwards. Father says, however, that Monica will be a fine character when she learns that a man can be all the things that really matter, even if he never had a grandfather, and that she will rise to the occasion some day and do the splendid thing even if she doesn't always know whether she wants to play tennis with Ross or Charlie.

CHAPTER VI

When I was sixteen my governess got married and daddy said it was a good opportunity for me to go to school for a bit. I was therefore sent to the one in London where Monica was. The head mistress was a friend of Aunt Amelia. I suppose that's why my prickles were always out and my old Adam gave me such a lot of trouble.

There was that last unfortunate Sunday, for instance. It was the 27th April, and Monica and I awoke at four o'clock. We peeped out of the bedroom window just as the dawn was coming. The London garden had all the glamour of the woods at home, and there in the half light we could see the six or seven trees with bluebells growing round—a mist of blue, enchanting, adorable, divine. The scent blew across the grass and the birds called us. We slipped downstairs and ran over the delicious cool lawn into that lovely blue light at the foot of the trees. We gathered handfuls of blossoms and ferns all drowned with dew. We went quite mad with the call of the spring, and danced, for I thought I heard distant music. It may have been only a blackbird; could it have been the pipes of Pan? Anything was possible that morning. We got back, as we thought unseen, stole some scones and milk, and as we tumbled into bed again Monica swore she heard the cuckoo, but I'm certain it was only the clock on the stairs, because this 'Bird' ooed before it cucked!

Then the same day I behaved badly in church. Of course, the general behaviour of the sons and daughters of the clergy is always more unseemly than that of other people's children. Daddy says it's because they're so frightfully handicapped in having the clergy for their fathers.

But that day two such absurd things happened. I believe even St Paul with his love of decency and order would have been obliged to smile, while Peter, of course, would have giggled. Monica passed me a bit of paper shortly after we arrived, on which was written the mystic message: 'Eyes right. Psalm 57, verse 5. She will remember.' I looked to the right, and seated in the pew immediately in front of us was a spinster of uncertain age in a smart blue toque, in the hollow crown of which lay a complete set of false teeth with an unholy smile still lingering about them. I suppose the poor dear had put them on her hat to remind her to put them in her mouth. I collapsed into weak giggles, which increased when I looked up the Psalm we were about to sing, which contained the verse: 'Whose teeth are spears and arrows.' I am afraid I must confess I didn't attempt to follow the service, I simply lived for verse 5. Sure enough, as Monica had predicted, 'she remembered.' She was singing away lustily, 'And I lie even among the children of men that are set on fire whose——' then a violent start, a wild clutch at the toque, and a dash down the aisle. The churchwarden, who thought she was ill, followed her into the porch with a glass of water.

I could see Monica's shoulders shaking though her face was preternaturally

solemn. I felt quite ill with suppressed laughter. I tried to remember all the things I had been taught to think about in church, but I was in that weak state I couldn't stop giggling. The next Psalm began with the question: 'Are your minds set upon righteousness, O ye congregation.' I felt neither Monica nor I could answer in the affirmative.

After a while my eyes stopped running and I was able to attend a little better. Then we had the second lesson. It was Acts xxvii, all about the shipwreck of St Paul. I noticed poor old Admiral Stopford, who is a bit weak in the head, was getting very fidgety. His nurse whispered to him once or twice, but in vain, for when the vicar read how they cast the cargo over to lighten the ship he suddenly got up and said loudly,—

'Never ought to have been necessary, bad navigation, bad navigation.'

His nurse hurried him out, purple in the face, and Monica and I followed. I felt if I couldn't laugh aloud I should spontaneously combust. We found a flat tombstone in a secluded part of the churchyard on which we sat and rocked.

On arriving back at the house there was a most frightful row because one of the neighbours had telephoned to say that he had seen us in the garden in the early morning. The head mistress said we had brought disgrace on the school and that I was the chief offender. She telegraphed to father,—

'Seriously worried about your daughter come the first thing on Monday.'

Daddy was frantic and thought that I was dying, and wired to Ross at Harrow to go to Hampstead at once, and that he would come up by the first train he could catch.

Ross was out, so he only got to the school half an hour before father. Meantime Aunt Amelia had been sent for, and I was in the head mistress's room being rowed when Ross was announced. He looked quite old as he came in and said, 'Is my sister still alive?'

He was so relieved when he saw me that he was just going to kiss me, but Aunt Amelia stopped him and said he'd better not.

'Have you got *another* cold?' he asked, 'but I'm not afraid of germs.'

Ross wouldn't sit down because I wasn't allowed to. I felt like a prisoner at the bar while he was told all my crimes from the beginning of time to 'this last disgraceful episode which could not be passed over.'

Ross could not see their point of view at all. When she told him about the scones he exclaimed,

'But if my sister was hungry surely——?' and she said, 'But is that any reason why your sister should leave the house in the middle of the night?' and Aunt Amelia remarked she did not know what my dear dead mother would say if she could know it.

My quick hurt then! I know it's awfully weak-minded to cry when you're

in a row, but I couldn't stand that bit about mother. Ross seemed to get suddenly about seven feet high and his face went like a granite sphinx, and he put his arm round me and said, 'There darling,' several times.

'Oh, Ross,' I sobbed, 'I never left the house at all, I only ran out into the garden.'

'Of course, darling.'

'And it wasn't the middle of the night either, Ross, it was four o'clock in the morning.'

And he agreed that it was *quite* different.

When daddy came the Mistress regretted that I would have to be expelled, but she trusted that a father's care and watchful eye were all I needed. She hoped and believed I had no vice.

I cried some more against father's sleeve then, because Ross had said once that people were only expelled for really rotten things,—

'It was the bluebells, daddy.'

'Of course it was, darling,' he said, 'but they're heaps bigger in Devonshire.'

'That child is on the road to ruin,' groaned my aunt.

Father said to Ross in the cab that crabbed age and youth never could live together, and that woman was enough to make an Evangelical parson turn Papist.

But something happened while I was at school that I can't forget. We were allowed occasionally to go to Evensong, and once in the dimness of the church I saw a man gazing at me. He looked like a soldier in the Indian army—not a bit handsome, but he had a certain rugged strength that made his face seem rather splendid. The keen, clear eyes were gray and stern, but softened as they looked at me. I felt as if I knew him. I have often thought since of that 'absent face that fixed me,' and I find myself comparing other men with him, and somehow, I can't explain it very well, I think I feel a little older since I saw him.

CHAPTER VII

Oh, it was topping to get home. Nannie said I was most frightfully thin. She seemed quite worried about it, but the cook said consolingly,—

'Oh, we all ebbs and flows, especially gals. She only wants the crip o' the crame and an egg beat up in a drop of good milk.'

The next day I woke up with a spot on my chest, and Nannie said I was

feverish, and daddy got in a panic and sent for Doctor Merriwater. His name is Tobias, but we always call him Toby. When he came he looked at my spot most earnestly and said,—

'Why, good gracious, the child has got the measles, the one and only measle, she's in a frightfully dangerous state. Don't let her get up for at least two days and I'll send you round a collar and a chain at once or I'm afraid her measle will be gone before the morning.'

When I was better I asked father if I could be presented, as I had left school, and Monica was going to be.

'No,' he said, 'I've had quite enough of London for you for the moment.'

'Oh, daddy, why not?'

Father turned autocratic then and said, 'Because I don't choose, darling.' So, of course, I couldn't say any more.

But after a minute he twinkled at me,—

'Sorry, little 'un, but a parson has to "rule his children!" It's one of Timothy's conditions.'

'Oh, that was deacons, daddy! and you're a vicar.'

'Or if "a man desires the office of a bishop," Meg.'

'But *do* you, father?' I asked gravely, 'for if you don't you haven't got a leg to stand on, and I——'

'No, I don't desire the office of a bishop, Meg; I don't want to do anything different from what I am doing now. I don't, I don't.'

'Why, father,' I exclaimed, 'does anybody want you to?'

'I loathe natives,' he replied, and went out of the room hurriedly.

Sometimes I don't understand my father; he says things that don't seem to have the slightest bearing on the subject under discussion.

When Ross came home in the summer for the holidays he was bigger than ever. I had the greatest difficulty in keeping him in his place. He seemed to think he could go straight on from that moment when he went seven feet high and said, 'There, darling.' He actually had the cheek to say, 'Because I don't choose' to me once, and we had words about it!

Aunt Amelia invited herself to stay for six weeks while he was home. Relations were slightly strained all the time and when she said to father in front of Ross, 'I hope Meg has been quite steady since.' I really thought they were both going to blow up, but we escaped with a slammed door and father's threat to go into lodgings.

Ross calmed down later in the day and observed that 'It was a quaint family, all cracked on something: Aunt Amelia on Calvinism, Uncle Jasper on Archæology, Cousin Emily on animals, and you,' he added rudely, 'on—er bluebells.'

'And daddy?' I asked, ignoring the insult.

'Oh, daddy's passion is souls,' and he changed the conversation quickly. But I was never so horrified in all my life. To think that my brother should compare father with Aunt Amelia.

'Souls,' I gasped, 'whatever do you mean? Are you *ab-so-lu-tely* dotty, Ross?'

'You never *can* see anything farther than your nose, Meg. What do you suppose he said he was going to change the kids' service for that Sunday?'

For 'that Sunday' was the one that comes once a month, when the village children have to go to church, to say the catechism to father, instead of having Sunday school. He said at lunch if we had no other engagements he'd be most awfully obliged if Aunt Amelia and I would go and help keep the kids quiet as several of the teachers were away.

Aunt Amelia observed that she never had engagements on Sunday (she is tiring), and of course I said I would go, though privately I thought it was a sin and a shame to spend that gorgeous afternoon in learning what your godfathers and godmothers did for you. Ours never did anything for us, except to send us ten bob at Christmas, though Ross's godmother says she is going to leave him all her money and me her diamonds.

It was so hot in church, and the children were so naughty. The small boy next to me was a little devil. His name was Tommy Vellacott. He had a picture in his Prayer Book and he would keep sticking pins in it. Father stopped once and asked what he was doing.

'Pwicking holes in the Virgin Mawry,' he said, and all the children tittered. Daddy started the Catechism again and said to Tommy,—

'What is thy duty towards God?'

Tommy looked bored but replied that his duty was to believe in Him, to fear Him, and to love Him.'

Father seemed to think it was a heaven-sent opportunity to point a practical moral, so remarked that if children really loved God, they ought not to bring a dead mouse in church to frighten the others with, and that if Tommy were sorry he had better put it in the porch. (That's the worst of father, he isn't satisfied with repentance; you have to burn the vanities as well).

'Don't love God,' said Tommy.

Father stared down at the little heathen with a startled look on his face.

'You don't love God, Tommy?'

'No,' said Tommy, who is nothing if not truthful, 'course I don't, only believe in Him.'

I thought it was the most humorous thing I had ever heard, but Aunt Amelia was horrified, and at tea said that the present generation was hopeless and that Tommy's remark was a specimen of the apostasy of the age.

'Well, I belong to the church militant, Amelia, so I'm not willing to leave it at that,' said daddy, rather as if he were trying to keep his temper. So I, by way of pouring oil on the troubled waters, said,—

'But, daddy, don't most people feel like Tommy? They "believe," but I think it's most frightfully difficult to love the Man of Sorrows.'

Father looked at me with much the same expression as he had when he looked at Tommy, but he only said gently,—

'Darling, I don't think you will love the Man of Sorrows until you've become acquainted with grief yourself.'

I felt a pig for the rest of the day; it seemed such a rotten thing to have said to father.

The next time the kids had to go to church father said he was going to chuck the catechism and tell them stories instead, and let them choose their own hymns.

Aunt Amelia (who was still staying with us for our sins) observed that nothing was gained by leaving the old paths; and then father made another of those extraordinary remarks that don't seem to have the slightest connection with the rest of the conversation.

'"A Hindoo, though dying of thirst, will refuse water if offered in a foreign cup, but he will drink the *same* water if offered in his own."'

When daddy got into church he said to the kids,—

'It's much too hot to stay indoors this lovely day, we'll all go out and sit in the shade in the meadow.'

The children were frightfully bucked, and when they were all seated daddy said,—

'Now, somebody choose a hymn.'

Tommy Vellacott said he would like the one about the little boy who stole the old gentleman's watch. Father, with great difficulty, discovered that he meant

'The old man, meek and mild.
The Priest of Israel slept.
His watch the Temple child
The little Levite *kept*.'

I could feel Aunt Amelia's expression down my backbone.

Then daddy said,—

'Now, children, I will tell you a story.'

'A Sunday one?' asked Tommy, and when father said, 'Oh, yes, certainly,' he appeared to be about to take no further interest in the proceedings.

Father has a beautiful voice for story telling. He seems to fill it at will with fun and laughter, magic, mystery, tenderness, and tears. I wish I could put down on paper its beautiful tone and quality and show you the gentle softening of his strong face as he watched the little children sitting so contentedly in the meadow, listening to his tale.

Always after that daddy told them the old stories in a new way and the children were so interested and liked to choose the hymns. (They loved the ones for the burial of the dead). One day Tommy Vellacott sent daddy this note,—

'Please Mother says i can't go to church this afternoon and nor can emily she give me a green apple and i have got the dire rear and so has she so will you come to our house and tell us a story please your respectful tommy.'

And after the children's service, when daddy went down the village to see his two sick parishioners he had on his 'contented look,' as if what Ross calls his 'passion for souls' was somehow being satisfied by Tommy's desire to hear a Bible story. He is so dear and funny.

CHAPTER VIII

When Ross went to Sandhurst I got influenza, and then when I was better I got it again. Toby was very angry and said if I were going to turn into a trap for that bug he'd chuck up his profession and take in the village washing. By the time I had recovered the second time it was nearly Christmas, and Aunt Constance went to London, and I invited myself to lunch with Uncle Jasper on my seventeenth birthday, and oh! why I've got up to Chapter I again.... So the General Public can behold me now quite grown up, staid, and in my right mind, having been baptized, confirmed, and had the measles. But whatever else can I put in my novel? A little while after this I asked Uncle Jasper.

'Why, darling,' he said, 'I thought you just made it up as you went along.'

'But could you seriously advise me?' I ventured.

So he remarked that all the chapters must be about the same length and must be linked together by a strong plot, 'The General Public likes strong meat,' he said, and he looked at me and then across at father, and they laughed and telegraphed things to one another.

Nannie is the only person who really helps me. She said,—

'Why, you haven't got anything in yet about the old church, dearie, and

after that I should write a chapter every day about what you do.'

'But the chapters won't be all the same length then.'

'I shouldn't worry about a thing like that,' said Nannie with her usual homely common sense, 'because even the General Public knows that some days are much longer than others. Why the calendar marks the longest and the shortest, doesn't it.'

'Yes,' I said doubtfully.

'Well, then!' said Nannie.

So I *will* tell about the old church and "marey Falkner's" chemise.

Archæologists say that our church is 'a perfect gem.' The walls are very thick, nearly three feet in some places, and the axe marks are still visible. The nave and chancel are about 1100. There is a Norman priest's door on the south side of the church and a perfect Norman arch, dividing the nave from the chancel. There are *two* of the consecration crosses still remaining, and some bits of Saxon work.

There is no tower, but a little shingled wood turret with two bells, one of which is cracked. The pulpit and the canopy over it are 1628, and there are some splendid ancient candlesticks of brass. The church has small Norman lights mixed up with early English ones, and the pews are all old oak.

Uncle Jasper is simply absorbed in the history of the little place, and one day he showed me the deeds and some of the old Churchwarden accounts. I will copy out the one I like best, although he says it is not sufficiently 'early' to be really interesting.

'ACCOMPT FOR YE YEAR 1685.

	£	s.	d.
Received from ye ffor: Churchwarden	00	10	02
Reed ffrom ye psh on Two Rates ..	01	17	03
Totall Received	02	07	05
to ye house of Correction	00	12	04
Ffor Bread and wine & at ye Comm	00	07	06
ffor necessarie Repaire of ye Church	00	15	07
ffor Releiving poor passengers ..	00	02	06
Payd out	01	17	11

```
Rests due to ye psh        .. ..      00  09  06
These Accompts were examin'd and Allowe'd by us
FRED SLOCOMBE      ROB COCKRAN
WILLIAM COPP       ALLIN VELLACOTT
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I'm sure they had an awful bother to make the accounts balance, they must have got so muddled with all those noughts, especially Rob Cockran. I suppose Tommy Vellacott is a descendant of Allin's, and I've just remembered that there is an old woman who lives at the last house in the village and her name is Slocombe. She is thrice widowed and exceedingly rotund. She says she has only the Almighty to look after her now, and that all her troubles went innards and turned to fat. She has varicose veins. These things do link one up with the centuries.

(Father has just looked over my shoulder and says that really, 'after all the money that has been spent on my education!' But I don't know what he means. I'm certain varicose is spelled correctly, for I looked it up in the dictionary.)

It seems that some land and some money were given to the church by William the First 'for the health of his soul.' (Perhaps he'd been beastly to Matilda of Flanders and gave it as a kind of penance.) Father says, 'Oh, no. Probably it was a thank-offering when she died.'

'But,' I said, '*did* she die first?' Father remarked that he thought she shuffled off this mortal coil in 1084, but that he couldn't bother to remember an unimportant little detail like that about a woman!

Apparently it was quite a nice bit of land, sufficiently large and fertile to supply pasture for '80 romping, roaming, and rollicking swine.'

Some of the things the tenants had to do were very quaint. How would the village people like daddy to come down on them now to 'dam the water to overflow the meadows once a year,' and if they didn't do it make them pay a halfpenny? Or supposing they got a message that they had 'to fill two dung carts every two days or pay twopence,' or 'thresh and winnow white wheat,' and for every two bushels that they didn't do have to pay 'somewhere about three farthings.'

But the thing that fascinates me so is the entry in the accounts about marey Falkner's chemise. I'll copy it out:—

```
1792—to pare shoes for Marey Falkner ..  4  6
To shift 16d Ell for marey Falkner    ..  2  8
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Two pare stockens 16d      Do.        ..  1  4
To Handkerchief 14d.       Do.        ..  1  2
Paid for maken Shift       ..    ..   ..     6
and then
1793 for menden marey Falkners shoes      1  6
```

Oh, she must have been a proud girl when she got that outfit! But I hope the churchwarden's wife gave her the shift: it seems an embarrassing present to receive from an Evangelical churchwarden. I wonder if there was a ribbon round the top of it, and wasn't she a good girl to make her shoes last out so long? I do hope there was a ribbon. I've always had such heaps of them; the distribution of life's trimmings is very unequal; poor little marey Falkner.

The account goes on to say that Dame Crane received two and six for nursing John Insgridle, but they paid Dame Hollice 8/0 for nursing Snellings' wife, which seemed dear, unless there was a baby. H. Delva had to be examined and 'hors and cart to take her thare' cost six bob, which was a lot, I think. Then the churchwardens seem to have bought a lock for the church wicket and one Hedgehog, and paid four shillings for a hat for Richard Helsey. They procured a Polcat and a Stote and a mat for the 'Cumionion for the minister' and then got another Hedgehog and 'releived a porper' (doesn't it look poverty-struck spelled that way? I always told father that was the right way to spell relieved), and they finished up with seventy-two dozen Sparrows at three pence a dozen. Whatever did they do with such a Zoo?

But the thing I like best of all in the church is the record of a naughty boy who evidently behaved as disgracefully in the seventeenth century as my brother does in the twentieth, for very badly carved in the chancel near our seat is

R. Fotheringham. 1660.

There is a monument, too, to a Margaret Fotheringham on the opposite wall. She died young. I am so glad she did, for I have always loathed her, because Aunt Amelia used to tell me I ought to try to follow her good example. There is a long list of her virtues, and then it says:—

'This monument was erected by her afflicted
father who, when he looks upon this place,
knows that he gazes on an angel's tomb.'

But then, as Ross used to say when we were seven and I was extra specially fed up with my angelic ancestress, 'I don't suppose she really was as good and holy as all that, Meg, all men are liars; it says so in the Bible.'

Monica once said I ought to be proud of such ancient lineage, but I don't see why. We all go back to Adam.

'Yes,' said Monica, tilting up her chin, 'but it isn't every one that has written down how they did it.'

Of course I *do* see that these things *do* link one up to one's family.

'Just as varicose veins do to the centuries, little 'un,' father laughed, but he didn't condescend to explain what he meant. He is sometimes intentionally ambiguous.

CHAPTER IX

I fainted the day before yesterday, and I feel anxious about my health. I have been since I had the 'flu twice last winter. They say the after effects are worse than the disease. I have delusions: I find centipedes in my sponge. There was another yesterday, and I felt my condition was getting serious, so I spoke to Ross about it.

'Lawks, got 'em *again*,' he said, 'would you like a gun to shoot 'em with?'

I mentioned it to father, but, he, too, seemed to think I only thought I saw them. I went downstairs and found him mending a riding-whip.

'Do you ever see centipedes walking out of your sponge, father?'

'Never, I'm thankful to say,' he replied, dropping the whip suddenly and looking at me anxiously. 'But, Meg, what other symptoms have you? Does your head ache? Do you vomit? Does everything revolve? How many fingers am I holding up? Am I ever twins?'

'Do be serious, father.'

'I am,' he replied, trying to feel my pulse; 'I think it's frightfully serious. I shall get Toby to see you to-day and take you up to a specialist to-morrow. I understand it's frightfully on the increase amongst women.'

Well, I have heard of people with an *idee fixé*, and if there is such a thing as an insect fixe I must have it, and pretty badly, too, for another dropped out just before lunch when I was going to wash my face.

Nannie came in then and said, 'Dearie, why don't you keep your sponge on

the top of your water jug instead of by the window; that's the fourth centipede I've found in your basin this week.'

She is a comfort.

But to-day I had another kind of delusion, for I went out alone in Uncle Jasper's woods to gather early primroses. It was in the dusk, just when the woods were growing dark and filled with mystery. But I'm not frightened now, for ever since I saw that man in church I love to go out in that gloaming time and let the 'longing that is not akin to pain' steal over me.

And then I saw him coming down the little path, and when he drew quite near he saw me, too, and a startled look came in his eyes and a great wonder. He stopped a moment and it seemed as if he half held out his hands to me.

And I? I don't know what I felt save that it seemed again as if I had met some one I had *known* before. I dropped my flowers and ran home with my heart beating. But I knew, of course, he did not *really* stop. I *must* have dreamed the startled wonder of his face, that look of sudden adoration in his eyes.

Father met me at the entrance of the Park.

'Why, darling! were you frightened in the woods?'

'No,' I said, but I clung to his arm, and he turned autocratic then, and in his funny way forgot that I am grown up now, and forbade me to go out alone so late, because he thought that I had had a sudden fright such as I had when I was little, and the woods grew tulgy, and the trees turned to fantastic shapes, and strange things rustled in the undergrowth.

Then daddy told me a most amazing piece of news. There has been a family row at the Manor House, the first I ever remember.

Eustace told his father that he didn't want to go into the army after all, but that he wished to join the Roman church and be a monk instead. Imagine that bombshell in an Evangelical parish. Mercifully Aunt Amelia is not staying here just now. Ross's comments are not really printable. Uncle Jasper came over to see father about it in a towering temper just before dinner. I don't know what daddy said to him, but I was in the garden when he went away and I heard him say,—

'Yes, Anthony, I promise, at least, that it shan't be you over again. But I will never consent to it, never. A monk! My son!'

I wonder what that bit about father meant.

Daddy went to dine at the Manor House, so Ross and I had dinner alone as we weren't asked. My brother's mind is full of Monkeries, as he persists in railing them.

'What a mug Eustace is,' said he. 'Fancy wanting to give up his dogs and horses.'

'But giving up is very hard.'

'Yes, but it isn't giving up in his case; he was never keen on horses—thought the Derby wicked.'

'Well, but Ross, you know——'

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' said Ross with great exasperation, 'don't tell me that you think racing's wicked, surely *you* don't believe that because people gamble that the thing itself is wrong; you'll be going into a Monkery yourself next,' he said, glaring at me angrily. 'What do you suppose the horses were made capable of such speed for, if they weren't to run? I suppose you think they ought to be kept in their stables and fed on barley sugar, and you father's daughter,' said Ross disgustedly. 'Oh, don't talk to me, Meg; people like Aunt Amelia and Eustace make me sick. They just stick up a little set of opinions and call it religion. They always say the things *they* don't like are wicked; can you see Aunt Amelia ski-ing or hunting? Would she exchange that disgusting fydo for my bulldog? But because I like those things they both say that I'm "worldly" and she calls me her "poor misguided nephew." No, my dear girl, it won't wash, that sort of rot does all the harm. And then the parsons! with their everlasting "venture to think." When a chap in the pulpit gets up and says, "My brethren, I venture to think," I always want to heave a hymn book at him and say, "Oh, don't venture such a lot, get on with it." I never venture. I just think and say so, why can't he?'

'Yes,' I murmured, 'I'm sure you do, Ross!'

'Look at the stuff they preach, too. Always harping on the mild and simple tack! Who wants to be mild or simple? How can they think that will attract *men*?'

'Or women,' I said as he paused for breath.

'No, or women,' agreed my brother.

'But, Ross, it does say He was meek and gentle.'

'But not mild, that's the hymn, and they only put it in to rhyme with "child." I hate hymns, except "Onward Christian Soldiers," and "Fight the Good Fight," and decent ones like that. Why do parsons nearly always leave out the other side of Him? Think how strong He was, and strong people are always gentle. Look at daddy. Could you have a stronger man, mentally, morally, or physically, and yet he is most extraordinarily gentle sometimes; meek, too, about some things. I wish I was!'

'I were, Ross.'

'Oh, no! you weren't, *never* Meg. I will not be reproved for grammar by a twin. Oh, yes, you were meek once, about some bluebells. You're rather a sweet kid sometimes; I mean you used to be,' my brother corrected hastily, lest I should be puffed up with pride.

'Now, if *I* went into a Monkery,' he continued, being thoroughly wound up, 'it might be a good thing. It would be discipline for me. I should never be able

to say prayers all day. I'd always be falling foul over the law of obedience, and if there were a dog fight outside I'd have to go and separate them. It would take me years to get to what Eustace is now and—oh these nuts have got bugs in them, pass me an apple.'

When I went to bed and thought over what Ross had said I remembered that once when we were children, he and I and Eustace were taken round the National Gallery by Aunt Constance, and Ross came up to me privately and said 'Meg, I can't stand all these saints and Madonnas, and the paintings of Him are beastly, why, they're only women with beards. They're not a bit like the picture of Him that's in my head,' said the little chap with a proud tilt to his chin.

'What's your picture of Him like, Ross?' I remember asking.

'On a horse, of course, with a sword and crown like it tells you in the Revelation.'

And then, for that masculine English horror of 'talking religion' was developed strongly in him even at that early age, he wouldn't say any more, only, 'Let's come and see if we can find some lions!'

When daddy came in to wish me 'good-night' he said that Uncle Jasper was still in a most frightful bate with Eustace about 'this idea that he has got into his head,' and that Eustace has agreed to wait a year or two before chucking up the army.

I can't understand my cousin. Last time I saw him his young man's fancy had lightly turned to thoughts of loving me. Now he desires a Monkery. But which is 'the idea'? that's the question that I felt would keep me awake all night. Has he really a vocation? If so, I suppose I was merely a kind of centipede that got, for a moment, into his sponge. Time alone will give the answer.

But, oh dear me, I didn't keep awake all night. I only wish I had. Instead, I had a most appalling nightmare. I dreamed that Ross was going into a nunnery. He would do it, in spite of all I said to him. I found myself in the passage in floods of tears, hammering on his door and sobbing, 'Oh, don't, don't. Think of the privations.'

The next moment I was on my own bed with Ross and father beside me.

'Am I dying?' I asked, seeing my family gathered round my couch.

'Dying!' said my brother, giving me a shake with one hand and a stick of chocolate with the other, 'it's we who are dying, with laughter.'

'I thought you were going into a nunnery,' I wailed, 'and——'

'And very nice too,' said Ross, 'if I had a nice little nun to cuddle.'

That woke me right up. I don't know how my brother can say such things! Father says that really some of the family jokes *can't* go in my novel. But I can

scratch them out after.

CHAPTER X

It's a whole month since I wrote a chapter of my book. I don't seem to have had much time lately, although I know we all have all the time there is, as the Bishop reminded the lady who complained that she had not had enough in which to say her prayers!

And now it is full spring and the woods are a pageant of flowers, and there is a glory of green over the garden. It is warm like summer and the nights are still, and that wondrous thing called 'Love' has come to me.

I wish that I could get its fragrance down and put into my book something of its perfection.

My father twinkles at me and says that although I have got in William I., and 'the strong love interest' has turned up, William II. and the fauna of the South Pole have still to be inserted.

I think it's difficult to write of love, but Nannie says,—

'Oh, no. Just tell about the time you saw him first, and what he said to you, and you to him.'

But that first time, in church, he only looked at me, and the second time, out in the woods, I ran away! But two days after that, Aunt Constance had a dinner party, and the Foxhills came, and with them—Michael. I saw that same glow of adoration on his face, and I was afraid to let him see my eyes lest he should catch an answering look in them.

After dinner I slipped away into the Great Hall alone.

He followed me and said,—

'The garden is very sweet to-night, won't you come out with me?'

It seemed as if he had the right to ask that I should go, and I the right to go since he had asked it.

Out in the warm, sweet night he told me a little of his life in India—of the loneliness of his frontier station, but the splendour of it, too. I caught the lure and glamour of the mountains he loved to climb with two faithful guides who went out to him from Switzerland year after year whenever he had leave. I guessed a little of the strenuous simplicity of the life of this man whose face had 'fixed me.'

And then there came a little silence which he broke by telling me that once

in a London church he had seen 'a girl's face like a cameo, cut in the grayness of the wall behind.'

'I loved you then,' he said, 'I loved you in the woods that day—I love you now.'

And I? what did I do and say? Oh, what would any woman—out in the warm darkness with a man she'd hardly spoken to before? I chose to forget that moment in the woods when all my heart went out to him. I selected my words with daintiness and my sentences with care, and built up little barriers of aloofness all around me. I said that 'I must go in now, but that I had been so interested in all he'd told me of his life in India, that I would think of him sometimes climbing his mountains.' And as I turned to go out of the garden I added airily, 'Write? Oh, yes, perhaps I might even write occasionally. I liked writing to my friends. When he came home again in three years' time on leave we might even meet again. Perhaps—perhaps——'

But there were primal instincts at work that night out in the scented garden, and this gentleman, in conventional evening dress, suddenly reverted to the caveman who had seen his woman and quite definitely meant to have her. So with a certain ruthlessness that I discovered afterwards was typical of the man, he refused to let me go, but stormed the fortress of my heart with most exceeding suddenness. He brushed aside all my objections and the words and sentences chosen with such care, knocked down my carefully erected barriers and swept me off my feet, and swamped and drowned and deluged me in love, and with 'What does all that matter? You belong to me,' he took me in his arms and kissed me with a kiss that thrilled while it subdued me.

It seemed as if I had been with him in some dim, past age and then had somehow lost him, and had been restless ever since, striving to find what I had lost, and yet had been unconscious of the thing I sought until I found it, in a moment, in his arms.

As father and I went home I spoke to him with subtlety and with guile.

'Daddy, how old was mother when you married her?'

'Eighteen. Why, darling?'

'Just my age now.'

'Oh, nonsense, Meg, I quite decline to have a grown up daughter, you're only eight!'

'Have you ever felt it was too young for her to marry.'

'Never,' said father with great vigour, 'it was just the right age.'

'Do you believe in love at first sight, daddy?'

'Why, yes, I think I do in some cases. I loved your mother the moment I saw her, and then there's your friend Dante, little 'un, and——'

'Then, father, may I marry Captain Ellsley, please?'

But my father was not consistent, neither was he humble. He behaved like a man who not only desired the office of a Bishop, but was actually a whole bench of them at that moment, and intended therefore to 'have his children in subjection with all gravity.' He said he'd never in all his life heard anything quite so preposterous, he'd hardly seen the hulking chap (we do not see ourselves as others see us. Michael is an inch and a half shorter than father), never even noticed if he ate with his knife or not, so was it likely that——'

'But, father, Dante——'

'Yes, but he didn't marry the girl, as you've often said, Meg.'

Thus did I fall into my own pit, and in the net which I had spread for another were my own feet taken. The Bench of Bishops preferred not to discuss the subject further, so I went upstairs to bed in utter desolation, because I couldn't give up Michael even though father was so displeased with me.

But when he came upstairs ages afterwards he scratched on my door and said,—

'Are you Meg?'

'Oh, daddy, of course I am.'

He came in then. 'How many?' he asked.

'Four.'

'Oh, darling! never in all the years do I remember any tragedy that took more than three, even when you were so worried about "Adam-and-Eve's" family!'

He was sweet to me then, and took away my four little wet handkerchiefs and gave me his big dry one, and gathered me in his arms and said,—

'We can't have two rows in one family, Meg. Tell me about it, darling.'

So I told him.

'Oh, Meg,' he said when I had done, 'so love, that very perfect thing, has really come to you, my little girl, but, oh, why do you choose a man who will want to take you away to India, my darling?'

And then father made one of those strange remarks that he does sometimes which I can't understand.

'My harness piece by piece He has hewn from me.'

'What *do* you mean, daddy.'

'Perhaps I'll tell you some day, little 'un,' and he sighed and kissed me and said he would at any rate see Michael in the morning. So I felt more cheered. As he got up to go I thought how wonderful it is to love, so I said,—

'Daddy, what is it that makes me now understand all the lovers of the world? Jacob and Rachel, Elizabeth and Robert, even Dante——'

'Why, experience, darling,' father said, and came back and kissed me again, smiling with faint amusement.

When he'd gone I turned down the lamp and peeped out of the window and saw that it was moonlight. All the flowers I love so in the day-time were still waiting in the garden—waiting for Michael. In the bright moonlight I could see all sorts of funny things that I have never seen before. There was a little elf in the laburnum tree making yellow tassels, another was stamping out stars from a bit of cloud and throwing them on to the clematis, and a third was taking off the bracken's curl papers. Just as I was thinking I had better try to go to sleep, I saw a little old woman with a face like a rosy, wrinkled apple walking down the garden path. She was in a great hurry and rather cross.

'How people can expect me to make scent,' she said, 'with no flowers. Ah, this is better,' and she looked round the garden with great satisfaction. 'I remember now, this one's always nice.' Then she began to gather flowers and somehow I didn't mind a bit, though usually I should very much object if some unauthorised person came into the garden unbidden. She pulled bits of lilac and a great deal of honeysuckle, some bluebells, and an armful of wallflowers, lilies of the valley, and such a lot of primroses, and threw them into a still, which I never remember noticing in the garden before. Then she damped them with dewdrops and threw in more flowers—daffodils and gorse-blooms (the thorns didn't prick her fingers, though her hands were very white and soft.) Then more primroses and a few late violets, honeysuckle, and bluebells. She added just a wisp of wood smoke, too, from a bonfire and some damp earth and a shower of rain, and stirred the mixture with a sunbeam. She laughed softly and her voice sounded like a faint breeze rippling over the tree tops. Then she walked, or perhaps she floated, round the garden, and on every bush and tree she scattered little showers and sprays of scent, so that I could smell not just one thing like lilac or bluebell, but a delicious harmony of flowers, wet earth, and rain. She looked up at me as she went out of the garden and laughed.

'It will last till he comes in the morning.'

And I smiled back because I loved that dear Dame Nature. When Nannie came to wake me she said,—

'How sweet the garden smells. Hasn't the laburnum and clematis come out in the night? I suppose it's the rain, Meg.'

But I knew better!

Then Michael came, prepared, I think, to interview a Bench of Bishops, but found—my father—who remarked later in the day,—

'Well, he doesn't eat with his knife, Meg, and he—um—seems to know his own mind, too. I don't think that "gentle knight" would have desired to go into a Monastery if his ladye had refused him the first time he asked her.'

Now how on earth did father guess that?

And I smiled to myself as I wondered if 'you belong to me' could conceiv-

ably be considered by a Bench of Bishops as the speech of a gentle knight 'asking' his ladye.

When I told Ross that I was going to marry Captain Ellsley in the summer, he said coldly,—

'Never heard of the chap.'

'But,' I said, 'you must have heard of him, he's——'

'You don't mean *the* Ellsley; that man that climbs in the Himalayas?'

'Yes, I do, Ross.'

'My hat,' he exclaimed, 'why he might have married anybody,' and then he stared at me as if he had suddenly seen me in quite a new light and put an arm round me and called me 'Jonathan' and said,—

'Oh, Meg, I'll have to change into the Indian Army so that I can murder him if he isn't good to you!'

Funny old 'David.'

CHAPTER XI

Here's more than half the summer slipped away. The house has buzzed and overflowed with the boys whom Ross brings home.

Every day for eight whole weeks I have been out, riding or walking in the Hickley woods, sometimes with father, many times alone with Michael.

I love this man I'm going to marry very deeply, but I wouldn't let him know it. He dislikes 'the truest form of kindness' even more than all my other male things do!

Sometimes after a day of delight together he says as he goes home,—

'I've hardly seen you, darling.'

'Why, I've let you stay *all* day,' I say reproachfully.

'Yes, but I haven't really had you; you've eluded me. You drive me mad, Meg, with your little air of cool aloofness.'

But what would he? Is a woman to be done out of her wooing because a man chose once to be a caveman and talked of things belonging to him, before he'd even got them? So naturally I tilt my chin a little when he talks like that, and hold out my hand to say good-night, and watch out of the tail of my eye to see how he is liking it! But sometimes it's——'

'No, I won't stand *any* more of it to-night.' and then follows that mastering

kiss which makes me really his for just that moment, and sends my thoughts and feelings whirling so that I try the harder to elude him afterwards!

One day this week I felt unusually romantic, so I read the Sonnets from the Portuguese.

'Oh, beautiful, Elizabeth,' I said, 'but simple, when you come to think of it. I'm sure that I could write one just as good, and I love my man every bit as much as you did Robert.'

So here is my Maiden Effort and probably my Swan Song:—

'At night I think of you, beloved.
Dream that I see your face,
Fancy I feel you kiss me
As I rest in your embrace.
But at the rose glow of morning
You fade like a summer mist,
And I wake, and long
For a dream that has gone,
For a face that I fancied I kissed.'

Of course it is not strictly accurate, for I never have the luck to dream of

Michael, 'but a *Poet*,' I observed as I wrote the last lines down, 'is not expected to be verbally truthful in a *Poem*.'

'What, still slinging ink, little 'un?' said father, coming into my room at this point, 'why, you've got a blob on your neck!'

And then he picked up this chapter in that impertinent way he has and read it, with his eyes all curled up at the corners.

'Might one criticise the poem, Meg?' he asked diffidently.

'Oh, do,' I replied, conscious that it was beyond all criticism.

'Your "poem,"' he said, getting the word out with difficulty, 'has defective rhymes, darling. "Long" does not rhyme with "gone," nor is the—um—"poem" a sonnet.'

'But I never said it was, daddy.'

'No, Meg?'

'Oh, father,' I said, shaking his arm, 'it would look deliriously beautiful printed on good paper with wide margins and rough edges?'

Nannie said, 'You give it to Master Michael, dearie. He'll like it, and as to rhymes, why the stuff your father reads never has any.'

So I presented it to Michael, and I had no illusions then as to whether I were kissed or not.

Later, at tea, father had just observed that, like the Ephesians, we were 'in danger to be called in question for this day's uproar,' when a telegram was brought to him.

'The tone of this household will have to buck up a bit,' he remarked as he read it.

'It will after to-morrow,' grinned Charlie Foxhill, 'when Meg's gone, sir.'

(For oh, to-morrow is my wedding day, just fancy.)

'It's got to buck up before that,' father replied; 'this wire is from the new Bishop of Ligeria, he's coming here this afternoon and wants to stop the night. He'll have to stay on for the wedding, of course.'

'Oh, daddy,' I exclaimed in great disgust, 'we can't have this Ligerian fossil here to-morrow, it'll spoil everything, besides, there isn't a bed.'

'He'll have to sleep in his suit-case then, and his chaplain in the lid, Meg; there's no time to put him off, and *do* try to behave like 'a clergyman's daughter' while he's here, little 'un! Why, good gracious!'

For there was the Bishop of Ligeria, and a livid kind of chaplain who looked like a limp curl-paper, alighting at the front door from a motor-car.

Daddy rushed out into the hall and I after him. I wished I had had time to change into something black, as father seemed so anxious to make a good impression on the Bishop, but I managed to part my hair in the middle by the hall glass and I turned the collar of my blouse up instead of down.

And then one of those terrible delusions came over me, for I thought father seized the Bishop by the hand and shook it violently, exclaiming,—

'Hallo, Porky, what priceless luck.'

'What about that ten bob, old bean?' said Porky.

Then father turned and saw *me* with my hair parted down the middle, and the *chaplain*, partially paralysed with horror.

'My daughter, me lud,' he said, and led the Bishop and his attendant into the drawing-room for a belated tea.

I got away as soon as I could. I felt I must have quiet to think things out. Is this another delusion, or did father really call a Bishop 'Porky'? Nannie said once that putting the feet in hot water draws the blood from the head and eases mental strain, so I decided to have a bath before dinner.

I ran into daddy in the corridor.

'Meg, you've torn the lace on your dressing-gown; I told you so yesterday. Why isn't it mended?'

'Cotton,' I wailed, 'is threepence a reel.'

'Bad as that, Meg?'

'Worse, my honoured parent, worse.'

'Wild oats, Meg?'

'Sacks.'

'Debts?'

I nodded.

'Tell me the uttermost, my erring child.'

'Fourpence to Nannie, and five and threepence to Ross.'

I escaped into the bathroom and slammed the door. I sang a hymn as I bathed; it was that one the children love so, 'Days and Moments Quickly Flying.' I thought it might help to restore the tone of the household.

Daddy shoved five and sevenpence under the door with a note to say that a lady in the house was very ill and would I either sing something else, or go in the next street, as that hymn made her nervous, so I chanted (being always anxious to oblige)—

'Beer, beer, glorious beer,
Drink till you're made of it,
Don't be afraid of it,
Glorious, glorious beer.'

Another note was pushed under the door then to say that the lady was dead now, and the Bishop thought it would be well for me to sign the pledge (enclosed).

The Bishop took me into dinner. I behaved just like a clergyman's daughter.

'Sorry,' said Michael, suddenly dropping his fish fork, 'but I can't, after all.'

'Can't what?'

'Marry the girl, sir.'

'De'ah me,' said the Bishop, 'this is most distressing, very.'

'What would your ludship advise,' said father, looking at me hopelessly, 'you see, I can't keep her here either, for the sake of the parish.'

'There is a home for Decayed Gentlewomen at Putney,' the Bishop began; 'I should be very happy if my vote and influence would be of any help, but I doubt'—he continued surveying me solemnly—'whether they would take her. She is so ah—er—um—so *exceedingly* decayed.'

After dinner the Bishop nodded in the direction of his chaplain and whispered to me,—

'It sings. Most painful. Very.'

So of course I asked it to. Aunt Constance accompanied its impassioned wail.

'If I should die
To-night,

My friends would look upon my face
With tears,
And kissing me, lay snow-white flowers against
My hair.
Keep not your kisses for my cold,
Dead face,
But let me feel them
Now.'
(Unknown author).

Father looked round the congregation with a cold eye. He has views about guests.

'Thank you very much, Mr Williams. Won't you sing something else?'

And Mr Williams went upstairs to get another.

'Oh,' sobbed Charlie Foxhill, laying his head down on Ross's shoulder, 'keep not your kisses for my cold——'

'No one,' my brother giggled, 'can look upon *your* face *without* tears, old thing, but you shall have snow-white flowers all right; here, can you feel them now?' and he shoved a camellia and several wet carnations down Charlie's collar, and the Bishop mopped his eyes and remarked in his best Oxford drawl,—

'Such a good chap, really, if he only wouldn't. Top-hole, very.'

At nine-thirty father said to Michael, 'You can go away now.'

'Where, sir.'

'Anywhere you jolly well like so long as it's far enough. I'm going to take my only daughter for a last walk in the woods. Of course, if you thought it worth while to be at the park gates at ten-thirty to say good-night I might——'

'If you could make it twenty to eleven I could bear it better,' said Michael, 'it would be ten minutes less——'

'Ten-thirty is *the* very latest, Michael. An hour is as much as I can stand of her myself,' said father firmly, shoving him out into the hall.

'Oh, daddy,' I giggled, as we wandered out into the summer night, 'I haven't laughed so much for years. *Who* is Porky, and why and when did you bet him ten bob?'

'He was my fag at Eton, Meg, and I bet him ten bob he'd never be a Bishop.'

'Have you paid him yet?'

'I've given him six and tenpence on account, little 'un. Why, he's only a colonial.'

'Oh, daddy! you really are a poppet; you're much too nice to be a parson; whatever made you want to go into the Church?'

'I didn't want to, Meg. He made me.'

'What, that man, the Bishop of Ligeria?'

'No, *The Man*, the Bishop of my soul, darling.'

'Oh, father!'

'Didn't you know that I was once going into the army, Meg? It seemed to me then, as now, the only conceivable thing to do, as the Fotheringhams have always been soldiers. But I found that HE had other views about it, and I had to chuck it up at the last minute. My father was so furious with me that he chucked me out.'

'Oh, daddy!'

'And I have felt lately that there is something else I am required to do, and I don't want to do it. Sometimes I think that this pleasant Devonshire life is not the one to which I am to be allowed to 'settle down.'

'And yet you like Him, father?'

'And yet I "like Him," Meg, but, oh, I really don't think I can let you be married in the morning. I shall have to get Porky to say the bit of the service that really matters, for I shall be tempted to leave it out.'

And although father laughed as he said it, yet, from the struggle in his face, I seemed to understand suddenly that my marriage was for him only another 'bit of harness' which had been 'hewn' away. But why?'

Then Michael met me at the gate at half-past ten.

'There's a little cottage high up on a Cornish cliff, Meg.'

'How interesting,' I said.

'It's rather a sweet place for a day or two.'

'Oh, really?'

'And after that a bit of sea, which will be smooth'—(but *will* it?)—'and a long journey, till we come to a little village where two men will be sitting on a wall waiting for me, *and then* the mountains for my honeymoon, my Paradiso!'

You see, I am to have a quite unusual wedding tour. There is to be no dallying with love beside a rippling and sequestered waterfall, alone with Michael, who, at intervals, would strain me to his heart. *No*, there will always be those two young men with us who are going to strain my muscles all the time. I am going up a 'chimney' for my honeymoon. I have had an ice-axe for a wedding present and a most amazing pair of boots If I love and honour Michael, and obey him and the other two young men, I may *even* go up the wrong side of a mountain some day! 'It all depends!'

Now I had not felt worried about these arrangements till that moment by the gate, but Michael's *then* unveiled my eyes. I understood all in a moment that here was the stark and awful tragedy of my life. The mountains were his honeymoon, the two young men—his bride. The cottage and the cliffs, the sea,

the long journey?—less than the rust that never stained his ice-axe. His wife? Just a Cook's tour (personally conducted) to his bride—his two young men—his mountains—his honeymoon—his Paradiso.

But he learned there, by the gate, that an inferno comes for some before their paradiso. In a storm of indignation I declined to be his Cook's tour!

'All is over, Captain Ellsley.'

'No, it has not yet begun, Meg.'

'Oh, Michael! Oh, *please*, Michael.'

'And so do you think to-morrow you could bring yourself to kiss me of your own accord, just once, my darling?'

And now I am alone in my own little room for the last time, for by this hour to-morrow I shall have more 'experience,' I shall be linked up with all the other wedded lovers of the world: Charles Kingsley and Fanny Grenfell, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, William Gladstone and Catherine Glynn! Oh! poor old Dante! Why wasn't he content to love his Beatrice and not marry Gemma? But then the classics would have been the poorer. He might not have written his *Inferno* or said:—

'My wife
Of savage temper, more than aught beside
Hath to this evil brought me.'

What?

Oh, yes, I know he didn't actually say it of himself, but his own domestic hearth suggested it. And, anyway, I will *not* be reproved for ignorance of Dante by—the General Public.

FIFTEEN MONTHS LATER

'But when I became mature, I put away childish things.'

CHAPTER XII

At other times when I have settled down to write, the words have seemed to hurry from my brain so fast that my pen has had to race along to catch the thoughts before they passed into oblivion. But now—though the desire to write consumes me like a fire, the words come haltingly. I am afraid lest I should mar the beauty of *this* thing I know about. For I have found in marriage the loveliest experience of all.

For on my wedding day, when all the flowers and jewels and lace were laid aside, and all the good-byes said; the last kiss given to my father, and the farewells waved to all the loving village folk who were gathered at the gates to watch me go, I felt a little lonely, and wondered, as I drove away, if anywhere could ever be again so sweet as that old home.

When the little journey to the coast was made, and the sun set in a glow of splendour in the sea, the quiet night came down and the stars hung softly like jewelled lamps about a purple sky. Out in the windless, magical sea-scented night my husband caught and kissed me suddenly,—

'You can't send me away to-night, you little fluttering thing.'

But there was something in the quality of his kiss that frightened me, something almost ruthless in the finality of the words, so that I fled away upstairs in wild rebellion, because the summer's dalliance was over. I might elude the man no more. I must say like all the other women,—

'Meet, if thou require it
Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
In thy hands.'

Oh, if it only might be 'to-morrow, not to-night,' and when to-morrow came?

why then again—to-morrow. Thus Mother Eve passed on to me that fear which caught her once when she, perhaps, was walking in the garden.

I went over to my window and leaned out. The sleeping world lay at my

feet. I looked across the cliffs to where the quiet beauty of the sky met the wide splendour of the sea, and the great moon flooded the water, luring me to adventure out upon that rippling, shining pathway, which seemed to lead to God.

And as I looked I realised that all the natural world responded always to the natural laws, and, because of that obedience, there was that restfulness and harmony that had always soothed and quietened me, and the old 'washed' feeling came and swept away rebellion. So—when that time came that Michael shut the door, and there was no one in the room but him and me—he found 'duty' waiting, and that primeval fear that Eve passed down the ages to her daughter.

I suppose some of my thoughts were painted in my face, for I saw all that was dogged and ruthless in the man rise up—directed against himself, not me. I watched him beat down and back that ache and longing that was in his eyes when he came in, till there was nothing left but a vast, comprehending tenderness and the strength to wait, until such time as that frightened look had passed from his ladye's eyes.

And in the quiet shelter of his arms I listened to the very perfect things he chose to say. That by reason of the 'worship' he had sworn to give me, there could be no 'demands,' only a lovely gift most urgently desired if I could give a thing, so priceless, willingly.

And then at something wistful in his face, my love rose up and cast out fear—that craven thing. And there was a little kiss upon my husband's lips, so small and light, he hardly knew it there till it had gone—that little first one that I ever gave him 'of my own accord.' He took my hands and with the worship deepening in his eyes he asked,—

'Is my beloved mine?'

There flashed into my mind those words which, I suppose, express most fully the completeness and the glory and perfection of our human love, and which convey, so perfectly, the utter rest and peace and sweet contentment which both should find in marriage, when they love.

So I leaned against my husband and he stooped to hear the whispered words,—

'I am my beloved's, and his desire is towards me.'

So I gave. And in the old surrender of the woman to the man's exultant mastery, I, too, found love's consummation—and lo!—there was bread and wine—a chalice and a sacrament.

I have been married, really, such a very little while, yet in these fifteen months in India I have learned that sometimes women do not give ungrudgingly—that people speak and write of marriage as if its sweet abandonment were a thing of

which to be ashamed. But if it were, would Christ have used it as a type of that other union—mystic and wonderful—between His Church and Him?

And so it seems to me that first should come the 'marriage of the minds.' If he 'demands' and she gives grudgingly or of necessity, or with regret, as if for something spoiled—they too are 'wasteful' and have 'cheapened Paradise.' They have not discerned the Sacrament, but have

> 'Spoiled the bread, and spilled the wine
> Which, spent with due respective thrift
> Had made brutes men, and men divine.'

And, by the way, I'm sure it's time I got in all those other bits I know about.

Those poor birds of the South Pole, still waiting on the ice for me to bring them fame! And then that other king, but oh! he was so dull. He missed the best of everything in life: for William II., 1087, never married; and so of course he never knew what we shall know in four more weeks, that 'A child's kiss, set on thy sighing lips, shall make thee glad.'

And when the labour and the travail are all done, and my baby rests in my arms, I shall have more 'experience.' I shall be linked up with all the other mothers of the world. Oh, dare I say it? Humbly I do. I shall be linked up, faintly and far off, even with Mary.

PART II
FOUR YEARS LATER

CHAPTER I

'I start life on my own account and don't like it.'

Grammar is not my strong point, and I never could quote correctly, but my

geography is hopeless. I always remember, however, when I am at sea that the earth revolves around the sun, and on its axis, too, for I can feel the double motion in every fibre of my being.

Now that I am once more on dry land and the universe has ceased to rock I have gone back to my childish and comfortable belief that the world is a nice, firm, square thing fixed on four legs like a dining-room table.

I really am a shocking sailor, though 'the Gidger'[#]—my small daughter—loves the sea. The stewardess was an angel of light to me, yet she insisted on my turning out for all the boat drills. I felt I would so much rather lie in my berth than bother about my place in a boat if we were torpedoed, that it would be so much less exertion to go down comfortably in the big ship than toss about in a small boat on the chance of being saved. One great advantage of *mal de mer* is that all other sensations are obliterated. I was not conscious of the least fear when the ship next to ours went down, and the fact that our own escaped a like fate by a miracle left me cold. Even my loneliness and misery at my first parting from Michael since our marriage were all forgotten—swallowed up in one great desire to lie down flat and perhaps take a little iced champagne, 'for my stomach's sake,' like poor darling Timothy.

[#] *Re* the nick-name Gidger, the first 'G' is pronounced as in Gideon and the second 'g' as in German.

Over four whole years of life I've 'drawn a veil,' and, oh, so much has happened since I finished the last chapter.

I've got to know my husband, that's one thing. A woman never really knows a man when first she marries him. That old woman in our village used to say 'the longer you live with a man, the less you like him,' and she ought to know, she was 'thrice widowed.'

So I have discovered that mine is a very quaint person, with primitive, old-world ideas, that make him ruthless with himself and other people about 'work' and 'duty'; and because he never had a sister (and a mother only for an hour), he's rather apt to think any woman who powders her nose is of necessity a painted Jezebel! Shall I ever forget his face on the steamer going out to India, when one of those dear, delicious, natural, American women produced a small mirror and a powder puff in the social hall and said to her friend,—

'Say, Sadie, why didn't you tell me I'd got a nose like a headlight?'

And his expression! when I told him that *of course* I had the same things in my pocket. Why, good gracious, is there any woman who doesn't powder her nose, though I do agree with him that some of them put it on thicker than they

need.

Then, too, he can, and will, only talk upon subjects he understands. Imagine the devastating dullness of a life lived on those lines. But now. he says 'two in a family can't talk, there aren't enough words to go round.' So my black beast (as I call him), has been content to adore and bully me by turns, and fill his life with deeds, and leave the words for other people and his wife. Consequently, I am not perfectly positive yet how much less I like him.

One day, after the war had raged two years in France, he came and told me that he was ordered to the Front, and I could see the soldier and the lover struggling in his face.

'Oh, Meg, I'm going, so I shan't miss it after all, but how *can* I leave you?'

Other things besides the war have happened in those four years. Daddy did not settle down in Devonshire, but his passion for men's souls has driven him to one of the terrible places of the earth, where he lives among natives, for whom he has always had a kind of abhorrence. He and Porky wage war against the devil over an immense tract of country, for daddy is on the Bench now, and his diocese is next to that of the Bishop of Ligeria. They meet once a year, daddy and his old fag, both consumed with a burning desire that men's bodies should be clean and their souls washed white, both so muscular and so militant that they are utterly unable to comprehend 'the church passive,' or to see why a man can't shoot and ride and crack a joke as well as pray. But then, as Ross used to say, 'Father is a man first and a parson afterwards.' I have sometimes wondered, since I have learned to see things 'farther than my nose,' whether the sentiment expressed so elegantly by my brother did not contain an element of truth, *i.e.* 'that the chaps in the pews are more likely to listen to what the chap in the pulpit is jawing about if they know he's a good shot and rides as straight as they do.'

But the thrill of the years was Cousin Emily, who, without a word to any one, let her house in Hampstead and turned up one day at daddy's bungalow and announced that she had come to keep house for him and to instil kindness to animals among the natives. My father (with that mediæval humour that made people in the Middle Ages put up gargoyles on their churches) says 'Emily's parrot, Meg, has done more for the cause than any missionary ever born will do. The natives simply love the collect for the seventeenth Sunday after Trinity!'

At one of the annual meetings Porky asked Emily if he could borrow the godly bird for *his* diocese, but there was that in his eyes which made her know he wanted her as well. So daddy married them, and they are now like the parrot, 'continually given to all good works together!

The paralytic chaplain's health has given out. The strain of one of the annual meetings (or else the climate) was too much for him, so he has been sent home, and has a curacy in England and a wife now, who can lay those 'snow-

white flowers' against his hair! And talking of England reminds me that while Michael wrestled with his packing in a kind of sulphurous haze, I pulled strings. If you pull them hard enough in India you can generally make the puppets work, so somehow I got a passage and embarked for England three days after Michael sailed for France.

Captain Everard, a great friend of my brother, sailed in the same boat. He was so kind when I felt sick and kept my small daughter amused.

When I got to Tilbury I was limper than Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'damp rag hung over the back of a chair.' I don't know what I should have done without the dear little stewardess to pack for me, and Captain Everard to help me and the Gidger through the customs, and all the other nightmare horrors of a landing in England in war time. I suppose I said I was 'British' when the Aliens Officer asked me my nationality, but I felt like a disembowelled spirit. (No, I don't mean disembodied!) Captain Everard could not come to London with me, but got me a corner seat in a carriage with only three men in it, nice chaps in the Pioneers, one of whom Captain Everard knew slightly.

CHAPTER II

At last after an interminable and arctic journey, during which I passed through every phase of land and sea sickness and might have died of cold but for a timely dose of brandy from the Pioneers, the train glided into the gloom of St Pancras station. Suddenly everything turned rose colour. Such a delicious surprise! Waiting under one of the shaded lamps was that wounded warrior—Ross. He looked so dear and big and beautiful in his kilt. I flung myself and the Gidger, regardless of life and limb, and the restraining hands of three Pioneers, out of the carriage and into his arms almost before the train had stopped. Did you ever know anything so delightful? He had coaxed the shipping company for information about the boat and got leave from the hospital to meet me. He enveloped us both in a huge hug with his one good arm. Oh, I was pleased to see him after five years, my dear adorable twin brother. I told him about the Pioneers, and he said,—

'Really, Meg, I think drinking spirits in a railway carriage with strange soldiers is about the limit of anything even you've ever done!'

But he thanked them very nicely. He has such charming manners when he chooses (he ought to have, I brought him up), he told them I was such a bad trav-

eller, and that he was much obliged to them for looking after me. The Pioneers said it was a great relief to their minds that some one had met me; so if it was to theirs you can imagine what it was to mine.

The Gidger loved 'Uncle Woss' at once, and was deeply interested in his M.C. ribbon and bandaged arm, and the admiration seemed mutual, for Ross said,—

'Oh, what a Poppet, Meg.'

Whereupon the Gidger, ever athirst for information, asked,—

'What's a Poppet, Uncle Woss?'

My brother replied that a Poppet was a little girl in a white fur coat, and immediately buttoned her up in one, while he called a soldier, who was standing near, to 'bring the other coat,' and, as he helped me on with it, he said, 'You remember Brown, don't you, Meg?'

'Why, Sam! of course I do,' and I shook hands. 'However do you always manage it?'

'Oh, got a knee this time,' said Ross, and stared at Brown, who looked extremely sheepish. 'Where's your maid?' he added.

'Haven't brought her, couldn't get a passage.'

'Oh, what rotten luck; how have you managed?'

'Captain Everard did a lot for me.'

'But not your hair, surely, Meg? (Get a porter, Brown, and fish the baggage out.)'

So while Brown 'fished,' I revelled in my warm coat, and tried to see how it set on me at the back and said, 'Why, Ross, it's sable.'

'Well, you don't think I'd give you a rabbit one, do you?' said my brother.

Being uneconomically inclined myself, I felt I ought to add, 'But what extravagance!'

He scoffed, and said he'd have me know his godmother had left all her money to him, and not to me, that a fur coat was cheaper than pneumonia, anyway, besides being less trouble to one's relatives, and for those two reasons *only* he had bought it. 'I've got a car waiting outside,' he said, 'so that while remarks on finance, coming from you, are deeply interesting, my child, they are also apt to be expensive, as it's up to thirty bob by now, the train's so late.'

As we drove out of the station Ross said, 'Michael wired to the Savoyard for your rooms, and my hospital is quite close,' and then he added in an airy manner, 'Oh, by the way, I knew you'd want a nursemaid for the Gidger, so I engaged one for you. She's pretty and seems nice, so I didn't bother about references.'

I didn't want to appear ungrateful, so I only murmured that I could see about those later on, and I drew a little closer to him and squeezed his arm for joy at seeing him again, while the Gidger gazed, entranced, out of the window at

the traffic.

'Ross,' I said, 'how on earth does Sam always manage it?'

'I dunno,' said Ross, staring through the glass at Sam's impassive back. 'It's extraordinary. When I got this bullet in my arm he came up a moment after, said he'd bust his knee. Sometimes I think he must have some arrangement with the d——'

'With a person that we need not name.'

'Just so,' said Ross, and giggled as he used to do when I reproved him.

But, all the same, it is a funny thing that Sam always has managed to get with Ross, from the time he turned up as the school boot-boy, to the day he appeared in my brother's dug-out with a can and said, 'Hot water, sir,' in just the same old way.

When I arrived at the hotel the 'pretty nursemaid' turned out to be my darling Nannie.

'When you feel you can stop kissing them both, Meg would like your references.'

'References given *and* required,' laughed Nannie.

'Then the deal's off. Meg's past won't bear looking into.'

Ross had just crammed my rooms with flowers and the air was full of scent. He said Michael told him 'heaps of lilies.' Did he remember that the scent of those is love? I do think, however, he might have ordered the removal of the earwigs.

I was so tired that I came upstairs directly after dinner. The Gidger was already fast asleep.

'Pretty lamb,' said Nannie, just as she always used to do.

So like the gardener's cat in Punch, I felt that we could

'Sit among the greenhouse flowers
And sleep for hours and hours and hours.'

Just before I sailed I got a mail from daddy. He was about to start upon a journey to some scattered mission stations 'to confirm the churches,' and after that he said 'perhaps I shall come home.' Oh, won't it be too topping if he does. He was very excited, too, over the two new missionaries who had come out to the only healthy station. He writes:—

'They're really quite nice, Meg, the Reverend Mister has a heart of gold. She's solid gold right through, only you know, little 'un, those very gold people do have funny clothes and shoes sometimes. I'm afraid she's rather inclined to think that

curly hair is "wicked." I don't know what she'd say to yours, Meg, but then the children of the clergy always go quickest to the dogs; you've said that heaps of times, so of course it must be right.'

He finished up:—

'Good-bye, darling, don't forget that whatever the next few months may bring you, "underneath are the Everlasting Arms."'

Daddy is such a comfortable person, he doesn't, like Aunt Amelia, jaw about the war and say it's 'a judgment' *every* time he writes. When it first broke out he said that God seemed to be speaking to the world with great vigour about something, and was I listening for the bit He meant for me?

Really, when you come to think of it, arms are nice things when one is tired. War makes one tired, all women hate it. I wish Michael wasn't in France. I wish he could have seen his way to take the staff job he was offered.

CHAPTER III

I have had such a glorious sleep! The gardener's cat wasn't in it, but the earwig was—in my bed—and Nannie wouldn't let me kill it because 'earwigs are such good mothers.'

Oh, what bliss a bed is after a bunk, the joy of a motor hoot instead of a fog horn, and the sight of a house opposite one's windows instead of a sickening swirl of green water and sky.

But I felt rather at a loose end, and when Nannie came in with my breakfast I said,—

'I wonder what I'd better do to-day?'

'Buy a hat, I should think, dearie, and then go to the Bank.'

She is a comfort!

She sat on the edge of my bed while the Poppet and I had breakfast. I believe her private opinion is that Michael has kept us short of food, as we ate

everything but the crockery, but when a person has lived on a dry biscuit for weeks, a person is apt to feel a bit peckish at the end of such a fast.

Dear old Nannie hasn't altered much, she carries her years lightly, it's just the same kind face, with the hair a little grayer. She says she would have come out to India to me ages ago if it hadn't been for the war. We had so much to say to one another that I got rid of quite a respectable amount of the conversation which had accumulated during the voyage, for I was too sick even to talk!

It is good to be in London. I went to my old shop. 'Estelle' remembered me and said, 'Madame is of a youthfulness inconceivable to have such a big little daughter,' which is most satisfactory. The 'big little daughter' looks enchanting in a white fur cap to match her coat, and I got a small soft brown thing 'of a price preposterous.' Captain Everard called to inquire after me, so I asked him to lunch and thanked him for all he had done for me. He said he hardly recognised me in a vertical position, having seen me prostrate so long. After lunch I spent the afternoon with Ross. He said he was 'quite well.'

'Then why are you in bed?' I inquired politely.

'Matron's orders,' snapped the soldier bit of him. 'Drat the woman,' said my brother.

He hasn't altered much, though the war has painted shadows and grim lines about his mouth; his eyes, too, are sterner than they used to be, otherwise he is the same good-looking, big, teasing, maddening brother. He thought I hadn't changed, and seemed the 'same rum kid.' I saw matron afterwards. She told me that his arm is very badly injured, and she feared at first that he would lose it, but it is on the mend at last, though it will be months before he can go out again, 'for which,' she said, 'you won't be sorry.' Then she added, 'I don't know if you've any plans, but he would be much better if he could be somewhere where it's quiet. When the pain comes on we simply cannot keep the place quiet enough. The slamming of a door, the noise of footsteps in the room make his pain almost unendurable. It's the shot nerve, you know. You can't, in a house like this, keep every door from banging, though we do our best. He would be much better with you in the country, though you would need a nurse. A right arm makes a man so helpless; he can't cut his food up, or dress himself. Of course, there's Sam,' and then she laughed. 'He'll probably be leaving his hospital soon; he's close by, you know.'

'But could he manage? How could he wait on Ross if he can't walk?'

'Oh, he can walk enough for that,' she said. 'He's already interviewed me on the subject more than once. He says the captain only wants an arm which *he* has got. If you could let him rest his knee all day and just help your brother night and morning it might do, though you'd have the pair of them really on your hands.'

'But do the men ever get leave from hospital like that?' I asked.

'Oh, there is such a thing as extended hospital furlough,' said matron; 'it doesn't usually apply to knees, but all the hospitals are crammed. I dare say I could work it. You'd have to give him time off sometimes to go before his M.O.'

'Well, if you think you can work it,' I said doubtfully.

'You can work most things, if you know how! Your brother's very angry with me to-day because I made him stay in bed after the excitement of your arrival. I am in very deep disgrace,' said matron, smiling.

As I went along the frosty streets I promised myself a perfect orgy of shopping. My wardrobe is too diaphanous for this climate. The cold is almost unbelievable after India. When I got back to the hotel I found the Gidger had had a gorgeous afternoon at the Zoo, and was sitting up in bed, eating her supper, while Nannie cut her bread and butter into 'ladies' fingers,' as she had done, oh, how many times for me when I was four years old.

I told Nannie matron's views, and she said, 'Why don't you go into rooms, Miss Margaret? Then you could have him. You and I could manage for him.'

'You can see him letting a "parcel of women" hang round him, can't you, Nannie? No, it must be a nurse or Sam, if we can get him.' But I agreed to wire to Fernfold, where a pal of Nannie lives, who has a friend who takes in lodgers, and would make us comfortable.

Just as I was going down to dinner I got a trunk call. It was Uncle Jasper. 'Your aunt wants to know when you are coming down to us,' he boomed.

'Where are you speaking from?' I asked; 'the Manor House?'

'No, we're at Rottingdean.'

'Wallowing in old churches, at least your uncle is,' came my aunt's voice, a long way off. 'Won't you come to us, darling, I'm so worried about Eustace. No, I can't tell you on the telephone, and we'd so love to have you.'

'Why aren't you at home?' I said.

'Yes, another call; oh, ... don't cut us off!'

'Your aunt,' said Uncle Jasper, seizing the receiver, 'has been very ill with influenza.'

'Nonsense,' said Aunt Constance, 'don't frighten the child, Jasper. I'm all right now, darling.'

'Shall I meet the 2.5 to-morrow?' said my uncle.

So I told him about Ross and Fernfold.

'What's the church there?' he inquired; 'Norman or Early English?'

I could hear his snort of indignation when I said I thought it was a new Wesleyan Chapel! Then we got cut off.

Nannie says that her friend's friend prefers to board her lodgers, 'and you'd better let her, dearie. You won't like contending with the rations.' So it's settled

we're to be boarded if we go to Fernfold. I'm so dead tired I must be getting sleeping sickness. Will there be a letter from 'the black beast' in the morning?

CHAPTER IV

Such shoppings! The Poppet and I are now considerably warmer than we were, and, we hope, more beautiful. Certainly Michael is considerably poorer.

I have seen several old friends and had lunch with Monica Cunningham. She has grown very pretty and still moves in the graceful way that made Charlie in the old days call her 'a Greek poem.' She has risen to the occasion, as daddy always said she would, and done the splendid thing like all the other girls—exchanged luxury for hospital work at Hammersmith. She was very amusing about it. She said that at first she had visions of herself in a becoming uniform holding the fevered hands and smoothing the pain-racked brows of wounded warriors, but what she got was all the kicks and none of the halfpence. However, she seemed quite happy.

'Meg,' she said, 'those men I nurse—they are "everything that really matters"—as your father used to say.'

And I wondered if she had learned that other bit of daddy's, *i.e.* that the lack of grandfathers was not important then!

I tried to get her to talk about Charlie Foxhill, for I'm certain he's been in love with her for years.

'Oh,' she said, 'he's quite a decent boy,' but I think her eyes said something stronger, and I was glad, because I'm devoted to them both.

Then I took the Gidger to Hampstead to call on Aunt Amelia.

In the old days I used to heave a sigh of relief when I came away from 7 Victoria Gardens, and things are still unchanged. One enters a house full of 'judgment' and leaves the 'love' outside in the garden. There is the same high moral tone about Aunt Amelia's conversation. Her 'fydo' does the things he always did. Her drawing-room is still decorated in tones of mustard and bestrewn with antimacassars. Only in the throes of a bilious attack can one appreciate the scheme of colour. My aunt greeted me with her accustomed coolness, but gave a peck to the Gidger's cheek, which that small person promptly rubbed off; this was a bad start.

The same sour-faced maid brought in the same uninteresting, microscopic

tea. The Poppet, who is used to a square meal at 4.30, said clearly,—

'Muvver, is this all the tea we're going to have?'

Aunt Amelia remarked acidly that she had bad table manners, and inquired if she had begun to learn the catechism.

Here the Gidger said pleasantly, 'I should like to go home now.'

Whereupon Aunt Amelia observed that she seemed as badly brought up as most modern children, and that my blouse was very low, and my neck looked most unsuitable for a Bishop's daughter.

I wonder if my neck is unsuitable, and, if so, isn't the Bishop the one to blame?

'Can you sing a hymn, child?' said my aunt.

'No, but I can say a little piece that Captain Everard taught me.'

'Can you, darling?' I said, rather frightened. I knew some of Captain Everard's 'little pieces.' 'I don't suppose your great-aunt would care for that.'

'But I should like to say it for her,' said the child obligingly. 'It's what a poor man said when he was tired on Sunday.'

At the word 'Sunday' Aunt Amelia thawed a little, so the Poppet recited,—

'To-morrow's Monday, Mrs Stout
Says she must put the washing out.
Why can't she save my scanty tin
And try and keep the washing in?
The next day's Tuesday, what a pest.
Why can't the devil let me rest?'

'That will do,' said Aunt Amelia, and rang the bell for her maid. 'Take the child away, and perhaps you could teach her a hymn, Keziah.'

'Yes, my lady,' said Keziah.

Then I tried to tell my aunt a little about my journey. 'I was so ill,' I said, 'the sea was simply awful.'

'Don't say "awful," Margaret, there's nothing awful but being in hell.'

I felt the conversation languishing. I asked if there was any news. It seemed safer to let my Aunt do all the talking, besides 'my prickles' were *all* out.

'I suppose,' she said, 'you've heard about your cousin, Eustace?'

'No,' I replied. 'Aunt Constance said she was in trouble, but she couldn't tell me why just then. What is it?'

'I expect she's ashamed,' said Aunt Amelia acidly. It's all her fault. Your Uncle Jasper knows the truth, at least he ought to,' but as I could not hear a word against those two beloveds, I said again,—

'Tell me about Eustace.'

'Monastery,' she said. 'Monks got hold of him and he has finally decided. I'm sorry for your uncle; there'll be no heir now, but it serves him right. He knows the truth and hasn't followed it. I look upon it as a judgment on him. Your aunt's persuaded him to let the new vicar—"priest," she calls him—put flowers in your father's old church. Candles will come next, of course; it's only the thin end of the wedge. And then your Aunt Constance talks about "union," but does she think that I would ever unite with people who have flowers and candles?'

'But,' I put in, 'father always said you needn't unite about the flowers and candles, but just in your mutual love of God.'

'Your father was always too charitable, but he's "one of the right sort," and I don't know what he'll say when he gets my last letter.'

I thought to myself he'll say, 'What a pearl you are, Amelia,' or else he'll lose his temper. Darling daddy! He'd die for the faith that is in him, but he regards his Lord's 'Judge not' as a command, consequently it is really rather pleasant to live with him.

'I think,' I remarked, getting up, 'I must go now,' so she rang for the Gidger.

'Well, and have you learned a hymn, child?'

'She's learnt four lines, m'lady,' said Keziah. 'She isn't very quick. Say them, miss.'

So the Gidger folded two small hands, shut her eyes in accordance with instructions in a way that set my teeth on edge, and chanted,—

'Go bury thy sorrow,
The world hath its share.
Go bury it deeply,
Go hide it with care.'

But anything less like a person with a sorrow that needed burial was the radiant Gidger when she opened her eyes.

'Very nice,' said Aunt Amelia, 'very suitable to these solemn times.'

'Yes, m'lady,' said Keziah.

'Look at my little cross Aunt Constance sent me,' said the Gidger, showing the small pearl thing with great pride. Aunt Amelia threw up her hands, while Keziah looked as if she'd like to.

'No one,' exclaimed my aunt 'can possibly be a Christian who wears a cross or a crucifix. If this poor ignorant child came to stay in this godly house we might begin to see some signs of grace. But of course,' she added hastily, 'I couldn't possibly have her; a child in the house would be too much for me.'

So then she pecked my cheek and gave me two incoherent tracts, one for myself, called 'The Scarlet Woman,' and one for Ross, entitled 'Do you drink, smoke, swear, or gamble?' To the poor Poppet she presented a book called *Heaven or Hell?* with lurid and appalling pictures of both states as they appeared to the mind of the writer. Then we drove to the hospital.

Ross was delighted with his tract, though he thought the questions 'rather intimate.' He said he should write one for Aunt Amelia, entitled 'Do you paint, powder, or wear bust-bodices?'

The Gidger had a second tea and so much flattering attention that I was afraid her head would be turned; the piece about the poor man who was tired on Sunday being received with cheers.

'What a row,' said a voice at the door, 'oh, what an awful, wicked, fiendish noise to make, you must be mad! I cannot spend my entire day coming in to ask the joke so as to tell the others. You, as usual, Captain Fotheringham, why, you're worse in bed.'

'Come in, sister,' four men shouted.

'No,' said the voice. 'I'm going out to fetch four cabs and keepers, and you're all off to Bedlam this night. Why, you're not having more tea?' she said, catching sight of a cup, and then she came right in and saw me sitting by the fire.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'I beg your pardon. Brown wants to know if he can do anything for you to-night,' turning to Ross.

'He can hang himself,' replied my grateful brother, 'after he's put my sister in a cab.'

'I don't want a cab,' I said. 'I'd rather wait and go in one of sister's four.'

Going home, the Gidger remarked, 'I don't think I like going to see my gweat-aunt much. Need I go any more? and I hate hymns. What is a sign of grace, muvver?'

A telegram awaited me at the hotel to say that the rooms at Fernfold are vacant, so I have wired to say we will take them from the 28th of January. Oh, when shall I get a letter from my Belovedest?

CHAPTER V

We left the Savoyard after lunch yesterday and arrived at this pretty little village in time for tea.

I suppose Uncle Jasper would say that I must get in a bit of 'background' now, but I'd so much rather be 'dim and confused.'

And is Surrey 'clear cut'? Is any county in the south of England, except perhaps Cornwall, with its spray-worn rocks and fringe of foaming sea?

This little village—you can look it up on a map if you want to. It's near a powder factory and a Pilgrim Way, and yet not so *very* near them! In summer it is cupped in a circle of gorse and broom, and all the country round is a soft blur of silver birches and heather. There are bits of common land and little woods with nightingales, there are cowslip fields as well, but at the moment everything is deep in snow.

Our lodgings are in a house with a nice new thatch and my sitting-room is exactly opposite one of the village pubs.

The landlady is a Mrs Tremayne—Cornish, of course—and a regular character. She has a loud voice and she shouts all her remarks at the top of it. She calls every one 'my dear,' in Cornish fashion. Her first remark was, 'Well, now, my dear, I 'ope you'll be comfortable like. You've had a 'ansome but cold day for travelling, and no mistake.' She is a dear old thing, and Nannie seems to like her.

The Gidger made a conquest of her at once. She was a nurse for many years before she married, so 'likes to hear a child about the house.'

The rooms were very clean, but bare, and in spite of a nice fire looked rather appalling and comfortless as a prospective winter residence. However, after a very sleepy Gidger had been put to bed, Nannie and I unpacked. Ross had given me a big box of flowers, and I filled all the vases and jars, and set out lots of photographs and books and cushions, and by the time dinner was ready I had transformed my sitting-room into quite a habitable place with the homey feel that books and flowers and firelight always give, while Nannie worked miracles upstairs in bedrooms.

The dinner was distinctly quaint: something funny in a pie-dish, with potatoes on the top. The top was brown. I liked that part. Nannie says I'm not to be dainty; food is very difficult just now.

At present we can only have two bedrooms and two sitting-rooms, as there are artist ladies across the passage. Their rooms are my Naboth's vineyard, as they would make such nice nurseries for the Poppet. We shall want to spread out if Ross comes.

It is so quiet here after the noise and bustle of London, but the air is lovely. It was rather an effort to be cheerful last night as I had so hoped for a letter, and I missed Ross, but the Gidger woke me this morning with 'Muvver, four letters from daddy. *Oh*, aren't you sleepy, darling?'

When I could get my eyes sufficiently open I found Nannie and breakfast (rather a queer one), and four precious letters from Michael arranged round the

tea-pot. Of course they had missed me at the Savoyard and been re-directed. I was so pleased to get them.

I was in the middle of dressing when Mrs Tremayne brought up a wire. Telegrams give one the creeps these days, but this was from Ross to say that he was arriving by the 7.10 to-night. Nannie and I hurriedly held a council of war on the subject of bedrooms. There is a small dressing-room vacant, but it really will not do for Ross. He gets bad nights, and he must be as comfortable as possible, so Nannie and I towed all my things into the little room and made the other ready for him and coaxed the landlady for a fire. Fires seem to be difficult to obtain in this house, 'coal being such a price.'

Some of the things in my new room are very droll. There is a case of stuffed birds, and a glass ship in a bottle, lots of ribbon bows, and a hair-tidy like a balloon, made out of an electric light bulb encased in yellow crochet, with an ingenious 'basket' constructed out of a small jelly-pot covered in with yellow silk. The Gidger thought it was the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen, and asked for it, but Nannie said, 'Landladies don't like things moved.'

There is also a unique collection of pictures and a lot of texts, but the thing which I most love is an engraving called 'The Believer's Vision.' It is a priceless work. On a low couch, with folded hands and a smug smile of satisfaction on her depressing countenance, lies 'the Believer' fast asleep. She has a plate of grapes and oranges beside her on a table, and there seems to be a good deal of Greek drapery about as well. Up in one corner is 'The Vision'—two fat angels lying long-ways on a hole they've scooped out of the ceiling. Oh, they are fat: two to a ton, as Michael would say, and they are blowing trumpets and have heaps of feathers. It is a most entrancing work of art.

After lunch, which I think was weirder than the dinner (I hope I am not dainty) I took the Gidger for a walk and bought a lot of fruit and biscuits. Fernfold is very sweet. All Surrey is, I think, with its little woods and commons.

After tea I went down to the station, and Ross arrived, apparently in the worst of tempers; Brown was with him.

'Why, Brown,' I exclaimed, 'I didn't know you were coming.'

'Nor I, but he's not staying,' growled Ross.

'It's quite convenient,' I said, 'only there isn't a bed. I expect we could fix up something.'

'Oh, that don't matter, ma'am,' said Brown, 'don't bother about me.'

'Brown can sleep on the edge of a knife, Meg. And I hope it'll cut him,' Ross said vindictively.

'Yes, sir, thank you, sir,' said Brown, with the greatest possible deference, 'won't you get into the cab, sir? You oughtn't to stand after the journey.'

'Oh, don't fuss. If you are going to fuss,' said Ross, 'you can go to the——'

'Ross!'

'Can I never say it?'

'No,' I said severely, '*never*.'

'But if I go and stay at Hindhead, surely there I——'

'Yes, but there you must say "punchbowl" after it.'

'Seems a bit complicated, Meg; how pious you've grown! What are you standing still for, Brown? Get the luggage and get a lick on you,' said my amiable relative, 'and then go back to London, don't——'

Brown had however vanished on to the platform and I followed.

'Sam,' I remarked, and somehow all the years slipped back, and he was just the jolly boy at Uncle Jasper's lodge, and I the Rector's little daughter. 'You can't go back to-night; there's no train; the last one goes at seven o'clock.'

'So the matron said, miss'—(what a wily bird, she said she'd 'work it')—'but, don't you worry, miss, I'll come up presently, it'll be all right, there ain't no call for you to worry, miss'—(there never was in Sam's view)—'we've got through worse than this,' said Sam as we got back to the cab.

'Got all the things?' asked Ross.

'Yes, sir.'

'Good-night, Brown.'

'Good-night, sir.'

'What happened about Brown?' I asked going home.

'Oh,' said Ross, as if the subject frankly bored him, 'matron sent me in a cab to Waterloo, with an orderly to get my ticket. I was sitting in my carriage, trying to turn the evening paper, when Brown said, "Allow me, sir," and then before I could swear at him, he got out into the corridor and the train went off. It was such a swot to try to find him, so there it is.'

'Oh,' I began.

'I am tired, Meg, can't think why she made me come so late; never seems much sense in women's orders.'

The first thing we did on arriving at the lodgings was to fight fiercely about bedrooms. His room looked so pleasant with flowers, a cheerful fire, a box of his favourite cigarettes, and a whole box of matches!

'Very nice,' said the invalid, 'and may I ask where you sleep?'

'Oh, I have a dear little room near by.'

'I should like to see this "dear little room near by," Meg.'

'You can't,' I said. 'It's all in a muddle and my things aren't put away.'

'I should like,' reiterated Ross, in his most maddening manner, 'to see this "dear little room near by."'

So of course he saw it. He wandered slowly round it, gazing at the works of art, until he came to 'The Believer's Vision,' which seemed to fascinate him.

After a long pause in front of it he said, 'Well, it 'ud wreck my faith completely,' and then he collected an armful of my clothing and proceeded to hang it up in the other room that had been so carefully prepared for him.

'Oh, Ross, don't,' I begged. 'I much prefer the little room.'

'Why didn't you choose it at first?' he said with unanswerable logic, 'and why isn't there a fire in it?'

'I made the other room so nice for you,' I wailed, and we can't all have fires; coal is so expensive.'

'Parsons say the war has taught us many things,' said Ross, 'but I never expected it would teach you to go without a fire because it happened to be expensive. Why, it's a modern miracle, and ought to be reported to the Pope.'

'But it's difficult to get, as well.'

'Then we'll buy millions of logs and cartloads of peat,' he said. 'You're not going to sleep in this room without a fire, or any other room for the matter of that. Why, it's like an ice-house after India. Come on, Nannie, help me to get this female gear out of my dug-out. Don't be cross, old girl!'

But I was cross. I hate being called a 'female' and my clothes 'gear.' Why do I always live with cavemen who will have their own way and trample on my deepest feelings? I determined, however, that I would try again and said, 'But the mattress has such lumps and——'

'I adore lumps; how can you be so selfish, Meg?'

'But I don't want to be turned out of my room like this.'

'Well, that's what I keep on saying,' said Ross. 'How inconsistent women are. What time is dinner? Can I have a bath?'

'Just turned it on, sir,' said Brown, coming into the room and beginning to unpack!

So I left them. When Ross went downstairs I heard him call back, 'Sam, there are several things in my room that I don't want. I've left them in the middle of the floor, get rid of them.' And I wondered how Sam would carry out my brother's impossible orders, as landladies 'don't like things moved.' I peeped in as I went down. Brown was gazing at a weird assortment: all the antimacassars, some of the texts, the case of birds, and the ship in the glass bottle, the hair tidy like a balloon (which I rescued for the Gidger) and last but not least the 'Believer's Vision,' which Ross had taken off the wall and stood upside down upon the pile, in a frantic effort to save his faith from shipwreck.

I went down to dinner, and Brown waited. Liver and bacon! with that variety of mashed potato which my refined relative has from his earliest youth called 'worms.' I refused the liver and took some bacon; so did Ross, remarking that he 'Never could eat "works."'

Brown handed Ross the next course, which was rice pudding.

'Why do you bother to offer me this filth?' said Ross indignantly to Brown, 'you know I never touch it. What's the other stuff, jelly? I'll have some of that.'

'Packet,' said Brown, 'by the look of it, sir; shouldn't recommend it.'

But I, determining not to be dainty, said it looked jolly good and I would have some.

'Take it away, Brown, she's not going to eat hoofs and get a pain in her gizzard to start off with. Give her some pudding.'

Ross helped himself liberally to bread and butter and cheese.

'What funny butter,' he observed.

'Margarine, sir.'

'Oh, how tiring,' said Ross, pushing it away, 'give me a clean plate. Why *can't* they colour it blue?'

Coffee consisted of a jug of hot milk and some black stuff in a bottle.

We adjourned to the fire and I had quite a nice supper of hot milk and biscuits, apples, and chocolates; and we talked and talked, and got a bit levelled up with life after five years of separation.

Then I went to bed. But, oh, not to sleep. The family's appalling habit of leaving doors half open prevented that, and I heard Ross say to Brown when he came up to bed (his voice does carry so), 'What's to be done, Sam, they can't stop here?'

'Certainly not, Master Ross. Never saw such a dinner in my life, though the cooking was all right.'

'Yes, it's the stuff they cooked that's wrong. Can't you do something?' said Ross vaguely. Sam has always seemed to be able to do the things that put our muddles right.

'Well, you see, sir,' said Brown, 'it's a bit awkward; Mrs Ellsley seems to be paying very little, and food is expensive.'

'Have you ever known my sister pay very little for anything if it was possible to pay a lot?'

'No, sir, and that's what I can't understand about it.'

'But how much *is* she paying, then?' inquired my brother.

'Six guineas, sir.'

'But aren't there always extras in a place like this?' said Ross vaguely, searching his mind for recollections of lodgings at the sea. 'Don't they always make the profits out of—cruets, I think they call it?'

'Miss Margaret don't seem to have gone into any details,' said Brown.

'No,' agreed Ross, 'she wouldn't. But I should have thought you could feed two women and a child better than that for eighteen pounds a week. Well, they'll have to pay more, that's all.'

'But it isn't eighteen pounds,' said Brown.

'You said it was just now,' said Ross, 'six guineas each.

'But it was two guineas that was meant, sir. Six guineas for the lot of them.'

I heard my brother sink into a seat and scrape his feet along the floor, as he does when the burden of life becomes too heavy to be borne standing up.

'Do you mean to say, Sam, that the landlady proposes to provide rooms, beds, food, baths, boots, fires, cruets, and——' here Ross searched violently in his mind for more things which Mrs Tremayne was willing to provide, 'and "Believer's Visions" for two pounds a week each? Why, she's a public benefactor.'

'That's the price, sir. She said she asked six guineas and the lady agreed without arguing, as her lodgers usually do.'

'Well, of course, that's the explanation, Sam. She thought she meant "each."'

'The "she's" me,' I said to myself, to make it clearer in my mind.

'Not a doubt about it, sir,' said Sam.

'Funny things, women,' said my brother reflectively, 'never seem able to make a proper arrangement with a hotel, or book a cabin. The only mess I ever got into on a ship was when I let one of my aunts book my berth going out to—I forget where——'

'Indeed, sir,' said Brown, with interest.

'Yes, wrote and said she'd booked my berth but the ship was full and I'd have to share a cabin with a Captain Booth. Hoped I didn't mind. I loathed it, of course.'

'Of course,' said Brown.

'However, there was nothing to be done but put up with it, so I prayed it might be the Captain Booth in the 4th Lancers that I knew a bit. Where were you, Sam, that time?'

'Typhoid.'

'Oh, yes, of course. Well, I got down to the ship and turned in early, as I was dead done after—forget what I'd been doing; kept half an eye on the door to see what my stable companion was going to be like, and then Captain Booth came in.'

'Was it Captain Booth of the 4th Lancers?' asked Brown.

'Salvation Army lass,' said Ross laconically, and Brown laughed, as he used to do in Uncle Jasper's woods.

Suddenly somebody knocked violently on the wall.

'Anybody ill, do you think?' asked my brother.

'Oh, no, sir, making too much row—laughed a bit too loud, I expect, woke up the other lodgers.'

'What a rum place,' observed my brother, and then there was silence till the water ran in the bath, and the house for a few moments was turned into a pond

with a polar bear in it.

Then I went to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

Brown has, apparently, been 'doing things' the last few days. Particularly nice breakfasts turn up now, a maid lights my fire and the bath water is hot. Ross informed me that he had taken on the running of the show, but that, with the best will in the world, Mrs Tremayne could not supply butter, so he'd wired to Aunt Constance for a supply, and that if I could put up with marmalade till it arrived it would ease his mind.

I have recovered my temper, too, and have decided that cavemen have their advantages. The one with whom my lot is cast at the moment knows how to stoke a fire, if nothing else. The millions of logs have begun to arrive, too, so at any rate we shall be warm. Ross says it's a pity I didn't live in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, for then I could have got really thawed on the days they lighted the burning fiery furnace.

The other occupants of the house are two maiden ladies—'artists.' Ross calls them the 'spiders,' because they entice into their parlour all their friends and acquaintances, and encourage them to buy their 'pictures,' and they borrow; oh, how they borrow! It is 'Could Mrs Ellsley kindly lend some ink?' or 'We have run out of notepaper and should be so obliged, etc.' Yesterday their newspaper hadn't come. 'Would Captain Fotheringham spare his for ten minutes?' Captain Fotheringham spared it with a very ill grace, but as the ten minutes became fifteen, and then twenty, and then thirty, he announced his intention of singing Hymn 103 outside their door.

'Why a hymn?' I inquired.

'Because it expresses in concise, lucid, clear, and unbiased language the perfectly intolerable situation which has arisen,' and he departed down the passage, singing loudly, 'My Times are in thy hand.'

Alas! this afternoon we are in deep disgrace, for the Spiders have given notice, and are going in about a week, because of us.

They object, it seems, to meeting Brown on the stairs and landings, and to the number of baths we have. Since we arrived there is never any hot water left for washing their blouses. The climax came, apparently, this morning. Brown

goes into the bathroom about 7.30 a.m. and cleans the bath. I saw him do it once at home, so I know what happens. He sprinkles it all over with some powder in a tin, and then scrubs and scours it till you'd think all the enamel would come off. And then he washes it out with hot water and a brush on a long handle, and then dries it, and cleans the taps, and wipes the floor, and puts out soap and heaps of towels, turns the cold tap on and then goes along to Ross and says 'Bath's ready, sir.'

Then Ross goes and splashes it all up, and scatters soap about and swamps the floor, and then, after breakfast, Brown cleans it just the same all over again for me, only this time it's the hot tap, and Nannie comes and says 'Bath's ready, dearie, hurry up now.' What would Ross say if Brown suddenly said, 'Hurry up, now, dearie,' and if he wouldn't stand it, why do I?

Well, for some reason or other this morning Ross went along to his bath before Brown called him. He had on his new dressing-gown. His taste is lurid and flamboyant, and Aunt Constance aids and abets him. This was a really scrummy one, dull purple silk, with pink flamingoes. And Aunt Constance had had bath shoes made to match with baby flamingoes on the toes. She does spoil him abominably.

Well, Ross, resplendent in his purple and flamingoes, lounged in a chair and smoked a cigarette, while Brown put the last polish on the taps and 'chucked the towels about,' as Ross expressed it. Brown was silently absorbed in taps and Ross in watching him, when, suddenly, the door was flung wide open and a Spider entered in a red flannel dressing-gown, rather short, with a collar that had bits chewed out (I quote my brother, he means pinked) while its feet were thrust in red felt shoes. It had no cap on, but its hair was screwed into a tight, 'round button on the top,' like the panjandram, and it was in a temper hot and hissing.

Ross got up hurriedly and surveyed the apparition, feeling a little at a disadvantage, with his hair rough and with pink flamingoes. Brown stood at petrified attention by the bath.

'Oh, is it possible,' said the artist, for it was one of the sisters I told you of, 'is it humanly possible that this room is *still* occupied?'

'I've only just come,' my brother remarked.

'But that man has been here at least half an hour,' said the red flannel dressing-gown.

'Have you, Brown?' asked Ross.

'I've had to clean the bath, madam,' said Brown.

'But surely,' said the Spider, 'surely the bath doesn't need cleaning. I'm sure Mrs Tremayne keeps everything most beautifully. It really is absurd. It's the same in the mornings, and at night, and sometimes before dinner. The man's always in here, and I feel the time has come to put my foot down. We all pay the

same, and baths are included in the price.'

So Ross, with that courtesy which he can't help showing to a woman, even if he's furious with her, said 'I'm extremely sorry, but if you will tell my man after breakfast what time it is convenient to you for me to have my bath, I will fit in with you and will speak to my sister also. See to it, Brown, will you?' and he turned away to close the conversation.

But the Spider's conversation was not so easily closed, and she was just about to begin again. However, she had bargained without Brown. Brown had his orders, he had been told to 'see to it,' and meant to. Somehow he hustled the little woman out and, with 'My master is waiting to have his bath, madam,' he closed the door on the little spitfire, and Ross exploded comfortably.

After luncheon they gave notice. 'Jolly good job, too,' says Ross. But I feel sorry we've annoyed them, though I shall go in and possess my Naboth's vineyard with great pride and pleasure.

Ross is only pretty well; he gets a good deal of pain and is sleeping badly, but he generally manages to be cheerful, when he can't he goes upstairs and stays there till the bout is over.

This evening he came into my room to say 'Good-night,' and his mind seemed full of dressing-gowns. 'Meg,' he demanded, 'is your dressing-gown red?'

'Yes,' I said, 'the one I'm using at the moment happens to be red.'

'But is it flannel?'

'No, but it's something quite as thick. Estelle thought it would be warmer for me. It's over there, if you'd like to see it.'

He picked up the soft crimson thing that Estelle had made for me when I first landed.

'Why, Meg, it looks like an evening dress.'

'Yes, but it buttons down the front, that's where the difference is.'

'Do you always button it, then, when you put it on?'

'Oh, always,' I replied, 'don't people usually?'

'I dunno,' he said, 'only this morning she had got hers sort of draped across her tummy, kept together with the belt knotted. When you walk about the passages in hotels, Meg, don't you wear a cap or something?'

'My dear child,' I observed, 'where do you think I was dragged up?'

CHAPTER VII

Fairy hands have been at work. Instead of a shining white world all is green again. There has been a very rapid thaw. The frost has gone and little brooks of melted snow are running down the lanes and paths. Tiny green spikes have appeared in all the garden as if by magic. There is even a half-drowned primrose out, telling that spring is coming very soon this year.

The morning post brought me a letter from Michael 'written in the mud.' It contains a most amazing suggestion. He asks me to try to find an old house 'such as his soul loveth' and make a home.

Oh, how he must have misunderstood my letters and thought because I frivolled and told him all our stupid jokes that I am happy. How can he imagine I could even contemplate making a home in England without him when it has been the dream of our lives to do it together. Surely he knows by now that 'Home' for me is just that particular bit of mud in Flanders in which his dear feet are embedded, and that any place without him is exile, that life, till he returns, is merely marking time. I don't care if I am talking like a little Bethel.... Ross thinks it's a topping idea. Even Nannie didn't help me. When I told her, all she said was, 'But of course you will if Master Michael wants you to.'

I felt, as I sometimes used to as a child, that 'every one's against me,' and I decided to walk my devils off.

I went downstairs and found Ross reading.

'Going out?' he asked.

'Yes, will you come?'

'No, arm's bothering,' and he took up his book again.

I went for a long tramp, down the quiet lanes and through the little spinneys, but there was no harmony—the old 'washed' feeling wouldn't come. I slipped into the Intercession Service at the little church and tried to pray for Ross and Michael and all the others. War seems very near in England, only a few miles off—those guns—that one hears sometimes in the night. I thought as I sat in church of all the death and desolation, the suffering and the broken hearts and tears. A great horror of the war came over me and a great rebellion. Why does God allow such things? How can I think of Him as a beneficent Being when the world is swamped with cruelty, blood, and separation? I feel like Tommy Vellacott. I don't love God now. I only believe in Him.

When I got home my feet were soaked and my throat sore, so I went upstairs early. I felt better in bed, and decided that I *would* try to find a house if it would give Michael the least scrap of happiness. If he would feel 'less anxious' about me in a house of our own instead of rooms, why a house it shall be. I grew quite excited and interested (as my feet got warmer), planning the details of our dream—an old, old house, standing in a big garden with long, low rooms full of oak furniture, seventeenth century, for choice, with lots of flowers and sun-

shine in the summer, and books and candlelight and glowing fires for the winter evenings. But how awful it would be if, when Michael saw it for the first time he should say,—

'This the dream house?—what a nightmare!'

Then Ross came in to say good-night. 'Better?' he queried.

'No, but I'm going to get up to-morrow,' I said defiantly.

'Are you,' he drawled, as though he hadn't the faintest interest in the subject, but there was a look in his eyes somehow I didn't like. 'Why is that wretched kitten up here again?' he said. 'I can hear it wheezing,' and he looked under the bed.

'It's me,' I said.

'It's I,' said Ross.

'Oh, have you got it, too?' (I will not be reproved for grammar by a twin).

'Are you making that noise for fun, Meg?'

'No, I can't help it,' I said crossly.

'Hadn't you better have one of those things on made out of a muslin curtain, with hot muck inside,' he added vaguely, racking his brains for medical knowledge. 'Can't think what the stuff's called.'

'No,' I said violently, 'I hadn't better!'

Presently the house grew quiet and I began to worry over Ross, his bad nights, the constant pain and the absolute refusal to let any one do anything for him; he won't have a fire and snaps Brown's head off if he suggests a doctor. He was really angry with me on Saturday because I—oh, well, it's no use worrying, I reflected, as I mopped my eyes.

Just as I was about to try to compose myself for slumber, with a little folding of the hands to sleep, wishing I could drown the kitten, Nannie came in. You will hardly believe it when I tell you that she carried in between two hot plates the thing that Ross had mentioned, in a muslin curtain.

'Master Ross says,' began Nannie.

'Nannie,' I retorted, and I was furious, 'I simply will not have that beastly thing on just because Ross says so.'

'Well,' said Nannie soothingly, 'have it because I say so, if you'd rather,' and she clapped it on.

And I decided, as she closed the door, that I should run away at dawn.

But the kitten wouldn't stop, and then I started choking. There was dead silence in the house, so I hoped that Ross was sleeping well for once, and I buried my head under the bedclothes and coughed comfortably.

I started up presently with a little shriek to find a giant in pyjamas making up my fire.

'Sorry I frightened you,' said Ross. 'What have you got your head buried

for, can't you sleep?'

'No,' I replied.

'But I told you to knock if you wanted me, Meg.'

'I didn't want you,' I said crossly, 'that's why I didn't knock.'

'You're very difficult to take care of,' said Ross, surveying me from the foot of the bed.

'Not nearly so difficult as you are,' I retorted, all the worry of his continued sleepless nights coming to a head suddenly in my mind, 'you won't let me do a thing for you. I cry about you sometimes.'

'You cry about *me*?' said the giant, suddenly sitting on the edge of the bed.

'Yes,' and I leaned against him; he seemed a friendly sort of giant at the moment.

'When did you cry last?' he demanded.

'To-night,' and I fumbled for a handkerchief I didn't really need.

'Why?' asked the giant.

'Because your arm's so bad, you aren't sleeping, you won't take anything or do anything, or let any one else do anything for you. You're making me perfectly miserable, and as for Sam, you've been absolutely rotten to him all the week.'

'I told Brown to keep every one out of my room when I'd got a "go" on, and he let you in on Saturday.'

'Yes, but Ross,' I said, 'how could he keep me out?'

'He'd had his orders. I can't be responsible for any difficulties that may occur in the carrying of them out,' said Ross obstinately.

'You are hard,' I said.

'Scold away,' grinned Ross.

'No, but you are; you've simply looked through Brown and locked your door, and been cold to me for days.'

'Can't stand disobedience in a soldier,' said Ross, shortly, 'never could.'

'Nor in a sister, Ross?'

But there was no reply.

'Ross,' I exclaimed suddenly, desiring an armistice, 'I'm sorry. I won't come in again, only, if you knew how I worry about you, you'd let me. But,' I added, 'I thought when we embarked on this conversation, that I was rowing you.'

'I haven't said a word,' protested Ross.

'No, I know you haven't, but conscience makes the head uneasy when it wears a crown.'

'Are you feverish, darling?' said Ross anxiously.

'No, but I get quotations mixed at times. Will you forgive me?' I said childishly.

So we smoked the pipe of peace with great contentment, smoked the

calumet, the peace pipe, and I said, 'My brother, listen,—

"See the smoke rise slowly, slowly,
First a single line of darkness,
Then a denser, bluer vapour,
Then a snow-white cloud unfolding,
Like the tree tops of the forest.
Ever rising, rising, rising,
Till it touched the top of heaven,"
Till it broke against the ceiling,
Till I sneezed.'

'Meg, I'm sure you're feverish.'

'I'm not.'

'Well, the only thing I've understood that you've said lately was the sneeze.'

'And that,' I observed with pride, 'was the original bit. I always felt I could be a poet if I tried. Now I'm going to finish rowing you.'

'But I thought we'd smoked the pipe of peace, Meg.'

'Oh, that——' I said.

'How like a woman. Fire away, then, and get it off your chest.'

So I fired away and got off all the wrongs of days.

'If you weren't so small,' said Ross, when at last he got a word in, 'I shouldn't feel so inclined to bully you.'

'But that's an awful thing to say. Why, you never ought to hit a man who's smaller than yourself.'

'Looks as if my moral nature is decaying and I seem to be a fair and average all-round beast,' said Ross, with gloom. 'I didn't mean to hurt you, darling. Sorry, little 'un. I'll try to be different,' he promised, as he used when he was naughty as a boy.

'Have some coffee, Meg? Brown put some in my thermy.'

'Yes. I will if you will,' and because my brother was 'trying to be different' he took a cup himself.

'Well, it's time you went to sleep,' remarked the giant, and got up to go.

Outside the door, as he went out, I heard Brown say, 'Can't you sleep, sir,' and then something about 'no dressing-gown with that cold on you.'

'Oh, dry up,' said Ross wrathfully, really trying to be different, 'you're as bad as a wet nurse. Go to bed and stop there, or I'll sack you, Sam.'

So I knew Brown was forgiven, too.

When I woke up next time it was getting light. I fumbled for my watch. It

said the hour was twelve, so I knew it must be seven, or it might be eight—the hour hand will slip round, though I can always tell the minutes, which is what one usually wants to know.

Then there was a knock upon my door.

'This,' I thought, 'is my repentant brother. Now, after last night, I must remember to be firm, but kind, and so help him to be different,' and I called 'Come in.'

But an icicle in shirt sleeves entered that I'd seen several times before.

'Meg,' it said, 'you're not to get up.'

'My dear sir,' I said to it (telling myself that I was not afraid of icicles), 'I hadn't the slightest intention of doing such a thing for at least an hour.'

'Not all day,' said the icicle, and as I opened my lips, intending to be firm, but kind, it said in a voice cold as a glacier just before the dawn, 'Don't argue, it's quite settled, Margaret.'

'But,' I objected, assuring myself again that firm kindness was the *only* way with icicles, 'you've got exactly the same cold, and you're up. Sauce for a goose ought to be sauce for a gander.'

Suddenly a rapid thaw set in and the icicle subsided into a mere puddle on the floor, and my brother answered, 'Sauce *from* a goose is all I know about,' and there we left it.

CHAPTER VIII

It took two days to drown that kitten, but now I'm up again and out, and to-day I went to Tarnley, with the permission of my gracious keeper, 'if I drove both there and back.' As it was sunny, and mercies are strictly rationed just at present, I accepted the offer and went to all the places I had meant to go to first, did a lot of shopping, and finally interviewed one of the house agents.

I was quite clear and definite in my requirements—I wanted to *buy* an *old* house; so of course every one he sent me to was *red brick*, *modern*, and *to let*.

I went home and groused to Ross, and announced that the only really satisfactory way to find a suitable dwelling was to walk the length and breadth of England, and when you saw the house you wanted knock at the door and beguile the owner into selling it to you, and that I intended to adopt this plan and to begin my pilgrimage shortly.

Ross, as usual, was rude about it.

'Haven't you discovered all these years, you little ass, that agents are a race apart?' said he; 'their minds are controlled by the law of opposites. Now your heart, Meg, is set on a house, ancient and mellowed with years, with long, low rooms and beams, and an old-world garden full of wallflowers, phlox and herbs and perennials and——'

'But, Ross——'

'Don't interrupt me, Meg; consequently you must tell the agent that you desire a new up-to-date dwelling with a small garden overlooked on either side (since we are cheerful souls and love the company of our fellows). Then they would give you orders to view old houses with little latticed windows and winding stairs. Methinks if you said you *must* have lincrusta and white enamel you might even get oak panelling.'

After dinner Ross departed upstairs, said he had things to do and then he was going to bed.

To bed? To walk his room all night, with Brown, unbeknown to my brother, pacing up and down the passage.

I sat by my fire and read. At one o'clock, Ross knocked me up. As I went into the corridor Brown barred his door.

'I daren't, ma'am. Please don't ask me. Not after last time, miss.'

'Let her in, Brown,' cried Ross. 'I knocked her up, you ass! Worrying?' he asked me laconically as I went in.

'Yes.'

'Like to make tea then? got such a rotten "go" on, Meg.'

And then he fainted, and I called to Brown. He got his master into bed, while I flew round for brandy.

'Give me some water,' said my reviving brother.

'No, I won't,' said Brown, 'you'll take the brandy, Master Ross, or I'll thrash you like I did that day in Hickley Woods when you fell and cut your knee and sprained your ankle, and tried to prevent me going for the doctor.'

Ross was so dumbfounded that he took the brandy meekly.

'Now these aspirins,' said Brown, 'and I'm going to light the fire. The room is like an ice-house. I'm about fed up.'

When he arose from the fireplace he was once again the suave, impassive servant. 'I should wish to give a month's warning, sir. I don't seem able to give you satisfaction.' And there was a desolating silence. 'Anything more I can do for you to-night, sir?'

'Yes,' said Ross, 'stop playing the goat.'

But Brown's face remained hard and impassive.

'Want me to eat humble pie, I suppose,' said Ross, and surveyed his servant

as if he had just suddenly seen him.

'Yes, sir, I think it would be a good thing.'

'Well, then, I've been a devil all the week.'

But Brown still waited.

'Want more pie?' asked my erring brother.

'That's as you feel, sir,' said Brown.

So Ross, with the air of a man who thought it a pity to spoil the ship of repentance for a ha'porth of grace, said 'Sorry.'

'Don't name it, sir,' said Brown, and I so rejoiced over the sinner that repented that I forgot to remind him to say 'punchbowl.'

Just as Brown went through the door, Ross called out, 'Got another place, Sam?'

Sam suddenly came to life again. 'Will you see the doctor in the morning?'

'Oh, have it your own way,' growled Ross.

'Then I've got a place,' said Sam.

'Get us some tea, then,' my brother ordered, 'and come and have a cup yourself.'

'Certainly not, sir, with Miss Meg—Margaret, I mean,' he said, getting deeper into the mire.

'Do you usually call my sister by her Christian name?'

'No, sir, but you worry me so, I don't know half the time what I'm a-saying.'

'Well, I'm a-saying now,' said his autocratic master, 'that it's time the tea was here, and bring three cups. I want to talk about the Hickley Woods. You've got a rotten temper, Sam.'

'Yes, sir, you can't touch pitch,' said Sam, firing the last shot.

So victory is not always to the strong.

'Oh, what a chap,' said Ross.

We spent a warm and pleasant hour talking birds, and fish, and rabbits, and the years slipped away and we were back again in the Hickley Woods—Ross, Miss Meg, and Sam.

After Brown had departed with the tea-cups, Ross said, 'Meg, do you think I'm weak?'

'Well, darling,' I replied, 'you are sure to feel so after fainting, but if you take care, you——'

'But I don't mean my body, Meg.'

'We are all sinners,' I said, 'but if you would like to see a clergyman in the morning, I'll——'

'How can you be so aggravating; I don't mean my soul, either. I want to talk about my Will.'

'I thought you had made it ages ago, but I'll wire for the lawyer in the

morning.'

'Oh, Meg, how you do exasperate a chap.'

'Well, what do you mean?' I giggled.

'I mean my will power. Do you think I'm weak?'

'About as weak as Michael,' I replied. 'Why?'

'Because,' said my brother seriously, 'doesn't it seem an awful thing that a chap my size can't manage a chap his.'

'But there's only three inches between you, and he is six months older.'

'Yes, but three inches is three inches, and what's six months, Meg?'

'You say forty minutes is enough when you boss me.'

'Oh, twins are different, but with Brown I get along all right when I take my stand on the King's Regulations. But when he brings in the Hickley Woods I go to water.'

'No, to brandy.'

'Oh, rub it in,' said Ross, and then because he was so quaint and sweet and I loved him, and he had fainted, and because the lion seemed very tame, I forebore to tease him further and was really nice, kissed him once and petted him a little, and then when I got up to go he said,—

'Pity you aren't always as dutiful as that.'

'Dutiful!' I shrieked. 'Oh, what a word,' and so we parted coldly after all.

CHAPTER IX

And the doctor's verdict is 'Two days in bed and bromide. First dose now.'

'I'll stay in bed,' said Ross, with the air of a man conferring a great favour, 'I'll not take drugs.'

'I'll get it down,' said Brown to the doctor, as he saw him to the car, 'somehow,' he added grimly.

'Sam,' I inquired, 'how are you going to get it down?'

'Can't imagine, miss. After last night he won't stand much. Well, it was a bit thick.'

'Sam, do you think if your knee gave out and it hurt you to keep standing when you argued, that it might have weight?'

'Can but try, miss.'

So Brown's knee, of course, has given out. They are a happy pair, one in

bed and the other with his leg up on a chair, talking woods and shooting, fishing, and birds' eggs, and they're smoking—how they smoke! I think the bromide's swallowed. There's a contented look in Sam's eyes and a 'Oh-well-stretched-a-point-for-once,' in my dear brother's.

So I proceeded to carry out my patent plan of finding houses and had a delightful and exciting morning. It was a lovely day, the hedges were a soft promise of green, and the bright sunshine and some saucy robins made a brave pretence of summer. I rambled down all kinds of little lanes and by-paths, but never a house did I see to suit me, till at last I chanced on Lynford, a little place I fell in love with at first sight and which I am sure is after Michael's own heart.

The village is built on the slope of a hill, with a little church on the summit and charming old world cottages clustered together in picturesque confusion just below.

Alas, the cottages were quite small ones, with only four or five rooms at most, and so not practicable. The last house in the village was a great surprise. It was larger than the others, with quaint little diamond windows and a glorious old red roof, and lots of creepers climbing over, which would make it in the autumn a thing of flaming beauty.

In the flower borders crocuses and snowdrops were already peeping, and the porch was aflame with yellow winter jasmine. The view was superb, for the hill sloped steeply from the house, and at my feet lay beautiful water meadows all in flood after the snow, with the ruins of an old abbey in the near distance.

Without stopping to think of anything but the fact that it was the kind of habitation I was looking for, I boldly walked up to the front door and rang the bell. Here my courage, which I had thought was screwed to the sticking point, began, in the most horrible manner, to trickle out of my boots, but before I could escape an elderly and severe domestic opened the door and glared at me as if I wanted to sell her something.

I inquired if I might see the owner on a matter of business. She hesitated and, after looking me well up and down, most reluctantly said, 'I'll see.'

She departed down the old flagged passage, leaving me on the mat with my last shred of courage in tatters and my knees a jelly. After a minute or two she returned and said, 'The master will see you,' and if ever a woman's sour visage said 'More fool he,' that woman's did.

As the last moments of a drowning man are crammed with the recollections of a lifetime, so all the silly, impulsive things I have done in my life crowded on me as I followed down that stone passage. Why, oh, why did I have an Irish grandmother to lead me into this scrape? What on earth could I say to 'the master' that wouldn't sound the most appalling impertinence?

I entered his presence rather more quickly than I meant to, as I fell down a

small step.

I looked across the charming room, and by the bright wood fire was an old gentleman seated at breakfast at eleven o'clock in the morning.

'Good-morning,' I said, 'I'm afraid I'm rather early.'

'Not at all,' said he. 'I'm afraid I'm rather late. Have some breakfast?'

'No, thank you, I haven't come to call.'

'Oh, he replied, 'I thought you had.'

'No,' and my words began to tumble over one another in my agitation, 'that is to say, not in the ordinary sense of the word, but I came—I hope you won't mind—I hope you won't think it awful cheek, but now I am inside your house I feel it is, though outside it seemed the most ordinary thing to do, but the fact is I am looking—oh——' I broke off as the appallingness of the situation came upon me afresh. 'Promise you will not be offended, but that you will take my visit in the spirit in which it is intended.'

'Is this to be an offer of marriage, my dear young lady?'

'Oh, no,' I gasped, 'much worse, it's an offer for your house.'

'Aha, aha,' said he, 'I thought I heard the tenth commandment crack as you fell down the step.'

'Crack,' I exclaimed, 'it's broken into a million pieces.'

'Well, I think that we had better see what we can do to patch it up again, as it's really quite a nice commandment, and breaking it is apt to cause distressing situations. Sit down and have some breakfast and tell me why you are coveting your neighbour's house and if you want my men and maid servants, oxen and she asses, too?'

'Not your maidservant, anyway,' I said, and his eyes twinkled. He was so friendly and kind that I sat down, and over tea and toast, which he insisted I should have, I told him about Michael and of our passion for old houses, and Ross, and the Gidger, and indeed all about everything.

'Ah,' he said, 'so you love old houses. Well, I sympathise, but this one will not be to let until I am carried out feet first.'

'God forbid that I should ever have it, then,' I said, and got up to go, 'and it's dear of you not to have been offended.'

'Offended!' he laughed, as he said good-bye, 'I was never so entertained in all my life.'

When I got home I went up to tell Ross about it, and he remarked as I finished the tale,—

'Well, there's to be no more house-hunting on those lines, Meg; you might have been most frightfully insulted. It's all right as it's happened; Michael would be simply furious with me for letting you do it if he knew.'

'But I told you I was going to,' I expostulated.

'It never occurred to me that you meant it. Of course, I thought you were fooling, you little idiot.'

And Ross did one of his atrocious lightning changes. Instead of a ragging brother one was merely 'fighting' with there was a man whose 'Sorry, darling, but I mean you mustn't do it again' closed the discussion, for all that it was very gently said.

Then he kissed me and said, 'Oh, Meg, you are so sweet and funny when you're "meek."'

As a rule people who bully me are not allowed to kiss me—but—my brother was ill in bed!

CHAPTER X

Ross seemed fairly well this morning, and, having announced 'Time's up,' said that *he* would go to the house agents at Tarnley to-day, and that if I liked I might come too.

I had previously said to Sam,—

'Don't you think another day in bed would do him good?'

'Not a doubt about it, miss,' said Sam, 'but I couldn't work it: thought we should have hardly lasted out the time as it was. We've drove him a bit hard lately. Better not press him too much, miss, he don't take kindly even to the snaffle.'

So we sallied forth to call on Messrs Cardew Thompkins.

My brother was in one of his mad moods and announced that he should pretend we were just married, and that I was to look as shy and modest as my brazen countenance would allow, and to blush at intervals if I could. An elegant young man, with a waist, received us with a bow, begged us to be seated and state our requirements.

'Take a pew, Florrie,' said Ross to me. I took one and hoped I looked shy and modest.

'I want,' said Ross, bursting with newly married pride and importance, 'to rent a small house for myself and my er——'

The agent coughed discreetly and said, 'Quite so.'

My face by this time was perfectly crimson with suppressed laughter. I hope Mr Cardew Thompkins thought it was shy blushes.

'The house must be as small as possible,' continued Ross, 'and quite new, with no garden, as my wife doesn't like slugs, do you, lovey? It must be in a row, or at most, semi-detached, as my er——'

'Quite so,' said the agent again.

'My wife is nervous at nights. We haven't been married very long,' said the incorrigible Ross in a burst of confidence.

'We should like it opposite a railway station, if possible, and we want white paint—enamel, I mean—and fireplaces with tiled hearths, nice cheerful wall-papers, and a dodo in the hall.'

'Dado,' I murmured.

'What, sweetie?' said Ross, 'what did you say, my pet?'

I could have murdered him.

'But it must be quite a new house,' said Ross, as I didn't answer, 'as you don't like beetles, do you, duckie? We don't even mind if it isn't quite finished, because——' Here Ross's powers of invention mercifully failed him.

'Because,' said the agent, 'then you could choose your own decoration. I quite understand.'

I was pulp by this time, and as I was in imminent danger of exploding I retired to the window and made curious noises into my handkerchief, while the house agent looked through a number of small cards in a little box.

'You're in a draught, my pretty,' said Ross, 'come and sit near to hubby, while Mr Cardew Thompkins writes us the order to view.'

I came lest worse should befall me, and Ross tried to hold my hand but didn't succeed.

'There's a little old house out at Crosslanes,' began the agent—Ross nudged me violently.

'Also one at Stoke, which is slightly larger and older.'

'It's beginning to work,' whispered Ross.

'I will give you orders to view both of these.'

'Are they near the railway?'

'I haven't actually seen them myself,' said Mr Cardew Thompkins, 'but I think from the description of your requirements they are just what you need. Good-morning.'

If he had looked out of his office window a moment later he would have seen Ross and me with our handkerchiefs stuffed in our mouths fleeing down the road till we got round the corner out of sight.

'Oh,' sobbed Ross, 'do stop. I told you so, but it's worked better than I thought. Read this:—

'"St JULIANS.—Very desirable gentleman's country residence."'

'Oh, that won't do, Meg.'

'Why not? Sounds rather nice, I think.'

'Is Michael a very desirable gentleman?'

'Oh, I never notice those mistakes, or spelling ones, I wish I did; they're so amusing when you see them.'

'Can't think what they teach in girls' schools,' said Ross gloomily. 'Daddy used to groan about the bills, tons of extras too, and when it's all said and done you don't know the most elementary things.'

'Grammar,' I observed, 'is very difficult; some of the best people can't spell.'

'But geography, your geography's no better. Why, I heard some one tell you the other day that her son was in Dunkirk, and you said that she must be so thankful to have him in Scotland. I could see the woman thought you dotty, only she was too polite to say so.'

'But, Ross, Dunkirk is so difficult, don't you see how Scotch it sounds. It's one of those places that I try to remember by reversing it. There is a system like that. I think of shortbread and then I know it's France.'

'Well, your system doesn't seem to have worked that time. But now I come to think of it, Meg, you're right. There is a system, whatever is the beastly thing called? Mell-gell-Hell-man-ism, I think it is.'

'Ross!'

'What?'

'You're not to put bad words into my mind.'

'I'm not, I said a sentence.'

'But no sentence could possibly begin with "Hell man."'

'Of course it could. I could say heaps.'

'Yes, but not fit for my young ears.'

'Meg, I could say one that a Plymouth Brother wouldn't mind Aunt Amelia hearing.'

'I'll give you a bob if you can while I count twenty.'

So my brother thought hard and said, 'Suppose.'

'But that doesn't begin with the right word,' I said.

'I must tell you the context, child. Suppose a Plymouth Brother were arguing with an atheist.'

'One, two, three,' I counted.

'He might with perfect propriety say.'

'Four, five, six.'

'Hell, man, is *not* a myth. Aunt Amelia would say he was "one of the right

sort," so that's worth 3d. extra. Give me that bob, Meg.'

So I gave him six pennies, six halfpennies, and a threepenny bit, and he said it wasn't a bob. He said it was a shilling, which was different, and he "couldn't be fashed with all that muck in his pockets," so we bought sweets.

Then he exclaimed,—

'Come on, Meg,' as if it had been I who had stopped first.

'But,' I protested, 'what is the hurry, there was such a pretty girl looking at you in that shop.'

'Meg, will you come, there's a man staring at you.'

'But I don't mind the pretty girl staring at you, Ross;' but my brother said,—

'One really couldn't have one's women stared at by a chap like that.'

'Really, Ross,' I said, 'I'm not a harem.'

'You're a jolly sight more trouble to look after.'

'Oh, have you had much experience,' I asked. And then he said I was 'abominable.'

So we walked on.

'No,' said my brother, reverting violently to my education, 'girls' schools are simply rotten. I could run one better than your woman did. Don't even seem to have fed you properly, judging by the size you've grown, or rather not grown. I wonder if it's too late to bring an action for insufficient nourishment considering the price paid. There's one thing you do really well though, and that's arithmetic.'

So I cheered up.

'I never knew anybody, no, not any single person that could add up her wants so accurately and subtract them from her husband's bank balance with such lightning speed.'

'I think, Ross,' I said with dignity, 'it would be better if we went back to St Julian's.'

So he read out:—

'"10 bed and dressing-rooms, 5 reception rooms, 6 acres of pleasure gardens, stabling and coachhouse, usual domestic offices. For sale only."

'Here's another:—

'"Charming country cottage for sale, 5 miles from Whittington station, combines old-world charm with every modern convenience, capable of being added to."

'Oh! Meg, isn't it priceless? Let's get a taxi and go and see them. Mop up your eyes, child, I don't want to look as if I were eloping with an unwilling bride.'

We got to the 'charming country cottage' first. It was miles away from anywhere. It was a bungalow—at least I suppose it was, at any rate the upper storey had disappeared. It seemed to be nearly tumbling down. There was only one large room, with a lovely old bread oven and one or two small cupboard-like apartments leading out of it. I stared at it in amazement.

'Capable of being added to?'

'Of course,' said Ross, 'very true, indeed, about the only thing you could honestly say of it. You could build a new house around it and use the present structure for a coal-hole. Next, please. I feel St Julian's will be the one, Florrie.'

This, however, proved to be a young barrack. If there were eighteen rooms, there were hundreds, I should think. The type of house that a polygamist might fancy. Damp oozed from the walls and most of the paper had peeled off and lay in little mouldering heaps on the floor. Rats scuttled in the wainscoting, and in the bathroom, which was on the ground floor, lay two or three of the largest cockroaches I have ever seen.

'You see,' said Ross, pointing to them with great pride, 'how the charm works. "My wife is afraid of beetles"—you get them—beautiful specimens. You want a house not quite finished—you are sent to one tumbling down. Now, if this could be worked out to its logical conclusion you would, of course, get your ideal home. I must do it on paper and try to get a formula. Let's go back to the agents, Florrie.'

'Not I—never again,' I said. So we returned to Fernfold for lunch. It's so jolly now the Spiders have gone. The Poppet has a nice day nursery and Ross a better bedroom. He says he misses the lumps in his mattress dreadfully, and his bed is now so comfortable that he cannot sleep.

To-night, after I was in 'my byes,' as the Gidger calls it, Ross came to say good-night. He was so quaint.

'Meg, something that you said to-day has rankled horribly.'

'Practically everything you say every day always does with me.'

'No, but Meg, *do* I ever put bad words into your mind?'

'Oh, Ross,' I said, and giggled hopelessly.

'But, darling, do you know any?'

'Why, yes, I know several: Damn's one, only daddy forbade me to say it once, and somehow I've never got into the way of it, and since the war I say Hell sometimes, not that I mean to swear, only it does seem like Hell.'

'The Germans seem inspired by the devil, if that's what you mean,' said Ross.

'And I say "infernal" sometimes. Daddy told me I might.'

'I bet he didn't, Meg.'

'He did, I tell you, if I always thought of Devonshire when I said it.'

'Daddy is topping,' said my brother, as he remembered the old joke, 'well, go on.'

'I think that's all I know,' I replied.

'Oh, he said, 'how white women are. I wish they were all I knew.'

'But surely, Ross, not knowing a thing doesn't make a person "white." If you know a lot and don't say them, by the grace of God, I should have thought that was being "white."'

CHAPTER XI

The Gidger came in from a drive bursting with excitement and importance.

'Muvver, *I've* found you a house, it's the darlingest you ever saw, very old, and the drawing-room has got a pump in it, and there's a pig, too.'

'In the drawing-room, Gidger?' Ross inquired; 'that sounds as if it might do. Your mother likes a pig under her bed, and so did her grandmother.'

'Nannie and I went all over it, muvver. One of the bedrooms has a funny little place leading out of it, the lady said she thought it was a powdering closet.'

'Get the telegraph forms and tell Mr Cardew Thompkins we're suited,' cried Ross, getting up in a great hurry. 'Of course it's *the* house; you're a jewel, Gidger. We never in our wildest moments hoped for a powdering closet.'

'I don't know what the drainage is like,' said Nannie.

'Fancy talking of drainage and a powder closet in the same century,' said Ross indignantly, 'let's have lunch at once, Meg, and catch the Longcross bus and go and see it.'

We had a bit of a scrimmage to catch the bus. It starts from the other inn, called The Ramping Cat. The guide-book says 'it is a small but well-conducted hostelry on the main road to London.' It seems an unfortunate name to have chosen for a place with so high a moral tone. However, as we got half-way to it we saw the bus, looking, as Ross expressed it, 'about to weigh anchor, and we're late as usual.' So I ran on ahead to ask the man to wait for Ross, as I didn't want his arm to be joggled.

The bus was a quaint affair, a kind of square sarcophagus on wheels, the door opened in two bits like a stable, and the driver informed us that 'the upper

part 'ad jammed that tight he couldn't get it open no'ow.' So we crawled into the beastly thing's bowels (I quote my brother), but after we had started the upper part flew open, and nothing I could do (or Ross say) would induce it to remain shut, so at last we gave it up as a bad job and left it idly flapping in the breeze.

Presently the bus stopped and the man poked his head in at the window and said,—

'I'm sorry to 'ave to ask you, mum and sir, to get down, but the 'orse is going to throw a fit.'

We hastily descended and found the poor beast trembling violently and looking wretched.

'Does he often have them?' inquired Ross.

'No,' said the man, 'only if 'e's upset about anythink—when the young lady come up in the yard and asked me to wait, I thought 'e was going to throw one, but I 'oped we'd get to Longcross before 'e did.'

'Goodness!' said Ross, hurrying me away, 'what a perfectly ghastly effect your face seems to have on animals, Meg; I should think we'd better walk back unless you could buy a thick veil in the village. If you come out here to live you'll have to buy a motor; that poor beast's health would soon be undermined if you used the bus constantly!'

The little brown house, as the Gidger called it, turned out to be two cottages, one of which is at present occupied by the owner, who is moving shortly. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that it is really one biggish house, which, about fifty years ago was divided into two small ones, each with an acre of garden. By taking down a partition and unblocking a doorway or two, it could be restored to its original state. It stands on the slope of a hill overlooking miles of common which will soon be ablaze with gorse, and in the distance there is a low ridge of purple hills with a crown of fir trees.

Most of the rooms have windows at each end, an arrangement I like, as it is delightful to follow the sun round. There is the most glorious old roof you can imagine, with beautiful curves and crooked chimneys, lovely, warm, red tiles and mossy eaves.

There are eight bedrooms and an oak-panelled hall, with a fireplace big enough to sit in and a place for your elbow and your pint pot. There is only one modern fireplace in the whole house. Most of the bedrooms lead out of one another, and some of 'the domestic offices,' as Mr Cardew Thompkins would call them, are a little unusual. The larder, for instance, is in the present dining-room, and so is the back door, so that while you are at lunch your butcher might arrive. But these are details which, no doubt, could be altered. There is a powdering closet, also a pump, not actually in the drawing-room, as the Gidger said, but in the 'potato shed,' which leads immediately out of it. The potato shed has a glass

roof and will make a tiny conservatory.

The back of the house faces south-west and is a regular sun-trap. Both the cottages are half-timbered and pargetted, with splendid beams and diamond-leaded windows, and roses and honeysuckle everywhere, and such a garden!—all on a slope, of course, with little steps here and there to break the levels, flowers, strawberries, and vegetables all mixed up, and lots of trees, and bush fruit, and a little copse with bluebells; already the exciting green spikes are showing, and there are a few snowdrops out.

It's the dream-house, and the Gidger found it!

We have got through a tremendous lot of business since we first saw the cottage, and I hope Michael will think we have done all the sensible things we ought. Ross telegraphed to the lawyers and they sent down a surveyor yesterday afternoon to value it and see it wouldn't tumble down the moment we bought it. The verdict is 'that it will outlast many a modern villa.' I wanted a builder to give me an estimate for doing it up. I asked the owner, who advised me to go to Jones, who had always given her satisfaction. So to Jones I went. He is the quaintest character. His hair and his whiskers grow with such velocity that on a Friday night he is double the size he was the previous Saturday, after his weekly hair-cut. He wears old stained overalls and a battered hat, and altogether looks a most frightful ruffian, the sort of person one would prefer not to meet in a dark lane. But his eyes redeem him, they are so blue and clear. The second time I saw him he said,—

'Have you any relations in the Isle of Man, mum?'

'No,' I said, 'why?'

'Oh, because my wife comes from there, and she was a Miss Ross, and when the captain come to the door yesterday, so nice and friendly like, my wife says to me afterwards, "I do see Uncle John in 'im."' (How delightful these unexpected relationships are, and I suppose he thinks I call my brother by his surname!)

The house needs very little doing up, but I should like it distempered throughout, and 'Uncle John' says that the alterations I want in 'the domestic offices' can be quite easily managed. Even now I can't describe it. I have a confused impression of beams and panelling, diamond-leaded windows with wreaths of creeper, but, ah, wait till I have filled the sweet old rooms with flowers and oak and firelight and comfy chairs and books and cushions—how Michael will love it—I am intrigued at the prospect of living in Gidger's gorgeous cottage, I shall be so disappointed if the 'black beast' won't buy it.

Charlie Foxhill is home on leave and wired to-day, while I was out, to know if we could give him dinner and a bed to-night. Ross telegraphed to say 'No, but we can give you an apology for the one and a series of lumps for the other.' So dear old Charlie duly arrived—beaming. It's so nice to see all one's pals. He is as

amusing as ever, and has the same quaint diffidence, and bubbles over with jokes and absurdities. We asked after his mother.

'Oh, still steeped in saints,' he answered, sighing.

After dinner he started holding on to the mantel-piece with both hands and bending first one knee and then the other.

Ross inquired, with his beautiful natural courtesy, if he were endeavouring to qualify for entrance into the County Asylum, and then Charlie gave one of those absurd answers that veil his real meaning.

'Oh, no, my dear chap, but I'm going to try my luck with Monica next week. I want to talk intelligently to her father, so I've mugged up patent manures and the lost ten tribes till I'm blue in the face, and am not perfectly clear now whether it's the fertiliser or the tribes that's got mislaid. As they have family prayers and my knees do crack so abominably, I'm trying to get them a bit looser. It might prejudice my chances if they think I ain't used to kneeling down. What.'

'Well, you aren't, are you?' asked my brother.

'Well, no,' said Charlie, 'to be perfectly candid, I'm not—I get too much of it at home.'

'Which is the particular pill you never can swallow?' asked Ross.

'Virgin birth,' said Charlie. 'I think He was quite a good man, but I'm not prepared to say He was divine.'

'Are you prepared to say He was a humbug and the bastard son of Mary, then?' demanded Ross.

'No, not that either, quite,' said Charlie.

'Well, He must be one or the other, for there's nothing in between,' remarked my brother. 'Here, chuck over the cigarettes,' and the conversation changed rather hurriedly to Germans.

This morning when Charlie saw the Gidger he swore that Monica was *not* his fate. (I wonder if Michael would think him a suitable person on whom to bestow his daughter's hand in marriage as Charlie wants to wait for her.)

But before he went to the station, and I was alone with him for a little while, he let me see his soul for just a moment.

I had wished him luck with Monica in the flippant way one does, when he said,—

'Meg, I'll almost believe in Him if I get her. I shan't care how soon I stop a bullet if I don't.'

'Oh, Charlie,' I exclaimed, holding out my hands to him, 'don't be diffident with her. You know Monica likes her mind made up for her. She always used to let you do it.'

'No, Meg,' he said, 'not about this. She must come to me willingly or not at all.'

But I am frightened for them. I know Monica's irresolution. He will be diffident and seem almost indifferent because he wants her so desperately, and she will be 'difficult' and will forget that it's just his way. She won't know her own mind till afterwards. Sometimes in these war days there is no 'afterwards.'

When we got back from the station Ross presented me with four threepenny bits.

'The charge for the delivery of each package from the station,' he said, 'is threepence.'

'How interesting,' I replied, pocketing the money, 'but I'm not expecting any parcels.'

'Oh, yes, you are, Meg, last night I wrote to four of our relatives and told them you were taking a house—an old one—and that contributions of seventeenth century furniture would be gratefully received.'

'Ross, how could you?' I gasped.

'Oh, it was quite simple,' he said; 'I just wrote what I wanted to say on a piece of paper, folded it carefully and put it into an envelope, and stamped and posted it. Of course, it needs brain; I don't suppose you could do it, Meg.'

'Well, if you've really written——'

'Do you doubt my word?' said Ross indignantly.

'You're a horribly ill-mannered, mercenary, money-grubbing, badly-behaved wretch, Ross; Nannie always said you should never ask for things you wanted.'

'I asked for things *you* wanted,' said Ross, with the air of a martyr. This was so unanswerable that I changed the conversation hurriedly, and, although I feel that his behaviour is most reprehensible, and I don't know that he's written at all, at the same time it would be exciting if any parcels did arrive.

And now I shall have to begin to think about furniture, if Michael decides to buy the cottage. It will be difficult to choose without him. I wish I had some of the old family things and bits of oak mother and daddy used to have, but everything was sold when he went out to be a missionary. There was a chest that used to stand in the hall at home. It had a lovely carved border, and there was a corner cupboard, too, that I specially loved because one side of it was longer than the other. And the 'chair of the nine devils.' *How* I would like that. It had eight little devils carved on it and the ninth was the person who sat in it!

CHAPTER XII

I am afraid Ross has been doing too much. He has had a dreadful lot of pain since Charlie left. On Sunday I took the law into my own hands and sent for the doctor. I 'got rowed' by my brother for doing it, and by his doctor for not doing it before. I think that life is very hard on women.

'No, he needn't stay in bed,' the doctor said, 'but something must be done about the nights. He has simply *got* to get some natural sleep.'

So I informed the invalid that I was going to sit up with him, make tea, and read aloud, and perhaps the night would seem a little less long, and he'd get a nice sleep before the morning.

But my brother is not one of those people whose submissive patience is always apparent to the naked eye, and all he said was, quite politely, but *quite* firmly,—

'You're going to do nothing of the kind.'

'I quite definitely *am*,' I said.

So then there was a little gust of temper.

'Oh, *do* stop fussing, Meg. You and Sam really are the limit. Anybody would think that I was "going to leave this mortal world of sin, and hatch myself a Cherubim," the way you both go on! When you hear me begin to chip the shell you can both sit up, but not before.'

So then the feathers underneath my skin got ruffled, and I said that he was simply hateful and delighted to worry people who only wanted to be kind to him.

And then he turned into a glacier, so I tried thawing it.

'Please, Ross.'

'No, darling.'

'But if you had something to do in the night it wouldn't seem so long.'

'I have got something to do, Meg.'

'What?'

'Swear,' said my brother laconically.

'Oh, you poor old thing,' I exclaimed.

And then he added, rather hesitatingly, 'Or else try to stick it out and be courteous to Him about it.'

My eyes filled up suddenly with tears. My brother evidently had still that 'picture of Him in his head,' and of course one ought always to be courteous to a person with a crown on, though I've not been decently civil myself lately.

Then Ross, feeling, perhaps, that he had inadvertently been betrayed into 'talking religion' (though he apparently didn't mind trying to 'live it') said irrelevantly, 'I wonder how Charlie has got on?'

'I am longing to know what she said to him, Ross.'

'Let's hope she kissed him "good-night, darling," which is what you're going to do to me now,' said my brother, whose face whitened suddenly as the pain

seized him again.

At that moment Sam came in dragging a basket chair.

'I don't intend to argue it out again with you, Brown,' said his master coldly.

'Nor I with you,' said Brown.

The two men looked at one another, and I could almost hear the clashing of their wills.

'I don't feel up to it to-night, Sam.'

'I don't either, Master Ross.'

'Is your knee bad?'

'Putrid. I shan't sleep, anyway.'

'Are you telling me the truth, Brown?'

'I'm not in the habit of lying to you, sir.'

'Sorry,' said Ross, 'of course you aren't. You can stay if you have your bed wheeled in.'

'Thanks,' said the other briefly.

So I left them, and when I returned later with hot milk and biscuits, they were both smoking, each man in his bed, prepared to help the other 'stick it out.' I wondered as I made up the fire and filled their 'baccy pouches for them whether they would swear, or be courteous, during the long hours, and prayed that they might both get some sleep before the morning.

In the night I woke at four o'clock, so I went in to see the invalids. But the dear things were both asleep. He had been 'compassionate' to them instead!

Now, when I wake up at four o'clock there always is a row before the day is out, and to-day was no exception to the rule.

There were three letters by the first post. One from Michael saying that he would buy the cottage, one from Charlie explaining rather bitterly that he supposed he hadn't enough grandfathers, or that the cement was too hard for her to swallow, but anyway Monica had refused him; and one from the lady in question to the effect that 'Charlie didn't seem to mind much.'

I lost my temper then. What a fool Monica is! As usual, I didn't stop to think, but rushed straight up to London and told her so. I interviewed her in the boot cupboard at the hospital.

'You're a fool, Monica,' I said; 'you can't, even at your age, see farther than your nose. You've been so wrapped up all your life in family trees that you've never even seen the flower of Charlie's love.' (I got muddled up with Mr Williams's song. I felt somehow that Monica ought to be willing to lay snow-white flowers against Charlie's hair, and that she wasn't.) 'You've looked up so many pedigrees that you've never noticed his devotion all these years. What's cement when he's got everything else that matters. You've mistaken everything about him. *Not mind*? Why, he worships the ground you walk on, and I suppose

presently you'll be sorry and think you *do* like him after all. You never could make up your mind in time. Never could decide whether you wanted your new dress to be pink or blue, and when your mother spoilt you and gave you both you wished you had chosen shot, and when she gave you that, too, you wished it had been mauve.' (I was too angry and agitated to notice that a dress shot pink and blue *would* have been mauve.) 'I'm absolutely sick of you. You've played with Charlie. You've let him care for you all these years and never let him speak, and when he does you refuse him. I'm tired of you,' I said. 'I'm done with you. You're too'—(I hesitated here and cast my mind round wildly for a word. I seemed to see my whole vocabulary, printed in columns like a spelling book, down which I ran a mental finger, rejecting them all until I came to 'patrician,' so I said)—'You're too patrician for me,' and I flung out of the boot cupboard.

Having quarrelled with my best friend and made her 'quick all bluggy,' I bolted into a post office and sent a frantic wire to 'Uncle John' to meet me at five o'clock at the cottage to talk about repairs. After that I did a heap of shopping, whirled into a registry office and put my name down for a cook, and was rude to the lady who ran the office because she seemed to imagine I must be dotty to think she could get me one at all, though she took my booking fee all right. Then I got in a panic and wondered whether I really did like the cottage now that it was finally decided, so I rushed home and routed Ross out to walk over to it and help me to make up my mind—like Monica.

The winter sun was setting as we walked up the red brick path, mellowing and beautifying the old place and filling the rooms with soft rose light. I felt quite sure I liked it.

'Uncle John' turned up at five o'clock as requested.

'Now,' said I, walking into what will be the drawing-room, 'what would you suggest here, Jones?'

'Well, mum,' said he, pulling his beard (it was one of his bushy days), 'I should think a nice yaller satin paper with a cream stripe would do 'ere, and a modern grate with a tiled hearth, that could be yaller to match the paper, or if you think that too conspishus you could 'ave it cream to match the stripe. I done one for a lady last week, and it looks a fair treat, that it do.'

I murmured weakly that I was sure it did, and did not venture to meet my brother's eye. Then we passed into the lovely old dining-room, with its oak panelling and beamed ceiling.

'Now 'ere,' said 'Uncle John,' warming to the job, 'you won't 'ave to go to no expense in fillin' up the fireplace; I dun that last year, but I should 'ave a nice gas fire, it saves a deal of work.' But the room he considered needed brightening up. 'A nice red paper, now, and this 'ere old panelling painted white.'

'By Jove,' said the incorrigible Ross, looking at me with a malicious grin,

'it would make the room lighter if you painted all the oak white, Meg, and you could have a green plush carpet and a red table cloth with ball fringe.'

'Uncle John' looked at him approvingly.

'Killing 'Uns ain't spoilt the young genelman's taste, I can see that,' he said, 'but I shouldn't 'ave nothing green, it is too conspishus, the two colours; keep it all red, that's what I say, mum. Walls, carpets, and curtings all to match; what you want to aim at, Mrs Ellsley, is a scheme o' colour, art in the 'ome is what you want; I done up a house for a lady like that, last week, dining-room red, drawing-room yaller, 'all green, bedrooms pink and blue, everythink to match and no expense spared, quite the palace, mum. Why, I could brighten up this old place so as you wouldn't know it.'

Am I lacking in moral courage? Could you have damped his ardour by word of mouth? He was so interested and friendly, so anxious to give the best advice. How could I tell him I wanted nothing but soft cream wash on the walls? and the only awful modern grate, that desecrated the whole house, pulled out? I didn't even want a geyser, his idea of the acme of comfort, "ot bath of a Saturday night and no trouble.' So I weakly said I would go home and think it over and would write and tell him what I had decided. Ross vanished into the village drapers on the way home and came out waving a pattern of ball fringe.

"Ere yer are,' he giggled, 'best quality seven three, what 'o for art in the 'ome.'

A radiant Gidger met us at the door.

'The first parcel's come, muvver. Oh, Uncle Woss, do cut the string.'

'String,' said Ross, proceeding to try to untie every knot with his left hand, 'string is a very valuable thing, Gidg., and must on no account be wasted. Your cottage is only held up by the wallpaper, which your mother insists on having stripped off, so I expect we shall have to tie it up outside like a parcel.'

'Oh, what a lubberly supwise, muvver.' And, indeed, it was. Aunt Constance had sent us six pairs of real *old* chintz curtains, enough for all my small windows, I should think. Such lovely soft colours: anemones and leaves on a cream ground, and a border that will make miles and miles of little frills for the top! I am now going to compose a suitable letter to 'Uncle John' about the wallpapers.

Oh, I nearly forgot to say that I have managed to get a cook after all, for 'Uncle John' brought his eldest daughter along with him and suggested I should try her, and as she had an excellent written reference from her last employer, who is now nursing in France, I engaged her on the spot, and Nannie says it's another modern miracle and no other woman ever had my luck!

Then I am keeping on the old man, Tidmarsh, nicknamed the Titmouse, who has always come in for two days a week and done the garden. He can give

me full time and knows of a garden boy who will also do the boots and knives and all the other jobs that modern servants won't do. The boy's name is *Tench*. Of course, Ross christened him 'the Stench' at once. The registry office at Tarnley sent a girl up this evening as parlourmaid. She amused me very much by saying, 'I don't consider myself an ordinary servant, I am very superior, and so is my family. I never go out, except to very special places, my mistresses have always been real ladies, they didn't know how to do anything.'

I am afraid I cannot aspire to that standard of gentility, but have engaged her and hope I shan't regret it.

Then the charlady of these rooms said,—

'My 'Ilda wants a place, would she do as 'ousemaid though she is a bit rough and young like?'

She came up to see me, and she proved to be a cheery soul, and perhaps the corners will rub off. I hope the superior parlourmaid won't be too superior to take on the job of training her. In any case there does not seem to be another housemaid in the world, so my choice is somewhat limited.

The staff, therefore, consists of the Titmouse, and the Stench for outside, and the Superior Person (commonly called the S.P.), the cook, who rejoices in the name of Dulcie, and 'my 'Ilda' for the house. Nannie insists she can manage for me and all the nursery part, if 'my 'Ilda' does the scrubbing.

It has turned very cold again after the thaw, and the frost made everything exceedingly slippery, the roads are like glass.

At dinner I said to Ross,—

'Aren't the paths slippery? Positively I could hardly get home this afternoon; I took one step forward and slid back two.'

'Do think, my dear,' said Ross, 'do try to use your brains, if you have any. If you had really taken one forward and two back you'd have found yourself back at the station.'

'I did, so took a taxi home, didn't you hear me drive up?'

'Humph,' said Ross. (I don't often get one in, do I?)

I am going to keep chickens and rabbits, as the meat question is difficult, and cockerels and young bunnies will help to feed the family. I suggested a goat, but Ross is dead off that. He thinks the Stench *and* a goat will be too much for the S.P. and Dulcie.

I intend the Gidger to know all about animals and flowers and how they breed and propagate. Nature is beautiful and ignorance unlovely. So I shall not tell my little girl lies or half truths about sex, but shall unfold the facts of life gradually as she is able to bear them, so that her heart and mind may become as beautiful as her face promises to be.

Then some day she may go to her husband, not in that awful state of igno-

rance, fright, and misery that some call 'innocence,' but with a wide, sweet, sane knowledge of the beautiful mysteries of life.

CHAPTER XIII

Ross seems better. He is sleeping some hours each night without the bromide. I never heard how much of that Brown got him to take.

When I inquired how the knee was, Sam said,—

'Keeps pretty level with the arm, miss—ma'am, I should say.'

Now what does he mean by that?

There has been another thaw and everything is distinctly mucky, but yesterday, after lunch, I put on my shortest skirt and my oldest hat, the one with the pheasant wing in it that Michael likes, and we tramped over the dripping meadows to call on 'Uncle John.' 'Aunt John' opened the door. She was resplendent in black silk with a necklace of melon seeds and a pair of the most enormous pearl ear-rings, that even Cleopatra might have envied.

She invited us into the little front parlour. This room was almost entirely filled with a full-sized grand piano, which 'Uncle John' had bought at a sale cheap, owing to the fact that most of the notes were missing, 'But then,' as he explained, 'look at the case, real Hebony.'

He came in a few minutes after, looking a perfect ragamuffin in his stained overalls and battered hat, not at all a suitable mate for the resplendent vision in silk and melon seeds. The pair rather reminded me of Uncle Jasper and Aunt Constance—she dressed for dinner in all her finery and jewels and he just come in from grubbing out a foundation of a buried abbey. And 'Aunt John' looked at 'Uncle John' in much the same way that Aunt Constance looks at Uncle Jasper under the same circumstances.

'Fair caught, I am,' he exclaimed affably, shaking hands all round; 'ain't had it off yet, then?' he said to Ross by way of cheering up an invalid. And then with great pride he added, reverting to his first paragraph, 'but the missis fair makes up for it, don't she, always dressed up like a 'am bone of an afternoon is Sarah.'

'Well, mum,' he said, turning to me, 'I got your letter, and it's a fair blow, that it is; I don't say but what wall-papers ain't expensive and likely to go up, but if you could 'ave afforded the yaller with the cream stripe I think it would 'ave fair made the place. Perhaps if you wrote and told yer 'usband 'ow much better

I say it would look 'e might be willing to do a bust for once, especially as you don't seem to cost 'im much in clothes,' and he glanced at my plain tweed skirt.

Here Ross tittered, as I happened to have mentioned at lunch the price I had paid for the garment in question.

"Owever, it ain't for me to say,' said 'Uncle John,' 'owe no man nothing is my motter and always 'as been, and it ain't always that I could give the wife a silk dress for the afternoon, is it, Sarah?'

Sarah, with ready tact, changed the conversation by offering us tea, and observed that John was always 'a bit free with his tongue.'

'Oh, no offence intended, I'm sure,' said 'Uncle John,' but the dear soul has it firmly fixed in his mind that we are rather poor, and he keeps assuring me that he will keep expenses down as much as possible. He will begin the work on Friday, with the owner's consent, although the deeds will not be actually signed by then. I hope we shall be in 'Our House' by the middle of March.

When we returned from calling on 'Uncle John' I found a letter asking me to go to Staple Inn this week to sign some deeds. But why should they want me to do that when Ross has Michael's Power of Attorney? I asked my brother if he knew, but he professed the most profound ignorance of everything in heaven and earth, except the evening paper (which was private).

So I had to possess my soul in patience all night, and this morning when we got to the lawyer's office I discovered two conspiracies.

Fancy! Michael has given me the cottage. Isn't it too sweet of him? I was quite overcome when the lawyer said that the deeds were to be in my name. I have never had anything of my own like that before, except £2 a year paid quarterly, that an old cousin left me.

When the lawyer had congratulated me on my elevation to the position of a landed proprietor, he said, 'And now, my dear young lady, I have another piece of news which will, I think, make you an even more radiant vision than you are at the moment.'

'Oh, lor!' Ross whispered, 'that's another 13/4 for poor old Michael; the larger the lie, Meg, the bigger the bill!'

And then the lawyer told me that all the family silver and the old furniture had been stored all these years by daddy's orders for me if I cared to have them.

My brother and I were so excited that we could hardly stop to say 'good-bye' to our legal adviser, but tumbled head-first downstairs and into a taxi. Ross exhorted the Jehu to drive furiously to the Furniture Depository, where I found all my treasures, all the things that in the old days made home, that had acquired a special value from their association quite apart from their intrinsic worth. I sat in the chair of the nine devils and cried for the days when mother used the things, wept because daddy had been so thoughtful, and because I badly wanted

to hear him say the old joke I loved as a kiddie, 'Oh, can't you see the ninth devil? I can!'

I found in store the eight old wheel-back chairs which were used in the servants' hall at home and the two arm-chairs to match, which were always set at either end of the long table for the cook and parlourmaid. Woe betide any lesser lights that dared to sit in those seats of the mighty! Fashion changes rapidly, however, and they will be our best, oh, very best dining-room chairs, with little flat cushions added, perhaps, for comfort. Then there is mother's grandmother's gate leg table, it used to stand in the hall for cards and letters, but that will be used for us to dine at. I seem to see the flowers on it and the little pools of light made by the glass and silver and the soft reflection of the shaded candles on the oak.

I shall set the chair of the nine devils beside the fire. The corner cupboard with the one side longer than the other will do for glass and salts and peppers, but as our dining-room is low, it must stand instead of hang as it used to do at home. Alas for Aunt Amelia's feelings, the cupboard door is panelled and the four divisions form a cross! Then there is a funny old Devonshire dresser made of deal, with three deep drawers, that we used in the school-room. It will do for a sideboard, and the drawers, if divided and lined with green baize, will hold the forks and spoons. It is painted black and has fascinating drop handles. There is a hard, uncompromising Elizabethan air about it that just matches the heavy beams in the ceiling. There is a splendid old brass Chinese incense burner amongst the ornaments, and somewhere in one of my multifarious boxes I have a flaming square of crimson with that glorious embroidery only Chinese people produce. It shall be made into a cushion for the black oak chair, and be the only splash of colour in the room. One or two of the pictures will look quite nice. There is a quaint print, in an old maple frame—Speech Day at Christ's Hospital—rows of stately dames mixed up with Mayors and Aldermen and maces sit round the hall, listening to one of the pupils reciting an ode. The pride and agony on the headmaster's face near by is funny. 'Will he remember it all? Such a credit to the school.' This at home used to be in an attic, but I loved it because, the glass being cracked, it made the Mayor appear to squint. Evidently daddy remembered this, for he had written on the back on a bit of stamp paper, 'For Meg,' that was what started the tears.

There are a few silhouettes in black frames with acorns on the top. One is of Grandpa Fotheringham as a baby, and his mother has written the date at the back and added, 'Very like my little boy, so dear to me.' There is a painting, black with age, of one of my mother's family. She is a severe-looking old lady, with rather a low-necked bodice (too low for a Bishop's relative), but I forgot she was on the distaff side. She has huge, full, puff sleeves and her head is entirely

covered with a large muslin cap with a goffered frill all round her face, tied under her chin. That must hang near the silhouettes, I think. I found in a box a funny old sampler framed in an ancient black and gilt frame. It is a picture, beautifully sewn in faded silks, of a little girl and a lamb sitting under a tree in a meadow, which looks damp, and her home is in the distance at the back. She, too, is in a low-necked gown, with short sleeves, and she wears a muslin erection on her head. She is loving the lamb, which is extremely woolly. He is made entirely of French knots, so if you know what those are you will know how very woolly that lamb is. There is a pair of small shoes peeping out from under the little girl's gown, they are red. Somehow I feel that they are her best ones, and I don't believe her mother knows she's got them on. They look most unsuitable for a damp meadow, and the lamb will step on them in a minute, and then there'll be trouble. She'll probably cry.

When I got home I found a batch of letters and a picture from Uncle Jasper. It is a copy of one in the cathedral library at Canterbury. I will copy out a bit of his letter, which is so typical of the darling pet:—

'I am sending you a copy, painted by a pal of mine, of the Mediæval Portrait of Queen Ediva. I expect you never heard of the lady, Little 'un, but she was the second wife of Edward the Elder, A.D. 961. Do try to remember that date. She was a great benefactress to Christ Church Priory, which I suppose you know is Canterbury Cathedral. In the picture you will see she is dressed in her royal robes and crown. Notice the beautiful jewelled and enamelled morse which fastens her ermine-lined cloak. The original is painted on wood and is presumably of the latter part of the fourteenth century. It is signed I.P.F., and if he's the chap I think he is, the date will be about 1392. You can hang it in the dining room of your ridiculous cottage. Why don't you say what the date of it is, instead of jawing about the creepers and leaded windows, which I expect are modern.'

Alas, there are no old deeds, so I do not know the date.

There was a letter from Aunt Constance, such a sad one. She asks me if I would like the Manor House nursery furniture for the Gidger. She has been saving it for her grandchildren, but now that Eustace has finally decided, there will never be any little folk to use the pretty things. Ross ejaculates at intervals, after reading the letter,—

'Oh, my hat! I simply couldn't, and when he could fight, too!'

No, I don't think the monastic life is the one for Ross.

So poor Aunt Constance, being a soldier's daughter, eats her heart out be-

cause her Eustace cannot see his way to fight and pray. Well, it's a funny throw-back.

Aunt Amelia acknowledged my letter telling her of my plans in thoroughly characteristic fashion. There is a good bit about the Devil in her epistle. She thinks 'one's days might better be occupied these solemn times than in amassing possessions and lands, marrying and giving in marriage'; but Michael and I are married, and it's only one house, and as to land, two acres and a cow is considered a minimum, and I've left out the cow. She 'hopes that the Vicar is faithful, and wears a black gown,' that the Gidger is showing signs of grace, and that I have been able to purge from the child's young mind the recollection of that dreadful recitation, taught her by some ungodly friend of her poor afflicted nephew.

'Does she mean me?' asked Ross indignantly.

'Yes, you're the afflicted one, and Captain Everard is the person who——'

'Well, old Everard does know some tales, I admit,' said Ross, 'but go on.'

'Oh, I can't bear to read any more of it out.' I threw the letter at him.

'Why does she always spell devil with a capital "D"? I should have thought the smallest she could write was good enough for that old beast,' remarked my brother as he handed the missive back.

CHAPTER XIV

I don't know if the day in London was too much for Ross, but he had a bad 'go' of pain in the night and cussed with great enthusiasm after breakfast because he couldn't light his own pipe. Somehow he cannot strike a match with his left hand, though heaps of men do it, I believe. Half an hour after the outburst Sam appeared with a vase filled with spills.

'Why these funny things?' said Ross, picking one up.

'Spills, sir, light them at the fire, sir; can't get matches.'

'Oh,' said Ross, and tried one. 'Why, Sam, this is a brain wave. I can light my own pipe.'

'Can you, sir,' said Sam, going away contented. He is so thoughtful in those little ways. He gives Ross such a very perfect service. Sam never attempts to serve two masters. He is wholehearted for his one.

After lunch Ross said that he didn't feel up to going out, and that his "Rev. Mother" wanted him to lie down and take some soothing syrup.

'And are you going to?' I asked.

'Of course I'm not. Do you think I always do what Brown says. The 'Rev. Mother's' the one that will do the lying down,' said my brother grimly.

So I went over to the Gidger's cottage and found it full of ladders, paint-pots, pails of white-wash, workmen knocking down partitions, while 'Uncle John,' his hair and whiskers bristling like a wild man of the woods, whirls in and out like a dog at a fair, glorying in all the mess and confusion. Now that the house is mine, I go round anxiously and point out the flaws and cracks in the walls, and 'Uncle John' says soothingly, 'Oh, yes, mum, it only wants a bit o' mortar, it won't cost you much,' 'a bit o' mortar' is his panacea for all ills. He says the roof is sound except over the powdering closet, which may give trouble, no doubt 'a bit o' mortar will set it right.'

The two partitions are down and the doorways unblocked so that I can now walk through my entire domain without going out in the garden, over the fence and in at the other front door. All the rooms have had one coat of distemper and the drawing-room is finished. The pale cream walls are quite delightful and cry out for water-colours in gold mounts and frames, the oak floors have been beautifully polished, and joy, there are three Persian rugs in the Depository. To-day I bought a pair of plain old iron dogs to rest the logs on in the open fireplace. The casement curtains are to be made of the anemone besprinkled chintz with frills along the top. But, alas, the little curtains cut into more yards of stuff than one would think, and so I must have others in the bedrooms. I went into a shop to-day and asked the man to show me dimity.

'Dimity,' said he with a supercilious stare, '*dimity*, why, good gracious, it's a hundred years old, madam.'

'But my house,' I said with quiet scorn, 'must be at least two hundred and fifty.'

I bought a seventeenth century settee and some deep chairs when I was up in town. They have loose covers made of chintz with a design of birds and baskets printed from the original old wood blocks.

The drawing-room is such a jolly room, very light and bright, with three big windows facing north and east and south. It has only one beam going across the ceiling and none of the sombre dark beauty of the dining-room, so I feel I may be flippant there. I shall have heaps of colour in the covers and curtains. There are a few delightful things of daddy's for this room—a lovely old mahogany corner cupboard with latticed doors, and some bits of china to go in it, bowls and jugs and funny old cups without handles. There are also three beautiful chairs with rounded backs filled in with lattice work painted in black and gold; the gold is very faint and worn in places. The seats are cane and the front legs very spindly, the kind of chair one's heaviest male visitor will inevitably choose. I

think they must be French, they are so elegant. No one should sit in them but an old gentleman with powdered hair, delicate lace ruffles, and a little cane, and his lady opposite must have a small patch box, there is one that I can lend her if she likes. None of my men folk will look well in them, unless perhaps my father, in his robes and full lawn sleeves. And I bought an old mahogany bureau with deep drawers and little hidy holes and secret places in it. It was really most expensive, but I asked Ross, and he said Michael's balance at the bank was so indecent that he thought I really must. I don't think we shall want much else; I like space and Michael needs plenty; he will only fall over things if I crowd the rooms too much, and complain that there is nowhere for his legs.

I forgot to say there is a great cupboard in this room with battened shelves for fruit. (I told you the domestic offices were all mixed up), and there are Cox's orange apple trees in the garden. I seem to see a man who will get up suddenly and leave the fire on a winter's night and hie him to the cupboard 'for a map,' but his pockets will bulge suspiciously on his return, and there will be a kind of 'ain't going to be no core' look in his eyes. Then he will lean back in the chair covered with the bird and basket chintz and blatantly and vulgarly eat a Cox's, skin and all, regardless of the fact that he's already had at least one properly at dinner with finger bowls and silver knives and plates. Then I shall say in righteous indignation, 'Where's the map?' and he will say, 'Why, in my pocket, can't you see it sticking out?' 'I can see something round,' I say severely. 'Well, what would you have?' he drawls, 'the world's round, isn't it? It follows that the maps should be round, too.' And he picks up his book again and reads. But I, because the flesh is weak and the man tempted me too far, and because his second apple looks so good, I shall shriek out, 'Oh, now I know how Adam felt, Michael, you old serpent, give me one.' 'You can't eat maps,' he says. 'Oh, yes, I can,' I say, and snuggle down beside the fire and lean against his knee and munch in jolly comradeship, while the tale of cores mounts steadily and sizzles with delightful splutterings in the fire. Ah, well!

CHAPTER XV

Everything now is signed, sealed, and delivered. Gidger's cottage really belongs to me.

I have engaged a most enchanting charwoman: she cleans silver and brass

better than any one else in the world, and polishes furniture till it dazzles, but she can't scrub, she has an 'inside.' It is of deep and lasting interest to her, and must be such a consolation on a wet day when one wants a hobby in the house. She is never tired of talking of it. It has a way of cropping up in every conversation, like the head of Charles the First in Mr Dick's memorial. Ross calls her 'Our Lady of Ventre,' which sounds more like a Belgian cathedral than it really is! She is very emaciated and her looks are more 'delicate' than her conversation.

'You see, mum, it's my inside,' she says; 'what I've suffered no one don't know but those what 'as it; why, one hoperation alone they took out——' but I spare you. So I have a second woman to scrub, and between them they are getting the house like a new pin, and it will burst upon the staff in all its pristine and primeval cleanness. I am a little afraid of the staff. I understand that English servants in these days need 'standing up to.' I can manage a man all right, having had a vast experience, and Ross keeps my hand in, but a woman—how does one stand up to her?

To-day the saucepans and baking tins arrived. I was thrilled, so was 'Our Lady of Ventre,' she helped me to unpack them while the other lady scrubbed the shelves.

'Could you wash them, do you think?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, mum, as long as I don't do no scrubbing; you see, it's my——' but I changed the conversation quickly by asking how her husband was.

'I 'ad a field card yesterday' (I wish I had), she answered, "e was all right then; my 'usband's in the calvery, in the calvery 'e is, always was a one for 'orses.'

'So is mine,' I said.

'Fond of hall dumb hanimals, my 'usband is.'

'Ah, a kind man,' I answered.

"E is that,' she said, waving the lid of a saucepan at me, 'never laid a 'and on me or any of the children, and what I've cost 'im in doctors you never would believe; you see, it's my inside, mum,' and she took a header into it, which I was powerless to prevent. 'Why, when I first went out walkin' with 'im, mum, only nineteen I was at the time, I got such a hawful pain in my inside they took me to the 'orsepital, took me kidney right out they did, never thought I would 'ave lived they didn't. Me young man, 'im what's me 'usband now, you understand, mum, 'e come to see me when I began to git over it a bit; fair upset 'e was when the sister told 'im about me kidney. I says to 'im, "Alb," I says, "I'm sure if we gets married I shall cost you a hawful lot in doctors, and as I lay 'ere," I said, "I've thought it's 'ardly fair to expect a man to feel the same to 'is young woman when she ain't got all 'er orgins, and if you feel you'd rather 'ave some other young lady, why, say so now," I says, and I cried, I did, I was that weak and low, for I thought a deal of Alb, I did, and I didn't want to lose 'im, mum.'

'"Liza," 'e says, "don't never talk like that again, my gal, I'd rather 'ave you with no hinside than any other young lady what's got all her guts." Always one was Alb to speak 'is mind, and 'e fair blubbed, 'e did, 'e was that upset, and then the nurse come along again and sent 'im off, but I never forgot it, mum' (I shouldn't have either), 'and, as I say, I've never 'ad an unkind word from 'im. 'Elped with the 'ousework, too, many a time, and always lights the kitchen fire and brings me up a cup of tea, 'e does, of a morning, suppose that's why I miss 'im so now 'e's in France,' and a tear splashed down into the saucepan she had started washing.

Oh, it was really very sweet: the little woman's eyes were all alight with love at the remembrance of her Alb's renunciation of her 'orgin,' which, after all, was inspired by the same divine spark which caused Dante to adore his Beatrice, Jacob to serve fourteen years for Rachel, and Elizabeth to cry out to Robert,—

'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
. . . . . I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears of all my life! and if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.'

I nearly forgot to say that the workpeople are out of all the rooms, except the servants' bedrooms, so we are able to make a start arranging furniture. Really, there isn't time to breathe, but when it is finished Michael will perhaps come home. Oh, the happiness of seeing him walk up to the front door, of taking him round the rooms, of introducing him to all the dear old things, of showing him the garden. I can't think about it, I cannot bear the separation bravely if I do—and for five days I have had no letter.

The weather is delightful for going to and fro from Fernfold. It is warmer, and there is a shade of green over the garden. Snowdrops and a few early primroses make a show of bloom and great fat buds are coming on the lilac trees. Soon there will be violets under the hedges. My lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places. Each morning Ross and I walk over to the cottage with sandwiches and Cornish pasties, eggs and things, and coffee hot as hot in thermos flasks. The two chars meet us there and Nannie and the Gidger come sometimes for tea. We all go home tired but happy in the bus at five o'clock. The General Public will be relieved to know that up to now the horse has not succumbed to any other fits on my account!

To-day we arranged the hall. Three sides of it are panelled with black oak. There are large red flagstones for a floor and a wide window looking out across a bit of lawn into a little wood already pierced with bluebell spikes. Amongst

the family things there is an old deal settle painted black, and this and a spinning wheel now stand beside the open fire, and where there is no panelling on the walls, I've stood an ancient dresser and filled its shelves with plates and dishes, made of stoneware, blue and gold. There are cups to match as well upon the hooks, and on the board below a naval copper rum jug Ross dug up from somewhere, and some copper bowls and pans. The carved oak chest now stands beneath the window, and there are other things besides which you shall see if you like to come and call on me! And then, although it looked so nice it lacked the feel of Michael, and because I am a very foolish woman I hung some caps and a coat of his upon the hooks just by the door, and flung a pipe and matches and a riding whip upon the table, and pretended that he had just come in and said, 'Lunch ready, old lady, what's the pudden?' and was gone upstairs for a moment followed by a trail of dogs. Then because he hadn't, and his things only increased the desolation, and because I have not had a letter for five days, I wept copiously into the aforesaid coat, and made a wet patch on the sleeve. Ross, passing unexpectedly, caught me with wet eyes, so I told him that the smell of Harris tweed always had, did, and would make my eyes water, which was the best excuse I could make at such short notice. This statement my brother received with the tact of an archangel, merely remarking as he went out that he knew exactly what I meant. Some things made his eyes run, for example, pepper and onions, and measles in the early stages. He returned soon after and said,—

'Meg, I want my lunch.'

'But you can't possibly eat your lunch at half-past twelve, Ross.'

'Can't I? You try me. Nature abhors a vacuum, come on, I'm starving. Now,' said he, as he stood, a great tall thing with his back to the fire, 'you're going to have a long rest this afternoon.'

'Indeed, I'm not, I've simply stacks to do.'

'This afternoon and every afternoon,' continued Ross, ignoring my remark. 'Michael says I'm letting you do too much, you're tired out and it's got to be stopped, I've got to read the Riot Act and then the list of crimes.'

'I should have thought the crimes came first,' I said.

'They have,' replied my brother grimly. 'Been reading in bed?' he asked abruptly.

'Yes, I haven't been able to sleep the last three nights, and it's no good, I simply must work, I can't do nothing with the news so bad and Michael in the thick of all that hell. Work all day and reading at night stop me thinking, and keeps me sane, so don't ask me to do less, Ross.'

'I don't "ask" you,' he said, and there was a horrid little silence.

One of the masters at Harrow once said to daddy, 'Don't mistake your boy, in spite of his wild spirits, his fun and charm and fascination, there's iron under-

neath.' The iron has a way of slipping up at times; it was uppermost just then, floating merrily, like the borrowed axe, and where was the prophet to whom I could go for rescue and say, 'Alas, Master.'

'You're too thin,' he began again, and then he pulled a letter out of his pocket and said, 'I don't really know any one who can express himself more clearly than Michael, once he really starts. I've had a regular jawing to-day from him for letting you get overtired—he——'

'Oh, Ross,' I interrupted, getting up hurriedly and clutching at his sleeve, 'have you had a letter from Michael to-day?'

'Yes, and another yesterday; why, what's the matter, kid?'

'Oh, why didn't you tell me?'

'It never occurred to me,' he said, 'Michael only wrote yesterday about money matters, and about you to-day; you hear from him every day yourself, don't you?'

'But I haven't had a letter for nearly a week, Ross.'

'Why on earth didn't you tell me, then,' he said, sitting down beside me on the settle.

'It's such a small worry compared with other people's, but I've been so dreadfully anxious.'

'You poor little scrap,' he said, and the cry which he had interrupted earlier in the morning I finished on his shoulder comfortably.

'What ridiculous handkerchiefs women use,' he remarked presently, exchanging my wet crumpled ball for his nice big, cool, dry one. 'Some chap said that men must work and women must weep, and you'd think that the sex that did the weeping would go in for the larger handkerchiefs, but I suppose you can't expect a female thing to be consistent. I shall have to ask our Lady of Ventre to bring a mop if you don't stop soon, and it'll be so bad for her inside, Meg.'

'How can you be so absurd,' I said, cheering up a bit, 'and I'm not a female thing.'

'You're a very provoking one,' he replied, 'and if there's another interval in Michael's letters, I'm to be told.'

'What does Michael say?' I asked.

'I'm to be told,' he repeated, tilting up my chin.

'So you said before,' I answered, trying to take his hand away, 'but I don't want to worry you with all my woes, you've got enough of your own.'

'My dear child, I could have told you two days ago that as I had heard from Michael his letters to you were only hung up in the post, and you would have been spared all this needless worry. Are you going to tell me in future, or must I order Nannie to bring me all your letters first?' and he tilted my chin still higher.

'I will tell you,' I said weakly, leaning up against him, it seemed the only

way to stop him looking at me, 'What does Michael say?'

'That the Power of Attorney he gave me to manage his affairs is now extended to his wife, that there's to be no more reading in bed, no more rackety days in London. Blows me up sky high for letting you work all day and sew miles of little frills at night. Here, I'll read you out the last bit: "Yes, it's all right about the shares. You take quite decent care of my goods, why can't you of my chattel? I'll scrag you if you let her get knocked up; don't take the slightest notice of anything she says, make her obey orders."'

'The audacity of the man, the cheek,' I exclaimed, 'to call me a "chattel," to talk of "orders"—to a person who by Act of Parliament has been put on an equality with himself—to a woman with the vote—to a householder—the autocracy of it!'

'Good word that,' said my aggravating brother, 'but then, you see, Michael isn't exactly Mr Jellaby, and I'm going to see that you do obey orders, and chuck in a few extras of my own—milk and things,' said Ross vaguely. 'Here, get outside this sandwich and have some more coffee for a start, and then up you go to get a rest.'

'It's so nice by the fire,' I remarked rebelliously, and then he remembered the old joke and said whimsically, 'You know what you promised in the harness-room that day, darling,' and he gave me one of his rare kisses.

So I hope Michael the caveman is satisfied—that black beast—out there. All my plans upset, all the crockery still in straw, no curtains up, and not a picture hung. Oh, I had planned to have the cave so nice for his return, to sprinkle all the floor with fine sea sand, to hang up the skin of that big tiger that he killed, to keep away the draught, and over the driftwood fire to set a pot of rabbit stew (he always is so hungry), and then perhaps with a new necklace for myself I should have been ready.

Just as we were getting in the bus to-night our Lady of Ventre came running out to ask me if she might come two hours late to-morrow. She said that an old woman in the village was dying, and was sure to be dead by the morning, and she had been asked to lay her out, there being no nieces or daughters who could do it. 'Can't say I like the job, mum, but one can't 'ardly refuse to perform the last horfice for the dead seeing as 'ow we've all got to come to it; it's different if you know a person; if it was you now, mum, or the capting, I'd do it with pleasure.' Ross's guffaw nearly took the roof off.

When we got back to Fernfold there were three letters from Michael, but I only liked two of them. If he gives another man a Power of Attorney to row his wife, he oughtn't to do it himself as well. It's not cricket. Oh, well, I read the third one through again and liked it better, because I left out all the written part

and only read between the lines—my darling!

CHAPTER XVI

Another week has passed. The workpeople have gone and taken all their pots and pails. Gidger's cottage is almost finished. It will be quite completed by to-night and we are going to sleep in it.

At the moment the two chars are working in the kitchen: Brown with his leg up is unpacking china, Ross ordering every one about, Nannie and the Gidger very busy in the nursery (the Poppet giving much advice about her own department), while the only person who really matters is doing 'nothing much' for a day or two, except cussing her male relatives in her heart.

The day-nursery is rather pretty—soft green walls, so that there may be no glare to strain the precious eyes: white furniture, just big enough for tiny folk: cupboards with shelves, low enough for little hands to reach the toys and that lovely 'Masque of Flowers' for pictures.

There is a window seat with cushions, where big people can tell small ones fairy stories in the dusk. There's a comfy chair for Nannie and a rocking-horse and doll's house, all presents from Aunt Constance, sent 'with love.'

Then in the Gidger's other room the same soft green, and all the pictures the small owner loves: that perfect Madonna of Andrea del Sarto, and a copy of Watts' 'Whence—Whither?' Do you remember that perfect baby, who runs out of the sea toward you, whichever way you stand and look at it. By special request, hung where she can always see them, are the two great favourites, 'The Good Shepherd' with a lamb, and the other—five Persian fluffy kittens sitting in a row.

'Because I like,' explained the Gidger to Uncle Woss, 'to see Jesus and the tittens when I get into my byes.'

'Would you call King George by his Christian name, Gidger?' Ross asked.

'Course not, Uncle Woss.'

'Why?'

'Because it would be most fwightful cheek.'

'Then don't you see it's much more cheek to call Him by His, darling?'

'But I didn't mean to be wude to Him,' said the Poppet tearfully, 'I'm fond of Him.'

'Of course, darling, so if you just say "Sorry, Sir," it'll be all right.'

So the Gidger said, 'Sorry, Sir,' and the conversation changed to kittens.

'I wish I had a titten, Uncle Woss, just like the one in the miggle.'

Ross said he would see what could be done, with which my daughter seemed contented.

But, ah, why is there only one little bed in the nursery, why is there no little son? Yes, of course, Michael is 'better to me than ten sons,' only he's so 'normous, the other would be so cuddley.

The Gidger does so want a long clothes baby doll. She's got a mother hunger for it, and I won't give her one. Shall I tell you why? If I should ever have the joy to hope about a little son, I shall hunt the garden for a nest, and let the Gidger peep at it with all the soft, downy things inside. Then I shall say, 'I made a little nest for you once, darling, just underneath my heart,' and I shall take her up in the nursery and open a drawer and show her all the small robes and garments that I made for her, and then she'll say, 'Oh, muvver, why won't you let me have a long clothes baby dolly?' And I shall tell her about the second nest that I've begun to make, and then I shall give her a most perfect baby doll that I've got waiting in a box just now. I shall ask her sometimes if she'd like to come and learn to sew some clothes for her baby while I sew some for mine: and if she pricks her little fingers, and makes a tiny spot of blood upon the narrow hem, and looks at me with eyes like drowned forget-me-nots (as she does if she is going to cry), I shall say, 'But, darling, don't you think it's worth it for your baby?' She'll learn to know then, when she's married and she's got the mother hunger, that her baby will be worth the mother pain.

And now the evening time has come. The house is finished, the last picture is up, the last curtain hung, and all the dear domestic gods arranged. Alas! the fly in the ointment has turned up also. The staff has arrived, and I am terrified of it. I feel all awash inside to think that I have to order the dinner in the morning and tell the S.P. what her work is. However, 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'

Tired, but happy, I wandered into the scented garden in the dusk to gather great branches of white and purple lilac, armfuls of forget-me-not and fragrant pheasant eye and the very early honeysuckle that grows over the porch. Then I filled every vase and pot that could be induced to hold water, and some that couldn't, Ross says, because I stood a leaky jar on his dressing-table and the water trickled into the drawer beneath and reduced the contents to pulp.

The house is so sweet, filled with the spring, but if only I had decorated all the rooms for Michael! My heart goes out to him to-night with a great longing. The rooms are full of the peace and fragrance only found in old houses, yet, dear as it is, it can never be to me anything more than a house till he comes and

transforms it into *Home*.

CHAPTER XVII

I think 'The Staff' might be worse, though it could not be more alarming. Dulcie cooks beautifully, only she won't cook enough of anything, and the S.P. is very superior, quite appallingly so. She does her work well, but she despises me. I try to like her, but it is difficult to feel any affection for a person who looks as if you were a bad smell under her nose. She has always lived with such exclusive families that I cannot think she will stay very long with us. Her last place was a failure, she only stayed a month. 'After I got there,' she explained, 'I found the mistress was not a lady.'

'How did you know?' I inquired politely.

'Oh, she never dressed for dinner, put the coals on with her fingers, and had tea in the dining-room. (By a merciful dispensation we have ours in the hall.) 'I was most uncomfortable,' she added, 'but I liked him. He was a real gentleman, his underclothing was all made of silk.'

'My 'Ilda' needs a great deal of polishing. At lunch the S.P. teaches her to wait at table, but it is a daily martyrdom for any one so perfectly genteel, so unutterably refined!

Monica turned up yesterday, unexpectedly, in a motor-car. She stayed ten minutes and then dashed back to her hospital.

'Oh, Meg!' she laughed as she came in, 'why didn't you tell me the truth years ago? What an utter little fool I've always been, but I've found out that I love him after all.'

'Well, you'd better write and tell him so,' I said, and kissed her.

'I have,' she answered, blushing like a wild rose. 'Aren't I a bold, bad girl? Aren't modern women hussies? I'm so longing for his letter, Meg. Oh, you were funny! I'm not a bit patrician, am I? I adore cement!'

Dear old Monica!

And after she had departed like a young whirlwind I had another thrill. The curate and his wife called, and he turned out to be Mr Williams. He is still solemn, and thinner and limper even than he used to be, but he cheered up a bit at the mention of the Bishop of Ligeria. She is a frail little person with a dress like a spasm and the most desolating hat it has been my lot to meet for years. I

wonder if she dresses so from choice or poverty.

I was glad my brother was in London when they called. His eyes would have been fascinated by the reserve of food on Mr Williams's coat. Funny old thing I Ross is always so well-groomed himself that, like the robin, he makes all the other birds look dirty.

When he came home he brought a hamper.

'The one in the miggle's in there,' he said with pride.

'You are famed for your lucidity,' I remarked politely.

It was a kitten for the Gidger, such a purring, fluffy atom, just out of the frame and christened Fitzbattleaxe by my daughter the moment she saw it. When Nannie had whisked her away, Ross said,—

'You'll have to put up with me for a bit longer, old thing. I got a big overhauling to-day. They say my arm is better, and I can have it in a sling now instead of these infernal bandages.'

'Well, that's something,' I observed, but Ross is not of a grateful nature.

'Small something, I think,' he snorted. 'Boards are a lot of old women, said I must be content to "Make haste slowly," as if I were a schoolgirl. I want to be back with my men. Oh, what an awful time it seems since I saw anybody decent.'

'Well,' I ejaculated, 'if that's not the pink-edged limit!'

'Oh, twins don't count, Meg, but I am in a vile temper. Let's go and do something. Clean the greenhouse roof, shall we? There's just light enough. Come on!'

Ross decided the plan of campaign. I was to pour the water from my bedroom window on to the glass beneath, while he, armed with a long broom borrowed from the kitchen, would stand on a pair of steps in the garden and clean the glass with the broom aforesaid.

'Now, Meg, plenty of water, no stinting,' he ordered.

So I got a huge canfull, and in order that Ross should have all the water he desired, I poured it out, not from the spout but from the other end, with great pride and force. Alas, 'the ways of mice and men aft gang agley.' The gutter of the beastly thing was too small to catch my Niagara, and the entire volume of water rushed over the glass, down Ross's neck, into his eyes and mouth, flooding his pockets and soaking him to the skin.

He gave one awful yell and overbalanced into the water butt, the lid of which, of course, was off (it would be in my garden). In my agitation I dropped the can, which followed the water in a wild leap on to the path below, smashing two or three panes of glass in its mad career.

'Well, you have done it,' said Ross, surveying the wreckage from the water tub. 'There's no doubt if you want a thing really well done, it's best to do it oneself.'

Then Sam appeared and looked reproachfully at me, and spoke to Ross, and I heard the words 'arm' and something about 'taking more care.'

Ross looked through Sam in that disgusting way he has when he isn't pleased, and said,—

'I can't go through the house like this, Meg; why do you have your tubs lined with green. Get me a bath, Brown.'

'Cold, sir?'

'How can I get this stuff off in cold? Hot, of course,' snapped his master, 'and ask the Titmouse for the ladder, Brown, and I'll go through the bathroom window.'

As I went upstairs a little later, Ross's door was slightly open; Sam was catching it. King's Regulations and the Hickley Woods wrestling for the mastery.

'You'll excuse me, sir, you don't take care.'

Then my brother's voice floated towards me down the passage.

'No, I'll not excuse you, Brown. I've had too much cheek from you the last ten minutes! Get me a shirt. If you mention my arm again in front of Mrs Ellsley, you'll quit. Now my coat. Do you call this brushed? Now a handkerchief, and get out.'

Then as he remembered that he was now promoted to a sling he added stormily,—

'Understand once for all, I will not be fussed over like a schoolgirl, I'm not a sucking dove.'

'Oh, no, sir,' said Brown, and I caught a flicker of amusement on his impassive countenance as he closed the door behind him with the wet clothes on his arm.

Just then the carrier brought a crate of hens and a box of rabbits from Aunt Constance. We felt rather like Noah when the animals began to file into the ark. The hens were the breed that have the very large combs. 'My 'Ilda' remarked as they were put into their run,—

'My! you won't get many eggs from them, mum, they're all cocks.'

The Gidger loved the rabbits and I told her how the mother bunny would presently have some little ones, and that she would love them very much and make a warm nest for them, and pull off her own soft fur to keep her babies warm. I want my little daughter to know of all the wonderful protective instincts God has implanted in His creatures and the sweet provision that He makes for all the tiny things.

Just before dinner we flew down the village to buy some bran for the new arrivals. On our return my brother did one of his atrocious lightning changes.

When Sam let us in Ross said,—

'Thanks, Sam, any letters?' and then 'Knee bad?'

'Pretty middling, sir.'

'Go and put it up, then. What are you about on it for?'

'It'll be time enough to put it up after dinner, sir. I *must* wait at table to-night, the parlour-maid is out.'

The atmosphere in the hall became suddenly arctic. I shivered as the cold of it blew into me. I could feel Ross looking through Sam as he asked coldly,—

'Did you intend to say "must" to me, Brown?' And Brown said,—

'No, sir,' and did not appear at dinner. I sent him up a book and two Cox's oranges, so I had to continue 'My 'Ilda's' education in the art of waiting.

As she handed the soup she decorated each plate with a beautiful scallop like a flannel petticoat. I suppose it is difficult to keep liquid level and walk at the same time. She had put no fish forks on the table, so I said reprovingly,—

'What are we to eat the fish with, Hilda?'

'Oh, whatever you like, Mrs Ellsley,' she said brightly. Ross drank some water hurriedly. I endeavoured to make my meaning clearer and to keep my face straight at the same time, whereupon 'My 'Ilda' said,—

'I do like being here; you don't mind how many mistakes I make so long as I do it right.'

She shot a knife and fork into Ross's lap, mercifully they were clean or there would have been ructions, then she upset a glass of water and got the hiccoughs, and later tripped over the footstool and sent the cheese straws flying like leaves before an autumn gale.

When 'My 'Ilda' brought the coffee into the hall she stepped on the kitten's tail, and as that indignant fluffy ball spat at her, she remarked,—

'My! ain't Fitzbattleaxe got a temper, I don't think. Your face *is* red, Mrs Ellsley; did I do it all right at dinner?'

As I went to my room to fetch a book I heard her fall down the back stairs with a pail. It was the end of an imperfect meal. Ross says I ought to start a nursing home for sergeant-majors suffering from depression—they'd be cured in a week, and then he remarked,—

'I wonder if Sam's got a decent supper. I must go and see.'

When he came down again he tossed a little box into my lap and said,—

'Why didn't you tell *me* that you wanted a new necklace? I'd have loved to give you one.'

'What *do* you mean, Ross?'

'Michael wrote to me to-day that you had said you wanted a "new necklace for yourself" directly the cave was finished, and that I was to buy you one.'

Oh, isn't he absurd and dear? So I opened the box, and inside there were two to choose from. So I chose the one of very perfect pearls, and then for some extraordinary reason of his own Ross kissed me and said,—

'*How* Michael spoils you, darling.'

But two kisses in twelve days. He must be ill, I think.

CHAPTER XVIII

It's All Fools' Day. Perhaps that's why the Titmouse elected to get the rheumatics that come from damp attics, so that I had to tell the Stench what 'to be getting on with.'

As I walked round the garden with him I asked if all the seeds were in.

'In, an' coming up by the galore, mum, an' I've given the turnips a dressin' of soot, as it makes a vast difference to 'em on their first appearance through the soil, mum.'

I could well believe it!

'I think you'd better dig the bed in front of the kitchen window then.'

'How deep, mum, two spits?'

I hadn't the foggiest notion how deep that is, but I said,—

'Oh, yes, *of course*, dig down as deep as ever you can; you can't dig too deep, Stench—Tench, I mean!'

Ross thinks he knows a bit about gardening, so at lunch I said,—

'Ross, how big is a spit?'

'Depends on how bad your cold is,' he began, but I closed the conversation.

Alas, alas, hear the end. Half an hour later the S.P. said would I speak to the captain in the garden? I found him in front of the kitchen window surveying some extraordinary earth-works and excavations, the Stench standing by looking particularly wooden.

'What on earth——' I began.

'I've dug so deep, mum, I come to a poipe; do it matter?' said the boy.

I surveyed the scene of his labours and found the little wretch had dug down to the kitchen drain.

'Gardening is certainly your strong point, Meg. Do you think the boy has dug this bit deep enough, or shall he take up the drains as well? By Jove,' added my brother, doubling up suddenly with laughter, 'what an acquisition you'd both be in the army. I never saw a better communication trench in my life.'

At tea-time Ross gloomily surveyed the table lightly spread with thin bread and butter and minute cakes.

'Well, there doesn't seem enough for Fitzbattleaxe, so let's go and have tea with Sam. He's dead down on his luck, too.'

'Knee bad?' I questioned.

'Putrid, so's his temper since I rowed him this morning.'

'What did you row him for?' I asked.

'Usual thing. Found him standing up brushing my clothes to-day, so I pitched into him for once in his life, hot and strong. It is rotten for him, but I really had to tell him a few home truths. He simply must stick his leg up all day.'

So we went up into Sam's little sitting-room with Fitzbattleaxe.

'Better?' said Ross, as he went in.

'Yes, thank you, sir,' said Sam, and got up hastily as I entered.

'Forgotten your orders again, Brown?' asked Ross sternly, opening the door to go out.

'No, sir,' said Sam, still standing up. (I do love to see him 'fighting' Ross.) 'Orders were: "Bed at 11. Not to stand up when it were you only, between the hours of 10.30 a.m. and 7 p.m.," sir.'

Quite obviously Sam was obeying the strict letter of the law, so Ross came in again, and I remarked,—

'And I say, same hours when it's only me, Sam.'

'If you could both remember about the verb "to be,"' began my brother.

'I can't,' I said.

Sam dropped into a chair, looking as if he'd like to smash all clocks, and remarked he was absolutely fed up.

'Well, we're not, we're half starved. That's why we've come to tea.'

'You want to count your mercies, Sam,' I said, which being a remark to which my Aunt Amelia is much addicted, was the most aggravating thing I could think of at the moment. When one is down on one's luck it is fatal to be sympathetic, and Sam was down on his, right on the bed-rock bottom of it.

'Well, I'm counting the mercies he's got and we haven't,' said Ross; 'there's quite a respectable bit of heaven spread on this table at the moment. A whole loaf, a pound of butter, two pounds of strawberry jam and jorams of Devonshire cream, goodies with sugar on top, and a plum cake that you can cut. My hat, some people have all the luck. It's a regular Hickley Wood one.'

'Make the tea, Sam,' I exclaimed, 'the kettle's boiling; mind you don't set the woods alight.'

'Have I ever set the woods alight, miss?' Sam asked indignantly.

'Nor ever failed to lose your temper either, if I suggested you would,' I answered.

So Sam grinned and felt better, and made a long arm for the kettle, and brewed tea, and cut up bread and cream, and we had it in the Hickley Woods,

as we've had it millions of times together. It was just the same. Whenever I had finished my slice, Sam put another on my plate, with mountains of cream and jam on it. At the third I remarked,—

'Sam, there really are limits.'

'Yes, but you ain't reached them yet, miss; four's yours.'

'Do you think you ought to speak to me like that, now I am married and have a daughter, Sam?'

'He gets you muddled up with the daughter, I expect, same as I do,' remarked Ross, 'only the Gidger is so much more sober and serious-minded than you're ever likely to be.'

'Four,' I called out; 'limit's reached, Sam.'

'Well, there isn't any more cream, anyway,' said Sam, which, of course, was the one and only reason why we stopped in Hickley Woods.

'I begin to feel better,' observed my brother. 'Why don't I have enough to eat at lunch, Meg, I do at breakfast?'

'I see to your breakfast,' said Sam, 'and I'd see you had a good lunch if only I was allowed down.'

'Well, you aren't,' said my brother, 'so that's that, and I should think it would be better manners if you saw we had a good tea when we're up. Pass the cake. Here, you eat the little chaps, I'll have the plum.'

So Sam ate all the small cakes with sugar on top, and Fitzbattleaxe got the cream tin to lick out. He went right inside and stuck, and had to be lugged out by the tail. Then we shoved the table back and sat round the fire, and talked about the old days. At seven o'clock Nannie looked round the door. She was promptly hauled in and sat on Ross's knee.

'Sam,' she scolded, 'why do you keep them out so late? I really shall have to tell your father to wallop you. I've often threatened to, I really will to-night.'

'Let's run her down the passage, Sam, for cheek,' said Ross, and they were just about to do it when Brown suddenly got up and said,—

'Want a bath, sir?' and Nannie said, 'Will you wear your black again, ma'am?' and, of course, it was that wretched S.P. come to clear away the tea. The smell under her nose was rather worse than usual, and the picnic broke up hurriedly. I felt as if I had been having tea with my brother's man-servant, and Ross had been nursing one of the maids. Oh, I do loathe that woman!

It was a most unfortunate dinner to-night, like one of those you get at Aunt Amelia's. There didn't seem to be anything solid to eat. At the end Sam handed Ross sardines on toast. 'What a thundering lot of hors d'oeuvres we seem to be having to-night, when's the dinner coming?'

'Savoury, sir,' said Sam.

'You don't mean to tell me,' said Ross, pushing back his chair and glaring

at Sam, 'that I've *had* my dinner?'

'You've had what there was of it, sir.'

'Well, I'm jiggered. Why on earth, Meg, don't you make them cook more food. Really——'

'"Tisn't her fault,' said Sam, still in the Hickley Woods, sticking up for me as he always did; 'she's told them times without number; it's no good blaming her. Shall I cut some sandwiches?'

'Sam, I suppose I can reprove my sister without your interfering, and I never blame, I always rule by love.'

'Same as you did this morning, sir,' grinned Sam, 'will you have large cups of coffee with your sandwiches?'

'Do you think that's a respectful remark to make to your superior officer, Brown?'

'No, sir, sorry.'

'I shall judge the measure of your repentance by the number of sandwiches you cut,' said Ross, 'and if the cups of coffee are very large, I might be inclined to overlook your cheek, otherwise——'

But Sam had vanished into the kitchen, and we went into the hall to wait for supper. A few minutes afterwards, Sam dumped a tray of food on the table.

We settled down comfortably for a good long evening. At 10.15, just as we were beginning to enjoy ourselves, Sam came in, he looked like milk and butter, and his voice was a caress.

'Turned your bath on, sir.'

'Are you dotty, Brown?' asked my brother.

'Certainly not, sir.'

'Well, what are you gassing about baths for at this hour of the afternoon, you gloomy ox, you're worse than a keeper.'

'Orders is orders, sir. If I've got to go to bed at 11 you'll have to go at 10.15, if I'm to see to your arm.'

'My hat,' ejaculated Ross, looking across at me in hopeless consternation, '*what* a fool I am.'

'First of April, sir,' said Sam, and fled upstairs.

CHAPTER XIX

I can't manage my 'staff,' I wish I were an Eastern Queen, then I should sort of call the eunuchs when I wanted anything, instead of which the maids do exactly what they like. Ross says if I won't let Sam 'do something' I must put my own foot down.

The S.P. brings my early tea in a silver teapot instead of the little brown chap I told her I preferred. So I hid the beastly thing under my bed, hoping she would take the hint and see I really meant it. She came and asked me if that was where I wished the silver kept in future!

Then when I ordered the dinner to-day I said to Dulcie, 'Send in the junket in the old blue china bowl, please.' It came in that silver dish we use for cutlets. So I wouldn't eat the junket—said it would taste of mutton cutlets, and after lunch the S.P. rowed me for saying the silver wasn't clean, which I hadn't even thought of, for she keeps it beautifully.

Putting my foot down made my face so hot that I retired to my bedroom to recover, but alas! Fitzbattleaxe was making the day hideous with his howls. He was lodged on a ledge in my chimney, just out of reach, and was apparently afraid to jump the precipice into my bedroom.

So I tied my hair up in a handkerchief, put on a nightgown to protect my dress, and laid down comfortably on the hearthrug with my head up the chimney. At intervals I waved a bit of liver at the kitten and said in my most persuasive manner, 'Littlekittycatpoorpussycometomissusdidums.' This seemed to entertain the kitten very much as it responded by rubbing its back violently against the chimney and incidentally dislodging a good deal of soot over me, while it sniffed ecstatically at the liver.

'Goodness,' said Ross, bursting like a cyclone into the room, 'what a sight you look; is that kitten still there? Mr Williams is downstairs. Are you giving that little beast meat, Meg; how many times have I warned you that it's illegal to give rations to rodents.'

'It isn't a rodent,' I said, sitting up in the fireplace, 'and it's not rations either, it's offal.'

A frozen look of horror slowly overspread my brother's open countenance.

'Offal,' he queried, 'could it *possibly* have been offal you said?'

'Yes,' and I began to get little creeps down my spine as I did as a child when I'd been naughty, 'it's offal, edible offal.'

'The word "edible" does not excuse the word offal.'

'They call it that in the *Times*,' I said meekly.

'There are many things in the *Times* which it is better not to repeat in polite society, Margaret.'

'I don't call your society polite, far from it,' I rejoined. 'What does Mr Williams want?'

'Oh, my angel, he wants a lot of things: a shave, for instance, and a bath and a clean collar, and his clothes brushed, and his nails cut, and snow-white flowers against his hair, and a heap of things like that.'

'I expect he's very poor,' I said, waving the liver at Fitzbattleaxe.

'Unless he's behind with his water rate, he could have most of his present needs supplied by turning on the tap. He's asked to see you.'

'Well, I can't see him like this, can I?'

'You certainly can't. You look like the back of a cab, Meg!'

'Do tell me sensibly what he says,' I implored.

Ross pulled his mouth down at the corners, closed his eyes and put his hands together as if in prayer. '"My dear wife is laid aside with an internal chill, she is, therefore, unable to be present at the class for female confirmation candidates this afternoon, and as the vicar is away, I ventured to think that Mrs Ellsley might be good enough to speak a few words of exhortation in her place, hymn 547, let us pray."'

'How can you be so absurd?' I said.

'Oh, why do curates talk like that? Why can't this man wash? Why can't he be modern and human? Why can't he say, "Hallo, old bean, my wife ain't in the pink, got a pain in her breadbasket or something. Priceless washout, too, as it's her turn to spout to the gals. Just blew in to see if your sister would help me out of a hole and come and do a pi-jaw stunt, what!"'

Here my disgusting twin retched realistically into the soap dish, murmuring 'He makes me sick.'

'Your vulgarity is simply awful, Ross, do stop, you make me feel quite ill.'

'I venture to think, my misguided young friend——' began Ross again.

'You know what happened to the children in the Bible,' I interrupted, 'who mocked at their betters: a frightful animal jumped out at them and——'

Here I gave a piercing scream as the kitten suddenly decided to risk it, and landed unexpectedly in the middle of my stomach.

'Just so,' said Ross with a howl of laughter, 'I never saw a better illustration of it in my life.'

And now I want to ask the General Public something.

Could you tell me why, because a person's mother once fell off the top of a step-ladder, a person should never be allowed to go on the top step herself? It seems such a ridiculous thing to hand on from father to son.

'Gracious,' I said, when I was rowed for it to-day, after Mr Williams had departed, 'because mother did it, it's a thousand to one I won't. I don't know the actuary figures, but it practically insures me against it, Ross.'

'I don't care,' said that gentleman, 'I won't have it, and that's all there is about it.'

'How can you be so ridiculous. You don't mind if I go up a tree, and I've done everything that you've done always. If you don't think it's dangerous for me to climb and hunt and ski, why on earth should you kick at the top of a step-ladder?'

'Well, we won't argue about it, Margaret.'

'I loathe twins,' I grumbled.

And he said he did, too, the sort that spat fire when a chap tried to take care of them.

Suddenly the bottom dropped out of the world, and everything that I had thought solid, stable, and immovable came crashing about me, and my brother, for the first and last time in all his life was 'meek' to me and said,—

'Please, darling, because I found mother after she smashed herself up so badly.'

It was that tide in the affairs of men which had I taken at the flood would have tamed the lion to eat out of my hand. Oh, wasn't I a fool to say,—

'Oh, all right, Ross.'

But there it is, and I know now what that poor darling felt when he wrote *Paradise Lost.*

CHAPTER XX

A telegram came from Monica this morning saying,—

'Please meet the 11.20 train.'

So the family turned up at the station *en masse*, but instead of the lady we expected, there descended from the guard's van a beautiful and dignified Great Dane with a label round his neck.

'For Meg's baronial hall. A thank-offering, sent with "Hove from a modern Lussy."'

Or, at any rate, that's what it looked like. Monica does write so badly.

The Gidger kissed the thank-offering promptly, and was rewarded with a large lick.

'Oh, *don't* wash me with your flannel,' she exclaimed.

Then we all introduced ourselves, and Ross observed as he edged away from a very wet tongue,—

'He must be first cousin to the dog in the Bible that was so kind to the poor beggar; you'd better call him "Moreover," after him, Meg.'

'What dog, and what beggar?' I asked.

'Gracious, child, for a Bishop's daughter you don't know much Church history, and haven't you heard that old chestnut either? Why, when Lazarus was laid at the rich man's gate, Moreover, the dog, came and licked his sores.'

Our Moreover is a splendid person. Directly he arrived at the house he walked into the hall, and laid himself down by the great open fire, and looked positively Elizabethan.

On the way home Ross dashed into the post office to send some telegrams. 'Aren't I a fool never to have thought of it before,' he said fervently, but what he hadn't thought of he declined to say, so I just agreed with the fool part.

After luncheon I slipped over to see Mrs Williams. The curate opened the door himself, looking haggard, with black rings round his eyes and yesterday's beard still on his chin.

'I called to inquire for Mrs Williams and to bring her some flowers and grapes. I hope she's better,' I said.

His hand shook as he took the little basket. 'How kind of you, won't you come up and see my wife, she's a little better to-day, but I have been up with her all night. I've just taken her some tea. I'll fetch another cup.'

'Please don't bother about tea for me,' I said. 'I'm sure your maids will have enough to do.'

'We haven't any maids.'

'But who is doing for you, then?'

'I do the best I can,' and he opened the bedroom door. If you could have seen that room and its little white-faced occupant. There was no carpet on the floor, no fire, though it had turned quite cold. It was all very clean, but, oh, the poverty of it. The poor little woman was propped up with two thin pillows and a sofa cushion, and had beside her a cup of half-cold tea and a bit of bread and margarine.

'Oh, Alfred, you oughtn't to have let Mrs Ellsley up. I'm not tidy,' and she patted her hair and smoothed out the crumpled sheet.

'You look quite sweet,' I said, 'but I'm afraid you aren't well, and as you have no maids is there anything I can do for you both; what does the doctor say?'

'I haven't had the doctor.'

'She won't let me fetch him,' said her husband, 'though I have begged her

to.'

'Oh, but do let me send, Mrs Williams. I am sure you ought to see him.'

'No, no,' she cried, getting very agitated, 'I shall be better in the morning.'

So I sat with her a little while and chatted and then tried once more about the doctor, but in vain. She would 'be better in the morning.'

'But, Mrs Williams, it would ease your husband's mind so; do tell me why you won't.'

Then, because she was so very tired and weak and ill, at last she told me. She had had attacks of internal pains several times during the winter, and the expense and medicine had used up all their little savings, and with a burst of bitter tears she said they owed five pounds, and had nothing more of value they could sell; and so on—all the piteous tale—of high prices and an income so minute that only by the most careful management and hard work could it be made to do in ordinary times. Gradually all the little jewels had gone and bits of plate, the food had been cut down, and she had had to turn her clothes and patch and mend and work till all her strength had gone, and now that she was ill it was 'All too much for Alfred.' The poor little soul turned faint and sick then from sheer exhaustion and lack of food. I sent her Alfred flying out for milk: there was only tinned stuff in the house, 'it went farther,' and with a reckless hand I beat up their only egg, which he informed me anxiously he had been saving for her to-morrow's dinner. And then I flung the last few drops of brandy in the glass and made her drink it all and eat some tiny sandwiches, and a few grapes. The food revived her and a scrap of colour came into her cheeks.

'Now,' I said sternly, 'I'm going to fetch a cab, and roll you up in blankets and take you to my house and nurse you up a bit.'

Of course she protested, said it was impossible.

'Why?' I demanded.

Oh, heaps of reasons, gave a few, hadn't a clean nightie, for one thing, she had only two and had been too ill to wash the other. She had so hoped there would have been some in the last parcel from the Charitable Clothing Fund.

'But I have simply dozens,' I wailed. Yes, I know, there wasn't an ounce of tact in that remark, but I was thinking of my own luxurious room, fires every night, all the pettings and scoldings I get if I'm not well, and how nobody asks me if I will have the doctor or takes the slightest notice of me if I say I won't, and of all the clothes I'd got and the general and disgusting air of affluence there is about the family. I hated myself and all my relatives. Yes, I did, the whole blessed lot of them.

'But I couldn't leave my husband,' said Mrs Williams.

'Of course, he's coming too, my spare room is crying out for visitors.'

'But we are strangers, you can't take us in like this.'

'But it was "a stranger and ye took Me in," He said. Oh,' I continued, throwing grammar to the winds, 'why didn't He tell a person what to do when the stranger won't be took in.'

She laughed at that and then consented. So I flew home and told the tale to Ross and Nannie in the nursery.

'Poor young thing,' said Nannie, 'but she'll soon get better here.' So I sent the Gidger flying to the Titmouse for heaps of flowers, and the S.P. scuttling round to get the spare room ready for her and the dressing-room for him, and the Stench off on a bicycle to ask the doctor to look in, and 'My 'Ilda' for a cab. After that I said to Nannie, 'Come and help me look out some things for her, nighties and something pretty to sit up in.'

And then I turned to my brother, who was sitting silently.

'Why, Ross, I couldn't do anything else? You don't mind Mr Williams coming, do you?' Suddenly his Irish grandmother came on top, and he exploded violently and unexpectedly in that way he has.

'What a system,' he stormed, 'what a church, that can so sweat its ministers that their families have not enough to eat, and gentlefolk are reduced to wearing other people's old clothes and being glad to get them. It's enough to make one sick, and I suppose they call it "holy poverty." It wouldn't make me feel very holy to see my wife hoping some beastly society would send her an old nightgown and have the cheek to call it charity. Surely if it's necessary to help the clergy at all we ought to give the best we can, as if we were giving to Him. Anyway, I won't have you give Mrs Williams your old clothes, Meg. If it wasn't that Michael was so disgustingly well off it might be you. Thank goodness I've got plenty of money; here, buy her all she wants and if it isn't enough tell me,' and he pitched into my astonished hands all the loose money from his pockets and a note-case stuffed with notes. 'And then you ask me if I mind,' he stormed, 'when the boot is on the other leg. He may mind meeting me. I wasn't decently civil when he called the other day, sneered at him because he looked unbrushed, when he'd probably been up all night. Why, I'm not fit to black his boots. It's all my accursed temper and my damnable pride.' And he flung out of the nursery into his own room and slammed the door.

'Oh, Nannie,' I said, 'isn't he funny? he hasn't been in such a bate for years; of course I never meant to give her my old clothes.'

'Of course you didn't, dearie, he'll remember in a minute, don't you fret.'

'Shall I go after him and tell him so?'

'Oh, I should let him bide, poor lamb.'

'So I let him 'bide,' though anything less like a lamb than Ross at that moment wasn't conceivable.

We smuggled out some nighties, so that the maids shouldn't see, and a blue

dressing-gown, and a little quilted coat to match, and some soft blue shoes, and a cap or two, and a shawl and pretty things like that to suit an invalid, and when I got to Mrs Williams's house I packed them all in her own suit-case and brought her in a cab to Gidger's Cottage.

Nannie solemnly unpacked for her, and said,—

'How pretty your things are, ma'am, if you won't think it a liberty for me to say so,' which was considerably more tactful than my remark about the nighties. And the invalid blushed quite nicely and looked at me reprovingly.

Daddy always said that Nannie couldn't tell a lie and came out in a cold perspiration if she even tried, but I think her first and last will be forgiven her. So we got Mrs Williams to bed, she was very exhausted. The doctor came and said that she was threatened with appendicitis and that if this attack could be warded off she ought to be sent to the sea and get quite strong and then have the operation.

While I was waiting in the firelight for dinner a chastened Ross appeared. He slipped his arm round me and hid his face in my hair.

'Oh, Meg,' he said, 'I am a beast.'

'I was wrongfully accused!'

'Nannie told me about the ripping things you've given her; I ought to be kicked for saying it.'

'Oh, Ross, what rot, what about that fat case of notes?'

'Well, I can't give him my new kilt, can I?' with a ghost of a laugh. 'I wish I hadn't been so cool to the chap, but clothes with the remains of the last meal on simply make me curl up. I can't help it, I do try and not let it show. I will be deadly civil now, I'll have my party smile on all the time,' said my repentant brother.

Ross in white rags of penitence so amused me that I felt I would like to keep him humble a little longer. The boot is nearly always on the other leg, so I said, very gravely, hoping he wouldn't feel me giggle,—

'You see, Ross, it was your damnable temper and your accursed pride.'

Then with amazing suddenness the boot was on the usual leg. 'I won't have you say those words, Meg, and understand if I let you have these people here, you're not to get fagged out. Michael says so in every letter he writes me. I shall wire for a nurse for her in the morning, and you're to get somebody extra in the kitchen, and as you don't seem able to manage those women, I've told Sam to do something. Michael sent me a prepaid wire to-day saying you'd said you were hungry, and what was being done about it.'

I was just about to protest when Mr Williams came into the hall, so the conversation changed abruptly. He was quite spruced up, shaved, and looked heaps better. I saw Ross give one fastidious glance at the spotted clothes, but he

was very nice to him at dinner and talked with charming deference. When half a spoon of soup went down the ill-used coat, I saw Ross slowly freeze and curl up, but he violently uncurled himself and said, 'Oh, rotten luck, sir,' and helped poor Mr Williams mop it up.

I slipped upstairs quite early to see how the invalid was, and found her inclined to be sleepy, and as I bent over her she whispered, 'I can't thank you, but "Inasmuch," He said.'

Ross peeped round my door about eleven and found me writing.

'Did *I* do it all right at dinner, Mrs Ellsley?' he began, mimicking 'My 'Ilda.' 'You look quite sweet in that cap and jacket, Meg.' And then he added hastily, lest I should be puffed up with pride like Pau-Puk-Keewis, 'but I thought Michael had forbidden you to read in bed.'

'He has, but I'm not reading, I'm just writing.'

'Humph,' said Ross, 'could I—would it—do you think it would offend him if I got Sam to—brush and—er sponge them, Meg? Goodness,' he ejaculated, pulling out his watch, 'do you know what the time is?'

'Twenty past,' I said, looking at mine.

'Twenty past what?'

'I don't know, the hour hand slips round, but twenty past anything can't be late; if it were five to, now, it might be different, Ross.'

'Well, anyway, give me that pen, Meg. You're not going to write another word, and I'll have that watch mended to-morrow. Give it me.'

So I handed that over, too, and produced a pencil

'Well, I'm dashed,' said Ross, and took that also.

'Oh, do let me finish my letter to Michael, Ross. The Titmouse posts it in the morning. I only want to write just one more thing.'

'You may say,' said Ross, handing it back, '"I am a very disobedient wife, Michael."'

So I said, "I am a very disobedient wife, Michael, but I love you" (oh, he's coming for the pencil), "love you—lo——"'

But, of course, I've got another pencil, one must be prepared for such emergencies, but the thing that really rankles is, if he 'lets me'—in *my* house!

In the silent watches of the night I have decided that if Sam does produce any improvement in the housekeeping I am going to find out how; surely my

brain is as good as a man's any day of the week.

CHAPTER XXI

I feel anxious about Monica. She hasn't heard from Charlie. I saw her yesterday. She looked very tired, but wouldn't say much—only, 'there's hardly been time yet,' which she knows as well as I do isn't true. So I suppose something has gone wrong there. God doesn't seem to like people to be happy lately. I haven't heard from Michael either the last two days, but I try not to worry. Probably the posts are just hung up again.

Mrs Williams is better, much less pain, and a little fatter, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, rather less thin. The nurse thinks she will be able to get up for a while to-morrow, and that she should go away for a change before her operation.

While I was in the garden sowing seeds, Ross came out to me and said,—

'Meg, excuse me mentioning it, but how much do operations cost?'

'It depends on how much they take out,' I said. '"Why, at one hoperation alone——"'

'Margaret, if you would have the goodness to give me some idea of a figure, and not make me sick, I should be so obliged.'

I looked round wildly for 'some idea of a figure.' The flower seed packet in my hand was numbered 207, so I said,—

'About 207, I should think, and it was "Our Lady of Ventre," Ross, who said that about the "hoperation." As long as it's a quotation, a person can say anything and not be blamed.'

'Your quotations always were about the limit,' he answered, and went indoors again.

A little later in the afternoon Ross was drumming idly on the drawing-room window when he suddenly exclaimed,—

'There are two visitors coming up the path, freaks, too, look at their clothes. My hat, Meg I it's Aunt Amelia, Keziah, and the fydo!'

I don't know if I said before that Keziah is tall and rather angular, with smooth black hair parted down the middle, like Aunt Amelia's, and as the maid is always arrayed in her mistress's cast-off clothes, one description will do for both. On this occasion each wore a funny little black bonnet, and a long voluminous

broché skirt, the train of which was held right over the arm, showing acres of white embroidered petticoat. A black jacket, and square-toed, flat-heeled boots, and those awful stuff gloves that pull on without buttons completed an awe-inspiring costume.

Keziah arranged my aunt in an arm-chair and handed over the fydo to her care, and then retired with my pulverised parlourmaid to the servants' hall.

Aunt Amelia was extremely gracious for her, in an early Victorian fashion, 'Hoped we liked our house and had found suitable domestic help.' She then asked in the next breath, without waiting for my answers, what we thought of the church, and when I replied that we liked it very much she said,—

'I'm distressed to hear it, Margaret. It may be a beautiful structure, but do you know the vicar believes in the Virgin Mary?'

Ross got up hurriedly and opened another window, and then my amiable relative started on the family and her friends and proceeded to pick their religious views to pieces, while the fydo wheezed and stank and panted at her feet.

I felt at all costs the conversation must be changed, so I told her rather irrelevantly that we kept chickens, but that we couldn't have many as we hadn't much space.

'Ah, Margaret,' she said, 'if you want space you can always look above.'

'But you can't keep chickens there, Gweat Aunt,' said the Gidger, who had been listening with great interest to the conversation.

My brother looked at me piteously. I don't know how much longer he could have controlled his laughter. Mercifully the fydo got fidgety, so the good lady got up to go. The Poppet observed with deep interest that the loose cover of the chair upon which the visitor had been sitting was all pulled out and wrinkled. She looked up at her great-aunt, and in a voice of the most intense interest, said,—

'Look how you've wuckled up the cover of muvver's chair. You must be cowogated like our hen-house roof.'

Ross became so alarmingly faint that he could only gasp out a choked 'good-bye' and hurry upstairs.

I found him a few minutes later with his head buried in a sofa cushion. 'Oh, what a thing it is to have a corrugated relative!' he gasped. 'Isn't she a priceless female? And their clothes! I must write and tell daddy. How he would have enjoyed it.'

And then my brother suddenly turned serious in that funny way he has, and said,—

'But now, wasn't she absolutely putrid, picking holes in everybody who differs in the least degree from herself. I hate that type of "Christian"; you ought to be able to judge Him by His followers, and half the time you can't. Nasty, spiteful old cat, bet her husband wished he'd never married her after the first ten

minutes. I don't wonder he kicked the bucket at an early age.'

'Well,' I remarked in a pause, 'you aren't exactly doing the charitable stunt yourself at the moment, are you?'

My brother looked at me lugubriously.

'*Isn't* it difficult?' he exclaimed. 'Really, I wonder He doesn't chuck me right out of The Service. I'm always letting Him down. Oh, clear out, Meg.'

So I cleared out, and as I passed the top of the back stairs I could see the staff standing on three chairs, craning their necks to catch the last glimpse of Keziah as she followed her mistress down the garden path. When the gate closed on the vision, the staff sighed deeply and said,—'Golly.'

Which seemed to exactly sum up the situation.

'Our Lady of Ventre' remarked,—

'Give my inside quite a turn she did when she first come in the kitchen!'

Then I went in to Sam's little sitting-room.

'I've come to have it out with you, Sam, sit down.'

'Won't hurt me to stand up for five minutes, miss.'

'Sit down when you're told. I'm going to stay hours. Put your leg up properly. Now then,' I observed, when discipline had been unwillingly restored. 'We've had enough to eat since last Friday, have you been interfering in my kitchen, Brown?'

'Sorry, miss, but he told me to, you know.'

'Yes, but do you think that is sufficient reason when I told you not to. You must take a month's notice,' I said severely. 'Who's the mistress of the house, Brown?'

'You are, madam,' and he twinkled at me.

'Well, now, as you are really respectful, I may feel inclined to withdraw the notice if you tell me exactly where I go wrong. Why are we so disliked, let's have the whole truth, what's the matter with us?'

'Everything,' said Sam, surveying me gloomily, 'but some things specially, the silver's one.'

'The silver? Why it's almost all old, some of it's seventeen hundred and something.'

'Well, that's what I'm telling you, miss; it's battered in places, it isn't embossed enough, even a bit of chasing would be better than nothing. And then your clothes——'

'Well, they cost enough.'

'Yes, but they don't look it, then Master Ross——'

'Well, he always looks clean, Sam.'

'Looking clean don't matter, miss, he should try to look rich; then your relatives—what's the good of some of them having titles if you call them plain

"father" and "aunt"?'

'You can leave that bit out.'

'I'm not going to. You asked for the whole truth and you're going to get it for once in your life, besides I want that notice withdrawn, I've got a comfortable place.'

'Oh,' I said, 'I *do* hope you are comfortable, Sam. Do you think your knee is any better? I so wish I could give you a nicer sitting-room and not in front of the house. It's so rotten for you to see us go out for walks and not be able to come.'

Sam has such nice soft eyes. He said he was 'Much obliged, miss.' He is always 'obliged' for such funny things, and never about the things I would be. He's never obliged for his wages, really seems to rather loathe them. Now I would love them, especially if they were paid punctually, which his never are.

'Well, now, miss,' he continued, 'when the letters come, for instance, why can't Master Ross behave like a gentleman and say,—

'"Brown, if there are any communications from his lordship, or from my uncle, Sir Jasper Fotheringham, Bart., or from Lady Amelia Leigh, you may hand them to me on a silver salver and retire." Instead of, "Sam, chuck over anything from father or Aunt Constance, and stick the bills on the mantelpiece."'

'Oh, Sam,' I giggled hopelessly, 'we always pray there mayn't be one from Aunt Amelia.'

'"*Aunt!*" There you go again,' said Sam desperately. 'Is it *any* good my talking to you?'

'Well, but what about the housekeeping, Sam?'

'Oh, that's worse than anything, apparently. The first morning you went into the kitchen you said vaguely, "We like thick soup better than clear, and junkets when there's any cream from Devonshire, and there are those chickens my uncle sent, I suppose they'd better be used soon." And you seemed to think you'd done the housekeeping for a week,' said Sam severely.

'Well, but that's what mother used——'

'Yes, but not after old Mary died. If you want a thick soup, you must say what they've got to put in it.'

He got up hastily and murmured, 'Caught again,' as the S.P. came along the passage with his tea, and as she came in and I got off the table, he said, 'Very well, madam, I'll see to it,' and I retired with dignity!

At dinner to-night Mr Williams quite warmed up. I suppose it's because his little wife is better. He nearly forgot to be a pallid curl paper and told us tales of the East End parish he had worked in after he returned from Ligeria. He said that some of the poor things were never washed except when they were born and buried, and never entered a church unless to get married, and they're all so ignorant that he found one wedding party kneeling round the font. (I wish to

goodness I had got the chance of kneeling round a font again; sometimes the ache for the small son is simply not endurable.) Mr Williams spoke, too, of the awful grinding poverty, and the vice, and how the housing question was responsible for so much. 'It's all a question of money,' he said, 'money can buy everything.'

'Except the Kingdom of Heaven,' said my brother, with one of his gentle looks.

And then the S.P. came in with a note for Mr Williams. It was from his bank, apparently.

'There must be some mistake,' he said aloud. 'Some one has paid in £207 to my account. Oh, Mrs Ellsley,' looking across at me, 'I can't possibly accept such a sum, you know. Why, one never could thank you for half the things you have done already.'

'Mr Williams, I swear it's nothing to do with me, I haven't done it,' and I glanced across at Ross.

'Captain Fotheringham,' said poor Mr Williams, 'can it possibly be you?'

'Do you know, sir, what a captain's pay is?' asked my brother.

'Why,' I exclaimed, rushing in where angels would fear to tread, 'good gracious, Ross can't live on it without an allowance from his godmother.' ('Since deceased,' I added underneath my breath, to make it truthful).

'No, I suppose not,' said Mr Williams (he is so easy to deceive); 'but what *am* I to think?'

'Well, I should think it was the most amazing bit of luck, sir,' drawled my brother, slightly bored. 'And I wish you'd introduce me to your friend.'

So Mr Williams went upstairs in a state of complete bewilderment to tell his little wife, and Ross was really rather nice to me, though I was not allowed to mention the subject of our recent conversation. However, he did say that I was a nice child not to have given the show away, kissed me once and called me 'Jonathan,' which he only does when he is pleased with one, I mean not actively *dis*pleased. Funny old 'David.'

CHAPTER XXII

My visitors departed soon after breakfast to-day in a motor-car with the nurse. Mrs Williams is going to the sea for a month to get quite strong so as to be very brave and have the operation. He is really touching, so is she. It seems such a

small thing to have done for such a wealth of gratitude, and that absurd £207 will make it possible for her to go to a proper nursing home, instead of the free ward of a London hospital.

I was rather glad to see them go, although I have learned to like them very much. But for six days I have had no letter from Michael, and yesterday the mail brought me one from father which upset me horribly. He wrote:—

'DARLING—I want to tell you something I have never told any one before. I can hardly write of it even after all these years—But I once saw a vision of my Lord.

'That summer, Meg, after you were married, Ross and I were so wretched without you, that we went down to that little house-boat of Uncle Jasper's on the Helford River.

'One lovely evening, after a wet day, I was in the dinghy fishing when Ross came out in the duck punt and said,—

'"Father, shall I go back and fetch our supper: It's too perfect to go in?"

'So he went back in the duck punt and I went on fishing. Suddenly *The Man* I told you about the night before your wedding sat down in the dinghy, and as I was about to kneel to Him, He said, just naturally, as a king might to any one he'd known for years,—

'"Oh, Fotheringham, a boat is an impossible place for you to be respectful in!" And He laughed as He said, "Sit down."

'And then after a minute He asked,—

'"Any luck?"

'"No, Sir," I answered.

'"It's because you're anchored; it doesn't do in this river, and you're in the wrong place. I'll take you to a better."

'So He rowed me further down the river towards the sea.

'"Is your line clear of weed?" He asked.

'And I looked and said, "Yes, Sir."

'"Do you ever breathe on your hooks?"

'"No, Sir, is it any good?"

'"Well, those old fishermen always say it's better, why don't you try it?"

'So I did, and I began to catch. Then *The Man* said,—

'"What about My other fishing?" And at first I didn't answer, because He had mentioned it to me before, and I wanted to refuse, but His eyes compelled me, for all they were so gentle, so I said,—

'"I'm not cut out for that other kind of fishing."

'"Not if I breathed on your hooks?"

'We fell silent. Then I thought of the loathing I have always had for slums

and dirt and squalor, and especially for natives, and He must have known what I was thinking, for He said,—

'"Isn't it a good thing I didn't have an antipathy for black people—that time I died for you?"

'And I said, "Yes, Sir," because all in a moment I realised how black sin was to the Son of God who in the perfection of His whiteness had been "made sin" that I might become the righteousness of God in Him.

'And then He said, "Anthony, you've been horribly lonely lately, haven't you?"

'"Yes, Sir."

'"And you think I can't comprehend that kind of loneliness, but it's you who don't understand. I have never had My marriage supper—My bride delays to make herself ready.'

'I looked at Him again then, and saw His ache and hunger for *His Church.*

'"Anthony, land and water only divide you from your children, so many of Mine are separated from Me by sin," and I looked at Him again, and saw that He would always be lonely till the last of His children kneel to Him.

'"So, Anthony, what about My other fishing?"

'"I've not forgotten what you chose I should do years ago, Sir, and if you order this I must go."

'"And still——?"

'"And still be Your unprofitable servant, Sir." For all at once I saw that, too.

'"Anthony, is 'I'll go because I'm ordered' *really* the best that you can say?"

'I looked out over the beautiful river, at the hills I loved, and I thought of the friends I would have to leave, and of the beauty of my old Devonshire home, and my heart ached increasingly for your mother. I looked at Ross, too, coming back in the duck punt—Ross, the last of my immediate family left to me—and I felt that I could only go out to the mission field if I were ordered.

'"Anthony, have you ever heard the old saying, 'Don't look at the thing that is asked for, but at the One who asks'?"

'"No, Sir."

'"Some people say you see then if it's worth while."

'So I looked at *The Man* who asked, and saw afresh God's Son. And suddenly I perceived the limitless love of Him, and His unbounded sacrifice, and the whole divine patience and perfection and beauty of *The Man*, and I cried, in sudden surrender and adoration,—

'"Lord, I will go willingly, because I love You."

'And although *The King* had had every right to give the order, He deigned instead to accept my long-delayed submission to His love. And presently He said,—

'"Oh, here's Ross coming back in the duck punt with your supper. I must go."

'But I cried, "Oh, don't leave me, stay to supper with us both."

'"I can't to-night, Anthony, I simply must go in to Plymouth, and there's an old woman in a cottage I must look in at on the way. You come to supper with Me instead on Sunday."

'So He departed over the fields to Plymouth, through clouds and trails of gorgeous blue and gold, and the water was all luminous from His footsteps, and the hills as He passed ablush with rose. As He went the sunset faded, and then suddenly the brightness all came back, for *The Man* called to me again from the cliff above the water,—

'"Anthony, the climate on that other river isn't fit for English women."

'"Oh, Beloved of my soul," I cried, "I am contented. I would not ask You for her back."

'Then He smiled and my Vision Splendid faded, but He left His peace behind, and the moon rose undimmed out of the ocean where the Helford River runs into the sea.

'And the reason that I've told you this, my dearest little daughter, is that you sound unhappy in your letters. You are haunted by a fear that *He* may take things from you. But, darling, don't you see that when you have Him you have everything. Oh, Meg, His strength! and the supreme perfection of His eyes. No brush can paint Him, no words describe Him. Oh, darling, won't you be dutiful to Him and leave everything to His most unutterable love?'

But I can't feel like daddy does about things. I can't trust Him. I don't even want to look at the One who asks if it means I have to give up anything. I love all my family so frightfully that I don't know what I would do if He took any of them away. I only hope I would at least be civil to Him. I never could be 'dutiful' about it. I have never really had a trouble, only that dreadful time when darling mother died, but then Michael came along so soon after that it seemed as if God had only taken away one love to give me back an even more perfect one. But since the war it seems to me that God is so relentless and so jealous. He won't share hearts. He will have all or none, and I am growing to feel that it must be 'none' with me. I am like that soul, pursued by the Hound of Heaven; I fear His

'following feet,' I dread lest having Him I must have naught beside.

CHAPTER XXIII

Twelve days again without a letter, and ah, dear God! the news from France! I kept my promise, and Ross knows, and though he wraps me round with love, it is as if I cannot taste or see or feel, but I can only listen for the post that does not come. It has been a wretched week, several of our friends are killed and many wounded, and to-day at lunch the S.P. brought a telegram, and my heart stopped beating.

'It's Foxhill,' Ross said huskily, looking across at me quickly, and my heart went on again, and then I prayed that I might be forgiven for being glad that it was Charlie and not Michael.

'Not killed,' said Ross, 'but blinded, and his right arm gone above the elbow. He's in London, and would like to see us. Shall we go this afternoon, there's just time to catch the train?'

'Oh, poor Charlie—and poor Monica!' I added and got up. I felt I hated God. Just then a car stopped, and the door bell rang, and presently the S.P. came and said,—

'The Hon. Miss Cunningham is in the drawing-room,' and even at that moment I noticed how she loved to say 'the Honourable,' it was so exclusive. I thought what a beast I was, and said,—

'Monica? oh, my poor Monica.'

She was standing by the window with a frozen look upon her face, very pitiful to see.

'Don't go, Ross,' she said, after he had shaken hands and was preparing to leave us together, 'You know Charlie best. Don't go, it's you I've come to see. You are his greatest friend. Perhaps you can tell me about this, perhaps you know why he has written this to me, who love him so,' and she held out a letter. It was very short, and typed, except the signature, which was very badly written.

'DEAR MONICA,—It was more than good of you to write to me, but I have thought things over very carefully since I received your letter, and have come to the conclusion that it is best for me to say at once that I feel now I cannot marry

you. Please do not try to see me, and think of me as kindly as you can.

'CHARLIE.'

'Has he told you, Ross? Doesn't he love me any more?' she said, with quivering lips, pathetic In my proud Monica.

'Monica, dear,' said Ross, 'haven't you heard about his wounds?'

'I have heard nothing since I wrote to him till I got this.'

Then very gently Ross told her about the poor blinded eyes while I kneeled beside her and tried to rub a little warmth into her ice cold hands.

'And I expect,' Ross finished up, 'that he wrote like this because he was half mad with pain knowing that he must give you up.'

'Why should he give me up?' she asked.

'Why, Monica, surely you see that it's the only honourable thing he could do, now that he's so helpless; don't you see, dear, every other man would do the same?'

'Then men are cruel,' I burst out. 'They never think the same as women do. If Monica had married him, would he write like that?'

'Of course not,' said my brother, 'that would be different. She'd have taken him already then for better or for worse.'

'She doesn't wait to take him till she goes to church in orange blossom and satin, she does that when she first tells him she loves him, doesn't she?'

'Of course,' said Monica. 'Are you absolutely sure he loves me, Ross, and that there is no other woman?'

'I did once hear him say he'd rather have the Gidger.'

'Oh, Ross, the comfort of you!' said poor Monica, and laughed and cried together. 'I must go to him,' she added, and as she did this 'splendid thing' the last vestige of 'littleness' dropped away from her.

'And I will take you,' answered Ross, 'but first you must have food and coffee. Had any lunch?'

'No,' said Monica, 'and I can't eat till it's settled.'

'Get your hat on, Meg, and let me deal with this rebellious woman, I'm getting such a dab at it.'

She laughed and let him put her in a comfy chair, and ate the food he brought, while he sat beside her and told her all the things he could remember that Charlie had ever said about her, and her eyes were shining when I came down ready for the drive. Yes, the 'Hon. Miss Cunningham' looked a different woman; more exclusive, if you know how that looks.

'Oh, Meg,' she said, 'I feel heaps better,' and then shamelessly, 'If Charlie

throws me over I shall marry Ross.'

'Done,' said my brother, 'that's a bargain, mind.'

Somehow I don't think the S.P. would approve, do you? Such remarks are not made in the best circles.

We were very silent in the car. Once Monica turned to Ross,—

'Oh, are you sure that it's only his eyes?'

And Ross said simply,—

'Quite sure, dear, don't doubt his love,' and took her hand and held it till the car stopped at the hospital. We saw the matron first.

'He's very brave,' she said, 'and very very patient, but I'm not happy about him, he's got something on his mind. He asked for a typist the day before yesterday and dictated a letter. He hasn't slept since. You can go up and see him at once if you like.'

So Ross and I went up, and the matron promised to bring Monica up in ten minutes. Charlie was lying propped up with pillows in a little room alone. I never saw a face with such a tortured look. It nearly broke my heart.

'Who is it?' he asked, turning his poor, bandaged face towards the door, and when I took his hand he said,—

'Why, it's Meg and Ross; how jolly of you, dear old things.'

'Charlie,' I said presently, 'why did you write that letter to Monica?' and as I spoke the door was pushed open a little way and Monica slipped in. He turned his face away.

'Meg, I can't discuss that, even with you.'

'But,' I persisted, 'don't you love her any more?'

'Love her. *My* God, how can you ask me such a thing, how dare you torture me like that. There's some one in the room,' he added quickly, 'oh, who is it?'

And then as Monica put her arms around him, he sighed,—

'Ah, my dear love, why have you come to make it harder for me now I must let you go?' As she drew him closer, and he hid his sightless eyes in the warm comfort of her breast, we slipped away and left them.

After a little while a message came asking us to go up again. He was back on his pillows and Monica was sitting beside him very quietly. All the tortured look had gone from his face and a great peace was there instead, and a great thankfulness in hers.

'Meg,' he cried, with his old laugh, 'how brazen all you modern women are. You never have the vapours like your grandmothers, never faint when you are pressed to name the day, as any lady should. Instead, you come and beg a chap to marry you when he's already said he won't in writing, and bother his life out till he says he will, just to stop the creature chattering. This thing,' he said, groping for Monica's hand, 'says that three arms and two eyes are enough for any couple

to start housekeeping on, so—oh, good gracious, *could* I have a cigarette; being proposed to is so dashed exhausting.'

Then we said good-bye and Monica came down to see us off. Just as she and Ross went out of the room Charlie called me back, and as I leaned over him he said with his old absurdity,—

'Isn't it a merciful dispensation that I'm "amphidextrous," Meg? I shall, at least, be able to fish with my left hand,' and then, with a little wave of his old diffidence coming back, he added,—

'Wasn't it perfect of Him to give me back Monica?'

I couldn't think what he meant, so I said,—

'Who, Charlie?'

'Why, the only Person I can see now, Meg—my Lord.' And I choked as I went down the stairs, because from the rapture in his voice he seemed to think his Lord was worth his eyes.

In the train Ross said,—

'What angels women are!'

'Oh, no,' I said, 'it's just the contrast.'

When we got home another wire was in the hall addressed to me.

'Let me open it,' said Ross, picking it up.

'No,' and I snatched it from him and ran up to my room. The dreadful ice was all around my heart again. The horror of a great darkness came upon my mind. I couldn't pray. I tried to quieten all my jangled nerves by saying—Daddy says 'They're underneath, oh, always underneath, those everlasting arms,' and then I read the telegram and flung myself upon the floor beside my bed in an agony of tears.

Ross came in and gathered me all up into the shelter of his love.

'Oh, Meg, not Michael?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, Meg, not killed,' he said again and held me closer.

'Oh, no, not killed,' I sobbed. 'He's got the D.S.O. and is coming home in three days' time on leave. Oh, it is such a relief.'

'You ridiculous child,' said Ross, giving me a little shake, 'oh, you poor, funny little scrap, what an awful fright you gave me. Poor Michael, what a wife he's got who sobs and cries because he's coming home on leave, I'm really sorry for that chap.' And then he picked me up, a crumpled heap, from off the floor, and dumped me on my bed. 'You'll stay there till you've had your dinner, anyhow. Now, don't argue,' he exclaimed, flinging himself into the nearest chair, 'I must have a cigarette. How poor old Solomon got on with all his lot beats me, managing two women in one short afternoon's enough. It is, as Charles would

say, "so dashed exhausting."'

THREE WEEKS LATER

CHAPTER XXIV

But of course I'm not. Why on earth should I be crying after three such perfect weeks. It's only just the smell of Harris tweed again. I caught the whiff of it as I came through the door into the hall alone, after the last sound of Michael's car had died away. I wish I had been allowed to go to London with him, it would have been another hour or so with my beloved. No, I don't really wish it if he didn't. I must be ill, I think, to be so meek.

After he went there was a ridiculous telegram from Ross saying that he was returning in time for dinner if it was convenient. Wasn't it absurd of him to take himself off like that the morning Michael came, and only come to dine and sleep twice in three whole weeks. He has had another Board, and the verdict is 'Three to four weeks and massage,' and Sam's M.O. said, 'Three to five weeks and massage.' So there you are! The usual arrangement!

But, oh, to think in a very few more weeks I shall have to say 'Good-bye' again to both of them. I can't accept God's will about it. My mind's divorced from His, my wishes in opposition. The constant struggle to feel differently fags me out, but perhaps I shall 'feel better in the morning,' as Mrs Williams used to say.

When Ross came in to say 'Good-night,' he said,—

'By the way, Meg, how's the novel? Got a plot yet?'

'No,' I sighed, and thought that Nannie was right that time. There is no plot in women's lives just now. They only say 'Good-bye,' as I have done to-day. For, oh, this book begun as a joke is now no longer a book at all. The written words are just a mirror which reflects some pictures from that thing I call my 'life.' Each chapter is the reflection of a day. You who can read between the

lines will understand why some of them are grave and others gay, and how my fickle mood alters with each day's news, or varies with the irregularity of the posts from France. You will know, too, that though each day stands as a single, separate thing, unconnected, as Uncle Jasper would say, 'by a strong plot,' yet each *is* linked to each by a great fear and an endeavour to be brave. For those who *go* have all the 'plot.' Theirs is the splendid hazard, so to them goes all the high adventure and romance. And we who stay at home have just the giving and the waiting. Yet some one said, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' Ah, you dear women folk! I know the splendour of *your* waiting. I have told you a little of the rebellion that's in mine.

CHAPTER XXV

Here's two-thirds of the merry month of May slipped by! The posts are regular. We have had a glorious telegram to say that father's coming home. The Gidger flourishes like a green bay tree. Ross is better, and the house buzzes and overflows (as the old vicarage used to do) with the jolly men that he asks down to lunch, or to 'dine and sleep,' regardless of the servants. Bless you! they don't mind. They'll always slave for Ross, and 'Our Lady of Ventre' 'dotes upon the military,' so she'll always come and lend a hand. But, and there always is one, isn't there—the roof is not all it ought to be!

On Friday a regular S.W. gale got up with raging winds and driving rain, and in the middle of the night I heard a little sound in the powdering closet which leads out of my bedroom. 'That's a mouse,' I said to myself. The sound increased. 'That's a rat,' I thought. A horrid roar shook the room. 'That's a bomb!' I shrieked, thinking it was a raid. I heard Ross's welcome voice at the door, asking me what I had dropped. I hurriedly lighted the lamp and let him in, and we surveyed the wreckage. A big bit of the ceiling of the powdering closet had fallen in, and there was a small hole in the roof through which I could see the stars.

'Did you say your prayers, last night,' said Ross.

'Of course, I did,' I replied indignantly.

'Meg, you couldn't have said the litany of St Christopher. I always do. I never get night alarms, my ceiling *never* comes down.'

'For goodness' sake say it now then, for there's a huge crack over my bed.'

So Ross lifted up his voice and chanted,—

'From gholies and ghosties,
From long leggity beasties,
From things that go bump in the night
St Christopher deliver us.'

We spent an exhausting hour mopping up the water. Ross said he could now sympathise with the other occupants of the Ark when Noah would keep opening the window. After we'd got the place dry Ross said,—

'It's nearly one o'clock, Meg; come and have lunch in my room. I've got a thermos full of coffee and some perfectly adorable biscuits—the squashed fly sort.'

Ross really thought my ceiling might come down, so he rolled himself up on the nursery sofa, and I spent the rest of the night in his bed. I lay awake for some time groaning in spirit at the thought of the mess and muddle workmen always make, and wondering how much more of the roof was likely to descend on us. Presently I heard Ross whisper outside,—

'Meg, are you asleep?'

'No, I wish I was.'

'Your grammar seems as defective as your dwelling,' he said, poking his head round the door.

'What I came in to say, Meg, was that when the workmen strip that bit of roof you may find the date of the house.'

I sat up in bed suddenly. Life seemed rosy once more. 'You angel,' I exclaimed, 'how exciting.'

'What a ridiculous kid you are, little 'un, up one minute and down the next.'

'Well, it *is* exciting. What did you wake me up for if you didn't think so?'

'I thought you said you weren't asleep!'

I pushed him out and shut the door. The thought of the date so consoled me that I went to sleep immediately, but I had one of my dreadful nightmares. I dreamed that the foundations of the house fell outwards with a crash, leaving the walls, which were made of squashed fly biscuits, standing on the date—B.C. .4!

'Uncle John' came in to survey the wreckage the next morning, but can't repair the roof till Monday. Then I showed him the crack in my ceiling.

'That ain't nothing, mum, surface, that is; I can put a bit of plaster on it now if you like, but it don't need it.'

So I decided to dispense with the plaster and to sleep in my own bedroom, but my keeper thought otherwise, so we had words about it.

'Ross, what *is* the difference between the air coming in at the roof or coming

in at the window?' But there is apparently a most enormous difference, and my brother said,—

'You're not going to sleep in that draught. There's a most beastly bug about just now. All the men at Canley barracks are down with it, kind of "'flu," I suppose; you get a frightful cold in your head, and then your tummy gets distended, and you can't button your trousers, and——'

'Is that the bug you suggest I'm going to get?' I interrupted icily.

And then he said I was abominable!

I am, however, allowed to sleep in my own room after all, because 'Uncle John' nobly suggested that the powdering closet should be boarded over till he could come and mend the roof, to which my keeper graciously agreed.

But half the night I could hear that bug walking up and down in the powdering closet, scratching the boarded door, trying to get in, until I said to it,—

'You needn't bother about me. I'm not afraid of you.' And then it started howling, and I discovered that it was Fitzbattleaxe up on that ledge in the chimney again, and he kept me awake for hours.

In the morning Ross said he must see if the ledge could not be bricked up somehow. We got a ladder and a light, and he rescued the kitten, who spat at him, and then he said,—

'Why, Meg, it's such a wide ledge, and at the back there's a small stone slab which seems to be loose. Shall I see if I can get it out? Give me something to poke it with.'

I gave him my best silver button-hook, and he jabbed about and broke it, but he eased out the stone and found behind a little hollow, and—yes—an old deed!—Such a nice one, though quite small.

It is an Indenture made the two and twentieth day of January, 1645, in the one and twentieth year of the reign of our sovereign lord Charles by the grace of God of England, Scotland, ffrance, and Ireland, King Defender of the Faith. But the part that intrigues me is that it seems to be a kind of marriage settlement for 'George Albury gives to his wife Mary'—Gidger's cottage—'in consideration of the love and affection he bore her.' So Michael has only been repeating history.

But why did Mary put her deed in my chimney? She must have got so grubby doing it. I'm sure her husband hated her to get so dirty, didn't like her little hands so soiled; but perhaps her George was up that winter with King Charles's army and she hid it there for safety, for the times were much disturbed and she was frightened. Women don't like war, I know just how she felt. I wonder what George and Mary Albury thought that other winter morning, four years later, when their sovereign lord, who by the grace of God was King of England, ffrance, and Ireland, was beheaded on the scaffold in Whitehall.

And every day now I say, 'Daddy's on his way home,' and Ross says, 'Won't

it be rotten if I just miss him?'

Yesterday in church the vicar announced that there was an awful outbreak of that bug at the local Red Cross hospital, that all the men were down with it, and nearly all the nurses, and the few of them who had escaped were worked to death. He asked for volunteers to help, not with the nursing, but in the kitchen. I told Ross coming home that I should offer, but he wouldn't hear of it, because Toby once said years ago I ought not to go within a million miles of 'flu. But there are times when I don't take kindly to the snaffle, as Sam would say. However, Ross is going to London to-morrow, so I said no more at the moment, and the conversation wandered off to the education and upbringing of the young.

'The poor Gidger doesn't seem to get much bringing up,' said Ross.

'Well, you're her godfather,' I retorted, 'you're to blame; why don't you teach her whether her name is N or M?'

'Oh, she knows her name all right, it's her station in life she doesn't seem to be clear about, thinks she's the Queen of England, I think, same as her mother does.'

'Ross, darling, you don't really think that she's——'

'Oh, you silly little ass, Meg.'

'But I have views on the way a child should be trained.'

'Then for goodness' sake get rid of them at once.'

'But all the same,' I persisted, 'I do hate the way modern children are brought up. They've no manners, they are such little pigs at meals, and they're always served first.'

'Well, the Gidger isn't.'

'No, but that's not your fault, Ross.'

I remembered the first time she came down to lunch I told Sam to serve me first, and then Ross, and then the Poppet. He agreed, and said I was 'Quite right, miss.' So he served me first and then went to Ross, who said, 'You've forgotten the other lady, Sam,' and so, without a word to me, Sam upset all my carefully arranged plans for my daughter's edifying and upbringing, and went to the Gidger just because his master told him to. Ross and I had words about it afterwards, and he said I was a silly little ass, and kissed me for some extraordinary reason.

'Doesn't Michael think she is a disappointing kiddie?' said Ross, breaking in upon my reverie, but as I didn't answer the conversation changed to oysters.

So the Gidger came down to lunch to-day, and as he is better Brown waited, and in a fit of mental aberration he handed a dish of stewed apricots to her before he had been to me.

'No, thank you,' said the Poppet.

'It's apricots, miss,' said Brown. 'Miss' never having in all the years of her long life been known to refuse them.

'Apricots, miss,' said Sam again.

'No, thank you, muvver isn't served.'

So I was served, and then the lady who thinks she is the Queen of England condescended to allow her faithful henchman to give her apricots, and my brother, with his usual habit of talking backwards, said,—

'You see, Meg, how little you know about bringing them up. If you really had "views," such a thing couldn't have happened. You were always such a nice child yourself, so pretty when you were a baby, such a pity that you've altered so.'

Then in a tone of most awful consternation he added, 'Why, Gidger?' for my daughter was in tears.

'Uncle Woss' was beside her in a moment, kneeling humbly to the 'Queen of England,' 'Darling, what *is* it?' he cried distractedly.

'You said muvver wasn't pwetty now.'

'Oh,' said Ross to me, 'could you go outside, woman, while I comfort this lady?'

So I went outside. After he had consoled the lady she went off with Sam, but she wasn't quite happy, so he kneeled down and took a turn at comforting.

'I assure you, miss, you've not the slightest occasion to worry. Your uncle always does say just the reverse of what he means—gentlemen do——'

'But are you sure he thinks muvver is pwetty now?' said the Poppet.

'Certainly, miss, not a doubt about it.'

'Do *you* think she's pwetty, Bwown?'

'She's perfectly distracting at times, miss; that's why I forgot to serve her first.'

'Oh, you are my gweatest comfort, Bwown; have you known muvver long?'

'Can't remember the time when I didn't know her, miss.'

'Neither can I,' said the Poppet. 'I weally don't know what I should do without you, Bwown.'

'I'm sure I'm very much obliged, miss,' he said, and kissed her little hands, and then offered to make her another boat or a new doll's house if she'd rather.

How do I know that last bit? Why, a little bird told Nannie, and Nannie told me, besides I always know everything. Oh, you silly men, because you don't see the finger on the pulse you don't believe it's there. Why, I know every heartbeat

in the house (including Brown's!) and so does every other woman!

CHAPTER XXVI

Ross departed to London last Monday with Sam. And I took the bit in my teeth and went up by the train after they did. I could see Ross and Sam hanging on to the red lights at the back of the last coach. They catch their trains like that (men always do). I, of course, like every other woman, invariably catch the train before.

I went to the Red Cross shop and bought a set of General Service uniform, and when I got home I found 'Uncle John' in a state of great excitement because he *had* found the date in the roof, as Ross had said he might! I went up the ladder to look at it. It is carved roughly on a beam. The wood is in as good a state of preservation as the day it was put in, and some initials (of the man who built the house, I suppose) are carved over it so:—

J.H.T.
1570

Elizabethan, after all!

It is such a pity that Ross is away, as I have no one to gloat with me, but when he comes back and rows about the hospital, I shall say,—

'Yes, but I've found the date,' and then all will be harmony and love. No one could be angry with a person who had found the date 1570.

I have to get up so desperately early in the morning. Nannie is horrid about the whole thing, refuses to call me or help me dress, says she is sure Master Michael won't approve and that she's not going to have any hand in it. However, 1570 consoles me for much, though everything else is rather beastly.

So on Tuesday I went to the hospital. It was a vile morning, blowing half a gale and raining. It took me so long to get into the unaccustomed clothes without Nannie that I had to run most of the way to avoid being late.

If you were outside a place and wanted to get in, what would you do? Ring the front door bell, of course, you say. Well, that's what I did, but it wasn't right, quite wrong, in fact. The person who opened the door to me seemed to think I must be dotty. I ought to have gone to the back door and taken off my hat and

coat in a kind of mausoleum in the yard. By the time I had rectified all these mistakes it was a quarter past eight. I didn't know how the veil ought to be worn either, so I put it on as the nurses did in Ross's hospital in London, which turned out wrong, for when I went to matron for my orders, she snapped,—

'Washing up—you're not an army sister yet, and no use at all to me unless you're punctual.'

I could see that she meant something horrid, but couldn't think what, and I blushed and stammered like a school child. There was a nice girl in the scullery who came behind the door and altered my veil and tried to console me by saying,—

'Matron isn't a bit like that usually, only she's absolutely overdone, as we all are.'

Then I started washing up. They had had kippers for breakfast, and I had no idea that they were so disgusting cold, or how impossible it was to prevent water going over one's feet when one emptied a big panful down the sink. By the time I had been at it an hour I was soaking, I could feel it on my skin, and the floor was all awash. A diver's costume would have been really useful. The girls who had been there for months thought I was such a fool. (They do not suffer fools gladly in a military hospital!) They were quite polite, of course, that's why it was so hard. I'm not used to people being polite to me.

The only person who was really decent was the charwoman, who was also new that morning, so perhaps she had a fellow feeling. She did not, however, seem to be quite clear as to what a V.A.D. was, for she said,—

'Oh, duckie, you are wet; new at it, ain't you? Why don't you buy yourself a mackintosh apron? I did in my first place, they aren't expensive.'

Later on, when I had dried up a bit and was cleaning a saucepan with great vigour, she said,—

'Nice 'elp you'll be to mother after this, duckie.'

I was very bucked at that remark. It's nice to feel that one person, at any rate, believes you to be young enough to be 'a nice 'elp to mother.'

At 10.30 a.m. the kitchen staff all came into the scullery and sat on boxes and drank cocoa, and ate bread and dripping (I hid the dripping part of mine) while the orderly and boy scout had theirs in the kitchen. After cocoa I helped with the potatoes and then cleaned saucepan lids. Then I washed up the men's dinner things. They had had Irish stew and suet pudding. Have you ever washed a pudding cloth? My last job was the pig pail! In the happy past when I have gone and loved the little pigs at Uncle Jasper's I never knew there was a pig pail. Ours stands outside the backdoor in the yard. It's rather like a domed cathedral; into it you scrape the kipper skins and bits of bread and fat and apple cores, and things like that.

I can do it now without active sickness. By the end of the week, perhaps, I need not shut my eyes or hold my nose.

But my hands are disgusting. My finger-nails are in deep mourning and the grease will not come off.

On Wednesday I committed the sin that can never be forgiven, for, unaddressed, I spoke to a General in front of matron, and I am to be shot at dawn on Friday.

This is what happened. I was just about to replenish the pig pail, trying to screw up my courage to remove the dome from the cathedral, when round the house came matron in a very starched apron with several extra ramrods down her back. With her was a most splendid brass hat—rows of ribbons, gorgets, gold braid, all complete, and there were several other officers. Picture me standing by the pig bucket—I was not too clean. I hadn't got my sleeves on, my arms were streaked with blue bell, and my cap was slightly crooked. Suddenly I looked at the advancing General, and I said quite loudly,—

'Toby, dear, what priceless luck!'

It was General Sir Tobias Merriwater, K.C.B., D.S.O., M.D., F.R.C.P. All I remembered was that I had known him all my life, and never called him anything but 'Toby'.

Suddenly the warm spring day vanished, I was up at the North Pole, or the South one if it's colder, as I saw the matron's face. And then, by way of trying to ease the situation, I dropped the scullery pig pail, showered the kipper skins and apple cores, bits of bread and fat and suet, like rice and rose leaves at a wedding in the pathway of a bride.

There was an awful silence, even the officers forgot to be bored, and looked quite interested. I drew back and wished I could get right inside the pig bucket, and shut down the lid.

'Ah,' said General Sir Tobias Merriwater to the matron, 'you keep pigs?'

'Yes, sir,' said she.

She was very bright and nice to him. (I understand people are always nice and bright to Generals.)

'And this is for them, I suppose. Most commendable, very.' And the retinue passed on.

I picked up all the 'rice and rose leaves,' every bit of it by hand, and then I went and told the girl I work with in the scullery. She collapsed into the coal box, saying, 'You'll be shot at dawn,' when a hand cautiously opened the scullery window and a voice said,—

'I'll be waiting outside the gate when you go home at one o'clock, and if you would kindly hurry I think it would be better, for I'm very much afraid I shall explode.'

So at one o'clock I went outside the gate, whereupon there appeared the unseemly spectacle of the latest V.A.D. hugging the Visiting Committee!

'Oh, Toby, it's such pure bliss to see you. I wish I could shake hands,' I said, 'but I really am so filthy.'

'A kiss of yours is good enough for any man,' said Toby. So of course I kissed him, as I always have, and at that moment matron caught us! Somehow, my luck's dead out. However, I felt as I was not on duty I could hug Generals if I chose, and, anyway, I was to be shot at dawn on Friday, so nothing mattered.

So the Visiting Committee came home to lunch with me and stayed to tea, which it hadn't meant to do, and then stayed on for dinner, but it couldn't stop the night, or else it would have. It was delightful to see Toby. When he went he said,—

'Darling, you don't look too frightfully well, are you being taken care of properly? You ought not to be going to that beastly hospital when they've got influenza. You're not strong enough. Do you ever faint now?'

'Never, except once last Thursday.'

But I don't think he heard, for he went down to the car and drove away.

CHAPTER XXVII

Ross wired to say that he was delayed till Tuesday, and then came on Saturday after all. I was in the hall wondering why I felt so tired and whether I'd bother to change for dinner, when my brother let himself in at the front door, followed by Brown.

'Why, Ross, this is a surprise. I didn't expect you to-day!'

He had, however, somehow grown deaf during his absence, and merely said,—

'Good-evening, Margaret. See to the luggage, will you, Brown,' and walked upstairs, followed by all the dogs.

'Has anything happened, Sam?' I asked.

'Not in London, miss,' and he handed me the evening paper.

Obviously a storm was brewing, so I decided that it was worth while to dress. I put on my best and latest frock. At dinner I was sparkling, and told my brother all about the hospital in my most vivid style. Somehow he didn't think any of it the least amusing. I asked him then if he wasn't sorry to miss Toby, and

he informed me that he had had lunch with him at the club in London.

Ross was, however, quite polite and civil, more so than he'd been for years, but as to rowing me as I had thought, oh, dear, no; he quite obviously was not interested in me at all, the whole subject of the hospital bored him stiff.

I thought I'd see if the date would warm the atmosphere.

'Ross, we've had such an excitement while you were away. We've found the date in the roof, and it's 1570.'

'Oh, really,' he drawled.

After that I gave it up. If 1570 wouldn't melt an iceberg, nothing would, so we adjourned to the hall for coffee, and now there sits on one side of the fire, surrounded by ice and snow fields, something which was once my twin, while I sit on the other writing my novel, trying to get thawed, pretending I don't mind a bit.

I have such a poisonous headache. I feel so funny! I——

* * * * *

For ten days I haven't been allowed to write, not even to Michael, and even now I may only do so for a 'very little while.'

After my headache I remember nothing till I found myself in bed and Ross making up the fire, still in his old dinner jacket. He looked a giant in the dim light, and I called out to him,—

'Why am I in bed if it's dinner time?'

'It isn't, it's eleven o'clock at night.'

'Then why are you here, Ross?'

'You weren't very well, fainted or something naughty, and I'm just going to change and stay with you for a bit.'

'But I don't want any one to sit up with me.'

'Sorry,' said the giant firmly.

'No, but I mean that I don't need any one.'

'The doctor's the best judge of that, Meg.'

'Ross, am *I* ever the best judge of anything?

'Not to talk till you're better,' he replied.

I said, 'Oh, I shan't be better till I've talked.' So he said I might 'a very little while then.'

'Have I got the bug?' I asked.

'Yes, a minute one, so Nannie mustn't come because of the Gidger; it's nothing to be alarmed about.'

'I'm not a bit alarmed about the bug, only it always frightens me to faint. You won't leave me when I feel like fainting, will you?' I asked, feeling very like

it at the moment. Even an iceberg seems a standby when you're going to faint. Then I began to shake and shiver and felt as if I were slipping down a slope, till Ross held me in his arms to stop me sliding down so fast. When I was a little better I said,—

'Oh, don't be angry with me any more.' He was so ridiculous then and teased me, said I must be much worse than the doctor thought, to mind about any one being angry with me.

'But I do mind,' I said.

He was very sweet to me. I can't think how big things can be so gentle.

'Of course, I'm not "angry" with you, darling, only I feel I have so badly bungled things, if you felt it was necessary to go to the hospital without telling me.'

'But, Ross, if you had been here, you wouldn't have let me go.'

'Well, of course I wouldn't when you catch the 'flu every time you meet the bug. Michael——'

'Oh, don't let Michael be angry with me either, I can't bear it.'

'Oh, Meg, I'm sure your temperature must have gone up miles, I shall have to send the S.P. for the doctor, if you go on being "meek." Has Michael ever been angry with you, you little goose?'

'No, except about the being taken care of side of things.'

'Well, don't you see, one must take care of something smaller than oneself. I can't explain, little 'un, only it's in one's blood, and your going to the hospital like that——'

'Hurt you?'

'Well, darling, if you make me say it, yes, a little bit.'

'I wish that I were dead and buried.'

'The bug always makes a chap feel like that, Meg.'

'It isn't the bug,' I answered, and cried against his sleeve. 'Oh, could you stop feeling hurt?'

'It depends how good you're to be in future,' said the giant, grinning. 'Will you do all the things I want you to, the next few days? Will you be a doormat just for once and let me trample on you because you've got the bug?'

'Yes,' I said meekly.

'Oh, my angel,' exclaimed my brother in great amazement, 'I do feel frightfully worried about you, I'm perfectly certain you'll be dead in the morning.'

So the list includes a nurse, no letters till I'm told I may, 'a willing spirit' as to letting the doctor decide when I am to get up, and millions of etcs. When I tell you that I took the whole lot 'lying down,' you will know to what deeps that bug has brought me. So I am a doormat, and Ross tramples on me.

One day Toby came to see me when I was feeling extra specially ill. Ross

sent for him, I found out afterwards. And when he went away and Ross came back into my room he said,—

'Oh, Meg, you look heaps better, your eyes are shining so,—why, darling!' For the tears and smiles were all mixed up. But I couldn't tell him why just then, only Toby said he thought the stork might fly into my house again some day if I were careful.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The garden has been a place of sweet delights the last ten days. The pear-trees are veiled in bloom, the pink almonds fully out, and the gorse a golden glory. I think my dear Dame Nature comes every night and makes some scent for me. I do not see her though, because I have to go to sleep so early since I became a doormat. But when I am carried down into the garden in the morning the air is warm and sweet, and I lie out under the fir-tree all day long, gradually getting stronger and thinking lovely secret things.

On Tuesday it was so funny and yet pathetic. Sam went before his M.O. and Ross for his last and final Board. He got home first and was tired but radiant, because he had been passed and might expect his orders any day. He was standing by my chair talking to me when the gate clicked and Sam came in, and Ross hailed him as a man and brother.

'Well, what luck, Sam?'

'Oh, all right, sir, passed all right.'

'What priceless luck, Sam; did they pull your knee about a lot?'

'Did a bit, sir,' said Sam, looking very fagged I thought.

'Hurt at all?'

'Hardly at all, sir.'

'If it hurt *at all* they oughtn't to have passed you,' said Ross, the officer, careful for his men. 'I shall send you back and say that you've been humbugging.'

'I don't think you will send me back,' grinned the Hickley Woods.

'What?' snapped the King's Regulations.

'I'm sure you won't,' said the Hickley Woods again.

'Why not?' demanded the King's Regulations furiously.

'Because you've done the same yourself, Master Ross.' And Sam went into the house quickly, leaving his master gasping,—

'Oh, what a chap!'

* * * * *

And everything is packed, and there is only just the telegram to wait for.

* * * * *

And it has come and he is to go to-night.

* * * * *

And now it is to-night, and he has gone. Oh, it was hard that I was made to go to bed early as usual. It is sometimes very difficult to be a doormat. So he came to say 'good-bye' to me when I had gone to bed.

'Oh, Meg, isn't it just too rotten to miss daddy?' And I agreed it was.

'You will keep the nurse a few more days, darling, won't you? Just till Monday, anyway. I shall feel that much happier about you, if you will.'

So I said I would. I wanted him to go away 'that much happier,' though I would much rather have been alone.

'Feeling pretty well, to-night, little 'un?'

'Yes, pretty well. Ross, darling, I have loathed having you.'

'I know,' he said. 'It's been the most wretched five months I ever remember, and this cottage is appalling. I suppose you couldn't see your way to move into a red-brick villa. Oh, here's your watch, it came to-day.'

'Oh, thank you, I'd forgotten all about it.'

'You'll be able to count the hours now till daddy comes, Meg.'

'Yes,' and I thought that I could also count the minutes till my brother went. I looked at my watch and found it wasn't my old silver thing, but a little gold wrist one set with pearls, and he 'hoped I liked it,' and I said I did. And then he asked,—

'Have I taken care of you nicely for Michael, little 'un?'

I said he had.

'Oh, Meg, I do wish daddy had come. Why does Aunt Constance go and get the 'flu again, just when I wanted her to be here to look after you.'

'I don't know, but I shall be all right, Ross.'

'Why, Jonathan, you're like the old woman that used to amuse you in the village, there's 'Only the Almighty' left to do it.'

And I smiled, but my lips quivered, too, and I clenched my hands. So then he sat down on my bed and said,—

'You needn't be ashamed to if you want to. I know you've got "views" about

it, and didn't when you said good-bye to Michael, but a person that has had a bug is not considered to be eternally disgraced if she does.'

So I did, and clung to him a little while, and then he remarked that it was an awful thing to have a sister who had got a bug, so that no one would come and stay with her. Then he kissed me and whispered,—

'I'm not perfectly positive that you aren't safest of all with Him, darling.'

PART III

'Acquainted with grief.'

CHAPTER I

'I fled Him, down the nights and down the days:
I fled Him, down the arches of the years:
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind: and in a mist of tears
I hid from Him.'
Hound of Heaven.

Another fortnight has slipped away. I have had one little note from Ross in which he sent me 'all his love,' and now, how can I write the news I have to tell?

Three days ago (ah, what an eternity it seems) I was ordering the dinner, for I am stronger now, and able to do the usual things.

Uncle Jasper and Aunt Constance were due to arrive in time for lunch. Captain Everard was to dine that night, and I had just said to cook, 'Extra good to-night, please, Dulcie, because he is a very special friend of my brother's' when the S.P. came into the kitchen with rather a startled look, and said, 'Captain Everard has arrived already, ma'am.' When I saw his face, I knew.

'It's Ross,' I said. 'So soon?'

Yes, directly he got over. He must have been rushed straight up to the

trenches. How can I tell you, Mrs Ellsley?'

'See, I am quite calm,' I said, 'please, tell me just the truth.'

So he told me the little that he knew, how very early in the morning he had received a telegram, (as Ross in his dear thoughtfulness had wished any such news to go first to him and not to me.) He said that Ross was wounded very desperately, and he had come himself to take me to the coast.

'Can you leave here in half an hour?' he asked. 'If that is possible you may see him.'

'Yes,' I answered.

Nannie packed for me, while I got ready. She was very quiet and good, only said, 'My lamb, my lamb, tell him——'

'I will tell him all your eyes say, darling,' and I got into the car.

I do not remember what happened then. I felt nothing. I was numb. I only knew that kind hands passed me on from car to boat, and then from boat to train, and car again, till I stood at midnight in a little room opposite a sister with a tired face, waiting for her to speak.

'Ah,' she said, 'you have been very quick; we hardly hoped to be in time to reach you.' Then she told me that he had been brought in the day before, hopelessly wounded in the body.

'It is a miracle that he has lasted with such appalling wounds; he is only living on his willpower, waiting for you.'

'Is he in pain?' I asked.

'At first, yes, agony all the time, but now there are intervals between the bouts of pain, and at the end I think he will not suffer.'

'But you can keep it down with morphia,' I said quiveringly.

'We did at first, but he dislikes it so, and now the pain is lessening he has refused to have any more because it clouds his mind. He asked for the chaplain a little while ago,' she continued. 'Just before he had the Blessed Sacrament he had a bout of pain and I begged him to let me give him morphia. "No, don't ask me again, sister," he said, and I felt rebuked. But it is not safe to linger—come. I am afraid he may be very exhausted,' she added as I followed her upstairs.

She opened the door of a small, quiet room, and signed to the orderly to go away. Ross was little altered, but his face had lost its colour, and there was a drawn look round his mouth, and his eyes were very tired. He stirred as the door closed on the orderly.

'It's Meg,' he said faintly and smiled. 'How sweet of you to come, how quick you've been, darling.'

The sister gave him a little brandy, which revived him.

'She's been so beautifully kind,' he said, as she prepared to go, then as she went she whispered,—

'Sponge his face and hands after the pain, and give him a little brandy when he is exhausted. I can do no more for him than you can, and he will love to have you to himself. Ring if you want me, I am close at hand.'

I put my arms around him.

'So happy now,' he sighed.

'Are you in pain, my darling?'

'Better,' he answered. 'I feel now like the lady in *Hard Times*, as if there were a pain somewhere in the room, but I'm not perfectly sure that I've got it!'

'Mrs Gradgrind?' I said.

'How well you know your Dickens, little 'un. I always thought that such a funny joke. Don't hold me, darling, you must be so tired. Sit down beside me.'

Presently he said,—

'You might see poor old Sam to-morrow, he's somewhere in the hospital. He wants to marry the S.P.' And he smiled a little.

'Ought you to talk so much?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter when I can,' he answered, 'there are such a lot of things I want to say. That night when we were in the trench Sam said, "If we get out of this alive I want to marry Emma, if you've no objection, sir."

'"Who on earth," I said, "is Emma, Brown?"

'"Miss Margaret's parlourmaid, you know, sir."

'"Oh, the S.P., yes. Well, Sam, why shouldn't you if the lady's willing?"

'"If you've no objection, sir," he said again.

'"You're not by any chance asking for my permission, are you, Sam?"

'"Yes, I am, sir."

'"Well, you have it," I replied, laughing. "I won't forbid the banns, and good luck, Sam, you always were a funny ass."

'"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," he said—you know his funny way, Meg, ah—it's coming—on again——'

And then a bout of pain, and although I loved him so there was nothing I could do but watch and wipe the pouring sweat and pray for God to take him. When it passed I offered him some brandy, but he said,—

'No, keep it for the bad turns.'

Ah, God, was there worse than that?

He spoke of Michael and daddy, and his little Gidg., and sent messages to Nannie and Charlie and one or two others, and then suddenly there was nothing in the world for him again but pain, and I could only watch and wait and pray and agonise.

The sister came in with some milk and food for me, but as I shook my head she, with a glance of pity at the bed, was taking it away when Ross opened his eyes and signed for her to leave it. He let me sponge his face and hands but 'No,

no brandy, just a little water.'

'Is it too hard for you, Jonathan?' he whispered as he saw that the glass trembled a little. (Too hard for me? ah, Ross, always yourself last), and, choking back the tears, I told him 'No.'

Presently, when he felt a little easier, he opened his eyes and said, 'Eat your supper, darling,' but as I shook my head he added, with a flash of his old mastery,—

'Just the milk, little 'un. I must send you away if you don't. Sit where I can see you, there by the fire. I told nurse you liked one at night, you always felt so chilly.'

I drank the milk to please him, and ate a bit of biscuit as he lay and watched me. Then as I crossed the room to kiss him he said,—

'You are so sweet when you obey one, and that half biscuit was pure, unadulterated virtue, Meg! How very "cowogated" it is to-night,' and he laughed as he tried to stroke my hair, and as I leaned over him he whispered,—

'Such a perfect little sister always, Jonathan.'

Then the agony again—suddenly his face convulsed and he gasped out,—

'Stand away, somewhere where you cannot see me.' And he hid his face as I obeyed him.

I don't know if I stood long there by the fire, with my back towards him, waiting, listening to the shuddering sobs that shook him. I could not even pray, I could not feel the everlasting arms were underneath, I only said in deep rebellion, 'This is not sent in love.' Once I heard him sigh as if in answer to a question, 'Yes, if you wish it, Sir.' And then a silence and the whisper of my name.

I was frightened at the exhausted look upon his face, and this time he took the brandy, and when the dear, pain-clouded eyes had cleared a little he whispered, and there were pauses in between the words now,—

'Sorry, darling—remember—your—funny char. Our Lady—of Ventre, Meg—you see, "it's—my inside!" he said apologetically, and tried to smile. 'Sponge me again—darling.'

Then he lay very quiet and tired, but presently grew a little stronger, and said without opening his eyes,—

'It's true about the everlasting arms, Meg. I confessed to my Redeemer and I'm shriven, tell daddy, don't forget. I had the Holy Communion, darling. The Padre here is such a good chap. He lighted two tall candles, but I couldn't blow 'em out, tell Aunt Amelia!' and his eyes were twinkling when he opened them. Then he was quiet again, and after a moment said,—

'He is so perfect if one even *tries* to be dutiful. I do adore Him so.' And then, 'Tell me about the garden.'

I told him all about the flowers, and which of the roses were in bloom, and about Dame Nature making the scent, and what Toby had said about the stork.

'And is he coming, Meg?'

'Oh, Ross, I think I've heard the faintest far-off flutter of his wings.'

'Give him my love,' he whispered.

'Who, darling?' I inquired, thinking he hadn't understood.

'The little son,' he said.

Then he lay quiet, and as the day began to dawn his hands grew damp. The shadows seemed to deepen on his face, and in his eyes there was a strange and far-off look, as if he saw beyond the present time, and gazed out into eternity. It was a very lovely, wondering look.

'Oh, all the pain has gone and somebody called me then; was it the colonel, Meg?'

'But I could see the great change coming, and I said I didn't think it was the colonel.

'There, he's called again, kiss me, darling, quickly; are you ready, Sam?' he asked.

And then there broke a perfect glory on his face and in his eyes a look of deep adoring love as, turning rapturously to me, he said,—

'Why, Meg, I heard the Lord!'

And so I quickly kneeled, because only his dear, dying ears had heard the quiet entry of that radiant Presence in the room, as, with a little rapturous intaking of his breath, he raised himself and said,—

'Yes, coming, Sir,' and saw his 'Picture,' The Beatific Vision.

And so the sister found us when she came; and as I folded the dear, strong hands that never did an unkind act, across the quiet heart that did 'adore Him so,' and closed the eyes which never looked at me except in love, she said, gazing with misty eyes upon his peace-filled face,—

'We see many types; *he* was a very gallant Christian gentleman.'

She took me to that little room I had first waited in.

'He left you very specially in my charge,' she said, 'because you've been so ill. He asked me to keep you if I could till some one came to fetch you home. There is a message just come through to say Sir Jasper Fotheringham will be here at noon in time to take you to——'

'Oh, will it be so soon?'

'It must, you see there are so many,' and her face grew very tired. 'So, will you let me take care of you till then? See if you can rest.' Presently when she went away, God gave me His great gift of tears.

When she came again, I asked for Sam, and, sitting down beside me on the couch, she said,—

'I hardly know how to tell you, but just at dawn he died. He had been very ill all night and wandering in his mind, and suddenly he called, 'Quite ready,

Master Ross,' and—passed.'

But, not alone. Who dares to say that such a thing was chance, that such a perfect happening was mere coincidence? I think his faithful heart answered his earthly master's call, and the two walked up the starry way together, with that sweet and gracious Presence in between.

Just before Uncle Jasper arrived the sister asked me if I would like to see one of Ross's men. So the sergeant came of whom I had often heard; he was very broken up. I asked him to tell me anything he could about the end. I will try and put it down in his own words.

'We all knew how devoted Brown was to the captain. We didn't exactly hate him ourselves, ma'am, but he was Brown's own personal property, according to his view. He never would accept promotion as he wanted to go on being his servant, and there was always trouble if any one wanted to have a hand at cleaning up the captain's things or making him a bit more comfortable, if you can be comfortable in hell, if you'll excuse the word, ma'am. We used to call him Brown's Archbishop, if you'll not think it a liberty for me to name it, ma'am?'

'Go on,' I said, 'I love to hear it.'

'Well, we was in a trench that night, with orders to hold on no matter what it cost. The Germans got the range and we was pretty well wiped out before they rushed it. We was all dead beat and wore out for want of sleep. After they had rushed it, Captain Fotheringham got some of the wounded and the last remaining men, only five, I think, together where the trench was narrowest, and he told us again what the orders was, and how we must still hold on, as time was everything, and that if we could even now keep them back a bit the reliefs might come up and so save a lot of lives. I could see he thought we hadn't got a dog's chance by the kindness in his face. He put us men behind him, me next to him, in case he fell, so that I could take command, and the two corporals behind me, and Brown, being the only private, was at the back, the last. We waited, we could hear the Huns coming down the trench, doing their devil's work they was, killing the wounded as they lay. Suddenly Brown pushed past me and the others and went and stood in front of Captain Fotheringham.

'"Get behind me Brown," said the captain, thinking, I suppose, he hadn't understood the order. He was not the type of officer men disobey deliberate, ma'am. But Brown said,—

'"I will not, sir."

When the captain saw that Brown did not intend to move, all the kindness went out of his eyes and his face hardened, and with a kind of fury he said,—

'"Are you mad, Brown? Get behind me."

'"I will not, sir," said Brown again.

'The captain looked at him—you know how his eyes go when he's very angry?

'"You refuse the order, Brown?"

'"Yes, I do, Master Ross."

'Then the captain's face suddenly softened and he said,—

'"The last one, after all the years, Sam?"

'"No, *because* of all the years," said poor old Brown.

'Then we saw the Germans coming round the bend and the captain moved a step or two forward where the trench was slightly wider, and for the only time in all his soldier life he changed an order.

"Oh, you funny old ass, Sam, you can stand beside me, then."

'"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said Brown; you know his funny way, ma'am.

'Never saw such shooting, absolutely deadly, first one shot and then the other, till there was a pile of Germans blocking up the trench, and just as the reliefs came up a shell came over and got them both.'

The sergeant's voice broke and he cried quite unashamedly.

Oh, can't you see them facing one another? Sam, with his life's devotion in his eyes, defying Ross. King's Regulations and the Hickley Woods striving for the last mastery: and then Sam, since he might not save his master, glad that at least he could stand beside his life-long friend and comrade, in that great and last adventure—taking equal odds.

Then Uncle Jasper came, and we left them lying side by side in that quiet spot that is for ever England, with just a little wood-encircled cross to mark the place.

Then we went back to Devonshire, to my old home, and I think my heart is broken. I am acquainted with grief now, as daddy said I would be, but I do not know *His* love. I am rebellious, I can only feel His mastery in my pain. I am not 'courteous,' as Ross was, or 'dutiful' like father, for I have told that Man of Sorrows—the Master of the Universe—that He has been very cruel to me.

CHAPTER II

'All which I took from thee I did but take
Not for thy harms.

But just that thou mightst seek it in my arms.'
Hound of Heaven.

It seems such a coincidence that Ross just missed him after all, for when we arrived at the Manor House I found my father! He had landed the day before and heard the news from dear Aunt Constance. What a homecoming for him! He is little changed, more bowed, perhaps, and he looks older. His face seems more aloof, as if he had not only caught a glimpse of that 'most holy thing,' but, like Sir Galahad, had 'achieved the quest.'

He held his hand out to me as I went in, and said, 'My little girl.' Then the others left us for awhile together. I do not think the years out in that Mission have been easy ones, he looks as if he, like his Lord, had suffered being tempted, and he sorrows deeply for his son. He is so unselfish, so thoughtful, talks about the things that interest Uncle Jasper, and takes away that terrible blank feeling. He even laughs a little, though I don't think that his eyes have really smiled. There is a hurt look in them, as there was when mother died.

Every one is very sweet to me, but I am the most wretched woman on this earth! No, not because of Ross. How could I be for him, after seeing his face when he said 'Coming, Sir.' Although I know that I shall never lose the ache to hear his voice and see him in the flesh again, yet I could be at peace were it not for one thing. It is my soul that's wrong. It has been ever since that time I stood beside the fire doubting the love of God, and, oh, for months before. Doubt is 'perilous stuff'—'it weighs upon the heart.'

I am not sleeping very well, and as I lie awake at night I think sometimes of all the others who are grieving, too, and because I share the same sorrowful 'experience'—because there is inscribed upon my heart, as upon theirs, a list of names: I find myself 'linked up' again—bound indissolubly to each of them by a great sorrow, common to us all.

We have been in Devonshire a month now, and still we do not talk of going back to Surrey. It is lovely to be staying with Aunt Constance, and I am trying to be brave and cheerful, and to go out in the village as I used to do. The Gidger loves the dear old cottage folk, and they love her, and it is perfect having father.

The Hickley Woods are just as beautiful, only my heart breaks when I walk about in them.

It has turned hot, even I am warm enough and don't need fires at night. This evening there was a most gorgeous sunset, the sky was all ablaze with emerald and blue and gold. The distant hills had a bloom on them such as there is sometimes on bunches of purple grapes.

I saw father alone in the garden after dinner, and I felt I wanted to tell him

what I hoped about the little son, so I went and stood beside him, and slipped my arm through his, and we wandered out into the woods as we have done many times before.

After I had told him, father said, with a very tender look upon his face,—

'And so The Shepherd Beautiful is giving you another of His lambs to mind.'

I thought it was such a perfect name for Him, it appealed to me more at that moment than any of the other lovely ones that daddy calls Him by. After a little while father said,—

'Shall I tell you something, darling, that I have never told any one before?'

'Please, father.'

'It was many years ago, quite soon after I was married. Your mother and I were walking over the downs. They were all "trimmed" with sheep. She was so amused at the lambs, because she thought they were dreadfully impertinent to their mothers sometimes, and then she said with a sweet look in her eyes,—

'"Anthony, The Shepherd Beautiful is going to give us one of His lambs to mind."

'Instead of being pleased I got in a sudden panic about it, as husbands do sometimes, and your mother laughed at me and shook my arm, and looked round at all the sunny grasslands filled with sheep and said,—

'"Oh, Anthony, don't grieve for me, because it's only like walking in a sunny meadow dappled with shade. When I come to the shadow at the end, I know that if I just walk round the corner, I shall find the Shepherd Beautiful doling out lambs. Oh, Anthony" (and she shook my arm again) "wouldn't it be amusing if the morning I got there He was a bit absent-minded or got muddled with His counting, and doled me out two instead of one to mind. Oh, I would run away so fast with them lest He should ask for one of them back.'"

Then, after a pause, father added,—

'And you see, darling, He was a "bit absent-minded" that morning, and now He's just asked for one of them back.'

'Oh, father,' I exclaimed, with a sudden rush of tears, 'and the one He's asked for back was always called "the lamb"!'

And then the horror of that 'perilous stuff' swept over me, and all the despair and doubt and misery of the last few months surged up like a great flood that presently would overwhelm me, and I cried,—

'But, oh, daddy! He isn't *my* Shepherd Beautiful, I can't find His love; I can only see some one who has been very cruel to me.'

And father put his arm round me as he used to do when I was little and frightened in the woods, and the evening sun streamed down upon his face, and deepened the aloof look that he wore, and he gazed out over the fields of lilies that were tinted now with gold and rose.

'Yet, it is He who clothes the woods you love so every spring, my darling.'

And as I looked at all the colour and the harmony, the flowers, the sunlight, and the dappled shade, the woods soothed and quietened me. And the old 'washed' feeling came, and the rebellion went, and a great longing to understand God's ways came in my heart instead.

'Oh, but the world's pain, father, and all the grief brought by the war.'

'God calls the world that way sometimes, Meg.'

'But does He never call except through pain?'

'Some very perfect souls can feel Him "in the summer air or in dewy garden green," or in the song of birds, but to many it is only "when the sharp strokes flesh and heart run through, in all their incommunicable pain"—God speaks Himself.'

'And does He always call when He sends pain, father?'

'It has so large a place in God's economy, my darling, that we may find in it another Sacrament. When the Great High Priest gives the bread of tears, the wine of separation, there is, in these visible things, His inward call to come closer to Himself. Oh, little daughter, when you can find His love in nothing else, look at Calvary, for there the perfect Saviour deigned to stoop to a last service—"Love's epitome."'

And so I 'looked' at Him upon His cross, as daddy bade me, and realised for the first time that as God's justice has been satisfied, there is nothing left but His love for me.

I saw, all in a moment, that if God loved me enough to give His Son, and if His Son loved me enough to give His life, He will not keep back any other gift. He is all love, so all He sends to me is Love. He cannot help Himself.

I am all broken up to think that I so nearly missed a gift of love because He sent it veiled to me in pain.

Out in the Hickley Woods I found Him. Down the paths of my life I suddenly saw the way of His feet, and my soul rushed out to meet Him.

At last I know the lesson that Ross learned by pain. I see what Charlie saw only when he was blind. I understand what father has known since mother died. Oh, the wonder and the utter perfection of this 'experience.' It links me up with all the others down the centuries who having found *Him* 'in a mist of tears' can *glory* in their pain. If only I could pass the lovely comfort of it on to some of those whose hearts are wounded, as mine is, inexpressibly and beyond all telling, by this awful war:—

He only takes away the ones we love if, in His all wise love, He sees He must. If we accept the atonement that He made, and love Him, and are dutiful to Him about the ones He takes. He will always give instead that incomparably more lovely, priceless, perfect, altogether lovely one—Himself.

And now this funny old book is finished. As I write the words my room grows dark, because the sun is hidden for a moment by a cloud of rain. Yet all the tender plants out in the woods will be the stronger for the storm, when it has passed.

I look into the future, and I see that there remains for me one last 'experience.'

Some day, perhaps when I am very old, I shall walk down a valley shadowed with dark wings. Beside me will be one—that mighty one—whose face is cold and quiet, majestic and inexorable. I shall not fear him as the darkness deepens in that vale, for all around, by reason of the Passion of my Lord, there will be a song of triumph sung:—

'Oh death! where is thy sting?
And where thy victory?'

And at the end of that dark night I, too, shall find the morning. I shall greet

Ross again. I shall see mother, and the others who have gone before. I shall in one ecstatic moment, find myself—'linked up' with God.

LONDON AND GLASGOW: COLLINS' CLEAR-TYPE PRESS.

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