

FICTION

Anna Chapin Ray

Teddy Her Book

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

TEDDY: HER BOOK

A Story of Sweet Sixteen

BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

ILLUSTRATED BY VESPER L. GEORGE



BOSTON

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*"Spring's hands are always full of rosy flowers,
Unopened buds to deck each field and tree.
We love and watch them through the long, sweet hours,
Not for the buds, but what the buds will be.*

*"Life's hands are full of buds. She comes on singing,
With radiant eyes, across Youth's golden gate;
We smile to see the burden she is bringing,
And for the Summer are content to wait."*

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CHAPTER ONE

The five McAlisters were gathered in the dining-room, one rainy night in late August. In view of the respective dimensions of the family circle and the family income, servants were few in the McAlister household, and division of labor was the order of the day. Old Susan had cleared away the table and brought in the lamp; then she retired to the kitchen, leaving the young people to themselves.

Hope was darning stockings. She had one of Hubert's socks drawn on over her hand, which showed, white and dainty, through the great, ragged hole. Hubert sat near her with little Allyn on his knee, tiding over a crisis in the young man's temper by showing him pictures in the dilapidated Mother Goose which had done duty for successive McAlisters, from seventeen-year-old Hope down.

"Stop kicking brother," he commanded, as Allyn lifted up his voice and his heels in vigorous protest against things in general, and the approach of the sandman in particular. "Listen, Allyn,--

'There was a little man,
And he had a little gun,
And his bullets were made of lead, lead, lead.'"

Theodora appeared on the threshold of the great china closet, where she was washing the cups and plates. She had a dish-cloth in one hand and three or four spoons in the other.

"You don't put enough emphasis into it, Hu," she said mockingly. "This is the way it should sound, like this,--

'There was a little cow,
And it had a little calf,
And it wouldn't ever go to bed, bed, bed.'

Never mind, Allyn, sister will come in a few minutes and put your nightie on. Oh, Babe, I wish you'd hurry and put away these dishes."

But Babe, baptismally known as Phebe, was engaged in tickling Allyn's toes, with the praiseworthy intention of making him kick the harder. Accordingly, she was deaf to the voice of Theodora, who was forced to put away the cups herself. She did it with a bumping impatience, grumbling the while.

"I do wish that everlasting old Susan would wash these things. The idea of my being tied to a dish-pan, all my days, and Babe never will help a bit! It's not fair." She set down a cup with a protesting whack which threatened to wreck its handle.

"Oh, Teddy?" Hubert called, from the next room.

"Well?" Her face cleared, as it always did at the voice of her twin brother.

"Drop something?"

"No. Wish I had. I'd like to throw this dish-pan into the street."

"Most through?"

"Never shall be. Do put Allyn down and come to help me."

He settled the child, book and all, in a corner of the old haircloth sofa which ran across the end of the room, and, with his hands in his pockets, he sauntered into the china closet and sat down on the little step-ladder that stood there, ready to lead to an ascent to the upper shelves.

"What's the matter, to-night, Teddy?" he asked, sympathetically tweaking the end of her long brown pigtail.

"The weather, I think," she replied, as she threw a dish-towel at him. "I don't like to wash dishes, and I don't like rainy days, and I don't like--"

"Nothin' nor nobody. Never mind filling up the list. You've a crick in your temper, that's all. It will be gone in the morning. Here, give me a towel, and I'll help wipe."

It was a service he had often performed before. The twins were close friends, and some of their most confidential talks had been held over the steaming dish-water. They finished their task together; then Hubert linked his arm in that of his sister and came out into the dining-room, where Hope, with the stocking still drawn on over her hand, was vainly trying

to rescue Allyn from the torments imposed on him by Phebe.

"Don't, Babe," she urged. "Don't you see how it makes him cry? Why can't you let him alone? He is always cross at bedtime."

"So are you," Phebe retorted defiantly. "When she comes, Hope McAlister, I do hope she'll give it to you good."

Hope flushed, and her sensitive chin quivered a little.

"Let's hope not," she said gently. "Do be quiet, there's a dear Babe. It is almost your bedtime."

"But I sha'n't go to bed," proclaimed Phebe rebelliously.

"Phebe!"

Experience had taught her that Sister Hope, gentle as she was, must be obeyed when she spoke in that tone, and Phebe sullenly yielded to the inevitable and became quiet.

Meanwhile, Theodora had pounced upon Allyn, caught him up in her strong young arms, cuddled his fluffy yellow head against her cheek, and gone away upstairs, whither Phebe followed them with a crushing dignity which sought for no good-night kiss. Hubert cast himself down on the old sofa and fell to rummaging his sister's basket. He smiled a little, as she showed him the vast hole in the toe of his sock; but it was some minutes before he spoke. Then he said slowly,--

"Never mind, Hope. It's in the air, and we all feel it."

He was silent again. Upstairs, they could hear the *tap, tap* of Teddy's energetic heels, as she moved to and fro, settling the two children for the night. Then she was still, while Allyn's shrill, childish treble rose in his evening petition,--

"Now I lay me down a shleep,
I tray a Lo' la tol a teep,
I ta die afo' I wake,
Tray a Lo' la tol a take.
It I at a Jedu' shlake. A-nen!"

Ten minutes later, she came back to the dining-room and threw herself down on the sofa, with her head on Hubert's knee and her elbow in the orderly work-basket.

"Do you know," she said abruptly; "I think our venerable father is a goose."

"Teddy!" Hope's tone was remonstrant.

"I can't help it, if it isn't respectful; I do. He's lived long enough to know better, and he ought to be put to bed without his supper, even if it is his wedding day." She started up, to add emphasis to her words; but Hubert seized her two long braids of hair and drew her head down on his knee again.

"Calm yourself, Teddy," he said, bending forward to peer into her face. "You are worse than the children. I told Hope that it was in the air, to-night."

"Why shouldn't it be?" she demanded. "Here are we, three grown-up children, sitting in a row at home and knowing that, this very evening, our own father is being married to a stranger. It's horrid."

"It may not be so bad, Teddy," Hope said consolingly, as she rolled up Hubert's socks in a ball and tossed them at her brother. "You know we saw her once and we all liked her."

"That was before we knew what was going on. You may think a person is pretty and nice and all that; but that doesn't mean you want her for a mother."

"I don't believe she'll be so bad," Hubert observed judicially. "She's been to college and she knows a good deal, and she's pretty and not easily shocked. Don't you remember how she laughed at Babe's awful speeches?"

"I remember just how she looked," Hope said. "She must have been amused at our innocence. I don't see why the reason never struck us that we were all dragged over to the hotel to see her."

"Because we had some respect for papa," Theodora said tartly. "I don't see why he needs to go and get married again, and I won't say I'm glad to see her, when she comes. There!"

"Ted is afraid that Madame will make her toe the mark," Hubert said teasingly. "You've had your own way too long,

Miss Teddy, and now you will have to come to terms. Isn't that about the truth of it?"

The clock struck eight, and Hope raised her head.

"Listen," she said. "Isn't it a strange feeling that now, in the middle of the lights and the music and the wedding march, papa, our own father, is being married, while we sit here just as we always do?"

The three young faces grew grave at the thought, Hope's with the sweet romance of her years, Hubert's with interest, and Theodora's with open rebellion. For some time they sat there, silent. Then Hope spoke, with the evident design of changing the subject.

"Does anybody know about the new people on the corner?"

"Only what papa said, that it's a woman and her son. She's a widow, her husband was killed in the Massawan bridge accident, and the son terribly hurt."

"Have they come?"

"Yes, I saw them yesterday," Hubert said.

"What are they like?" Hope and Theodora asked in a breath.

"They were driving past the post-office, when I went after the noon mail. They went by so fast I couldn't see much, though."

"How did you know who it was?" Theodora inquired, rolling over till she could look up into her brother's face.

"Mr. Saunders asked me if I knew they were our new neighbors. They came Tuesday, but they stayed at the hotel till yesterday morning, while the house was being put in order."

"What did they look like?" Teddy demanded.

"Like all the rest of the world, as far as I could see."

"Stop teasing, Hu, and tell us," Hope urged.

"Really, I don't know much about them," Hubert returned, with an air of lazy indifference. "Look out, Ted, you're tipping over Hope's basket. One would think we'd never had any new neighbors before, from the way you act."

"We haven't, for ages. Tell us, Hu, there's a dear, what are they like?"

"I honestly didn't have a chance to see them, Ted. She's tall and pretty, and has a lot of fuzzy light red hair."

"Of course she was in mourning," Hope said.

"Yes, I suppose so. At least, she had a pile of black stuff hanging down her back. I don't see why women should pin a black shawl over their heads, when somebody dies; but then--"

"How old is the son?" Theodora interrupted.

"About our ages, I should say."

"Did he look ill?" Hope asked pitifully.

"No; only pale."

"What's the matter with him, anyway?" Theodora inquired, as she reached out for her brother's hand and fell to playing with his slender brown fingers.

"Papa told me he was jammed into a corner, with a lot of stuff on top of him, and his back is hurt so he can't walk."

"Ugh!" Theodora wriggled. "How horrid! Won't he get over it?"

"Sometime; but it will take a good while."

"How did they happen to come here?" Hope said.

"They wanted to move into the country. Dr. Parker is their regular doctor, and he advised them to try papa, so they came here to be near him. Papa told me, on the way to the station, the day he went. He had a great, thick letter from Dr. Parker all about it."

"And so they are really in the house. It has been empty so long that I can't realize it," Hope observed thoughtfully. "Of course, if he were a girl, it would make more difference to us."

"I don't see why," Theodora said, as she pulled off the ribbon from one of her braids, and untied the bow.

"Why, because--Don't you see? He can't come to us, and we can't go there; that is, none of us but Hu."

"I don't see why," Theodora said again.

"It wouldn't be proper," Hope said primly. "You can't go to call on a boy, Teddy. Hu will go over, in a day or two, though."

"Not if he knows himself," Hubert returned. "I don't like freaks. They make me squirmy, and I never know what to say to them."

"Then you're a pig," Theodora answered, with Saxon frankness. "It won't be decent, if we don't try to make it pleasant for him. He's a stranger to everybody, and shut up so he can't have any fun."

"I really think you ought to go, Hu," Hope said gently.

"I don't hanker to," he returned laughingly. "Let Ted go, if she wants to."

"But she is a girl--" Hope began.

"Not more than half," Hubert interrupted, with a laughing grimace at his twin sister, who stood by the sofa, looking scornfully down at them.

"You can do as you like, you two," she said. "It isn't a question of whether it's proper or not; it is simple human kindness, and as soon as I can, Hope McAlister, I intend to get acquainted with him. You've got to go over there, Hu, and take me with you, just as soon as papa comes home." She tied her ribbon with a defiant jerk.

Rather to her surprise, Hubert came to her support.

"You're all right, Teddy; go ahead. If papa is willing, Hope, I don't see why she can't go to see him whenever she feels like it. It isn't in my line. I always feel as if people smashed up in that way ought to sing hymns all the time, and talk about Heaven. That's the way they do in Sunday-school books, you know, and they never have tempers and things. I shouldn't know what to say to that kind of a fellow, and I should only make a mess of it; but if Ted wants to play the good Samaritan to him, let her. For my part, I like whole people, or none at all." He squared his shoulders and took a deep, full breath, as he spoke, in all the pride of his boyish strength.

"We're bound to see a good deal of him anyway," Theodora urged, a shade less hotly. "Right next door and a patient of papa's, it would be queer not to pay any attention to him. He's all alone, too, and there are such a lot of us. I don't want to do anything out-of-the-way, Hope, but I do wish we could get acquainted with him."

"Wait till papa comes home, dear," Hope said, with the gentleness which had gained her so many victories over her tempestuous young sisters. "That will only be two or three weeks, and he will know what is the best thing to do."

"Maybe, unless the new Madame is a prig," Theodora said restively. "She may be worse than you are, Hope; but I doubt it. Never mind," she added sagely to herself, as she left the room; "it is two weeks till then, and there's plenty of chance for things to happen, before they get home."



CHAPTER TWO

Lying far at the side of the little suburban town, the McAlisters' grounds were of a size and beauty which entitled them to be ranked as one of the few so-called "places" that dominated the closely-built streets of the town. The land ran all up and down hill, here coaxed into a smooth-cropped lawn, there carpeted with the moss and partridge vines which had been left to grow over the rocks in undisturbed possession. Here and there, too, were outcrops of the rock, ragged, jutting ledges full of the nooks and crannies which delight the souls of children from one generation to another. The grounds had been, for the most part, left as nature had made them, full of little curves and hillocks and dimples; but the great glory of the place lay in its trees. No conventional elms and maples were they, but the native trees of the forest, huge-bodied chestnuts, tall, straight-limbed oaks, jagged hickories which blazed bright gold in the autumn and shot back the sunlight from every leafy twig, and an occasional cedar or two, from which came the name of the place, The Savins.

Less than a year after his first marriage, Dr. McAlister had bought the place, going far out of the town for the purpose. At that time, he was regarded as little short of a maniac, to prefer land on the ridge to the smooth, conventional little lawns of the middle of the town, where one house was so like another that the inhabitants might have followed the example of the Mad Tea Party and moved up a place, without suffering any inconvenience from the change. It was years before the townspeople dropped the story of Mrs. McAlister's first attempt to choose a site for the house, of her patiently sitting on top of the rail fence, while her husband borrowed a hatchet and manfully whacked away at the underbrush, to clear a path to admit her to her new domain.

It was not till several years later that the house was built, and the McAlisters actually took possession of their new home. Phebe was a baby then, and the twins were so young that Theodora formed an abiding impression that Indians were prone to lurk behind a certain trio of great chestnut-trees at the far side of the grounds. The house was not impressive. It stood on one of the three hills, and originally it had been small, to match the income of the young doctor. Only a year later, he had built on a new wing; and, from that time onward, the spirit of reconstruction had entered into his soul. Hope was wont to describe the house as a species of crazy patchwork, a patch for each year, and each patch of a different style. From the outside point of view, the result was not a success, and the large red house, low and rambling, had grown beyond the limits of the hill and sprawled over the edge on a pile of supporting piazzas and pillars. Inside, it was altogether delightful, with odd windows and corners and lounging places, sunshine everywhere, and the indescribable air of half-shabby, well-used cosiness which is so dear to every one but the owners thereof. Strangers felt the charm as soon as they crossed the threshold; the whole atmosphere of the place was hospitable and unconventional and homelike.

Taken all in all, it was an ideal spot for growing children, and the young McAlisters had made the most of it. On rainy days, they adjourned to the attic, where they bumped their heads against the low rafters of the gables, or ventured on long, perilous expeditions upon the beams of the unfloored extension over one of the wings. They were gifted with good imaginations, these three older children, and this carefully-trodden territory did service alternately as Africa, Fort Ticonderoga, and a runaway locomotive.

But that was only during stormy weather. The rest of the time they lived out-of-doors, in winter coasting down the hills on sleds or on shingles, according to the state of the crust; and in summer running riot among the green things, like the very daisies which refused to be rooted out of the lawn. A neighborhood had grown up around them; but they cared little for other children. A wealth of imagination, and plenty of room to let it work itself out had developed plays of long standing which were as charming to them as they were incomprehensible to their young neighbors.

Then the change had come, and a cloud had fallen on the home. Baby Allyn had been born, and on the same day the bright, happy young mother, boon companion of her children in work and in play, had fallen asleep. The shock had come so suddenly and unexpectedly that there had been no time to plan for a reconstruction. Almost before they realized what had occurred, they had settled back into their former routine, only with Hope as the nominal, and old Susan, the American "help," as the actual, head of things. In a larger community, such an arrangement would have been out of the question; but Hope was a womanly child, and Susan had been in the family for years, in a relation which unfortunately is fast dying out. Accordingly, the doctor had been content to let the situation go on from day to day, until the hour of his second marriage, two or three years later.

Back in a far corner of the grounds, close to the division fence towards the garden of the long-unoccupied corner house, was an early apple-tree, old and gnarly, which for years had been known as "Teddy's tree." No one had ever been able to trace the beginning of her proprietorship in it; but she had assumed it as her own and viewed with disfavor any encroachments on the part of the others. It might have been a case of squatter sovereignty; but it was a sovereignty which Theodora stoutly maintained. Her scarlet hammock hung from the lower branches, and the tree was

full of comfortable crooks and crotches which she knew to the least detail. Thither she was wont to retire to recover her lost temper, to grieve over her girlish sorrows, to dream dreams of future glory, and, often and often, to lie passive and watch the white clouds drift this way and that in the great blue arch above her. No human being, not even Hubert himself, could have told so much of Theodora's inner life as this old apple-tree, if only the power of speech had been granted it.

Three days later, Theodora was curled up in a fork of one of the topmost branches of her tree. The apples were beginning to ripen, and she had eaten until even her hearty young appetite was satisfied. Then she crossed her feet, coiled one arm around the branch beside her, and fell to planning, as she had so often done before, how she could fulfil her two great ambitions, to go to college in the first place, and then to become a famous author. It was always an absorbing subject and, losing herself in it, she became totally oblivious of her surroundings. Nearly an hour later, she was roused by the sound of approaching voices, and she straightened herself and peered down through the branches.

Just below her, on the other side of the fence, so close to it that it had escaped her notice, was a light bamboo lounge, covered with a pile of bright cushions. Across the garden, evidently towards it, came a wheeled chair pushed by a sedate-looking person in green livery, and occupied by a slight figure covered with a gay rug. Theodora gave a little gasp of sheer delight.

"It's the boy!" she exclaimed to herself. "Now is my chance to get a look at him."

Beside the lounge, the chair came to a halt, and the man, bending down, lifted the boy from the chair. With pitiful eyes, Theodora noted the limp helplessness of all the lower part of his body; but she also saw that the boyish face was bright and manly, and that his blue eyes flashed with a spirit equal to Hubert's own. She watched approvingly the handy way in which the man settled the cushions. Then he turned to go away. Half way across the garden, he was arrested by a call from the lounge.

"Hi, Patrick!"

"Well, sir?"

"Where's my book?"

"What book?"

"The one I was reading, the blue one."

"I think you left it in the house."

"But didn't I tell you to bring it along? Go and get it, and hurry up about it." And a pillow flew after Patrick's retreating form with a strength and an accuracy of aim which called forth an ill-suppressed giggle from Theodora.

Presently the man reappeared, book in hand, and the boy hailed him jovially with an utter disregard of his passing ill-humor. Then the man went away, and silence fell. The boy below was absorbed in his reading; Theodora above in watching him and building up a detailed romance about him, upon the slight foundation of her present impression.

"I wonder what his name is," she said to herself. "I hope it's something nice and interesting, like Valentine, or Geoffrey, or something."

She had just reached the point in her romance where one of them, she was not quite sure which, should rescue the other from a runaway horse, when the boy suddenly called her back to the present by throwing his open book on the ground, with a vigorous yawn.

"Ha-um!" he remarked, and, turning his head slightly, he stared aimlessly up into the tree above him.

Theodora, high up among the branches, was screened from his view by the light leafage, and the pale greenish tones of her cotton gown helped her to escape notice. Accordingly, she bent forward and peeped through the leaves, laughing to herself as she saw his eyes turned upward, quite unconscious of her scrutiny.

Yes, he was interesting, she told herself. He did not look in the least like a pensive invalid as he lay there, and she nodded to herself in girlish approval, as she took in every detail of his appearance. Unfortunately that nod cost her her hiding-place. Without in the least realizing it, she had leaned too far forward, and she slipped from her perch. She saved herself by catching at a branch before her; but the sudden jar sent a ripe apple crashing down through the leaves, and it landed plump in one of the cushions, not two inches from the boy's head.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed.



Theodora's face, rosy with blushes, appeared in the opening.

The words were addressed to empty space, merely as an expression of surprise. The surprise was increased, as he saw the leaves pushed apart, and Theodora's face, rosy with blushes, appear in the opening.

"I'm so sorry! Did it hurt you?"

"Not a bit. Besides, I was just getting hungry."

As a proof of his statement, his teeth met in the apple.

"Don't you want another?" Theodora inquired generously.

"Thank you; not in that same way. You might aim better, next time."

"Honestly, I didn't mean to do it. I slipped and jiggled it down. Wait a minute, and I'll throw down some more, better ones."

She scrambled about in the branches, tossing down the bright apples till they lay thick on the ground about the lounge. The boy watched her, half amused, half envious as he saw her lithe, agile motions.

"You'll have to come down and pick them up now," he said composedly, when the shower had ceased. "I can't reach them, you see."

"Oh!" Theodora gave a little groan of annoyance. "How stupid I am!"

"I don't see why. But come along down and talk to a fellow for a while."

Glimpses of a rosy face, a pale green gown and a pair of tan-colored shoes were beginning to whet his curiosity. He wanted to see what the stranger was like, at shorter range.

With a rustle and a slide and a bump, Theodora dropped lightly at his side. She caught the placket of her skirt, on the

way; but the sound of rending garments was too common an occurrence in her career to call for more than a passing attention. Strange to say, it had been much easier to talk when she had been half-hidden in the apple-tree. A sudden shyness came upon them both, as they looked in each other's eyes. There was an interval of silence. Then Theodora dropped down on the turf by the lounge, and held up a handful of apples.

"Take one of these. They're ever so much better than the first one."

"This is good enough, thank you." He took another from her outstretched hand, however. "Do you usually inhabit trees like this? I didn't hear you come."

"I've been there all the morning," Theodora answered, while she told herself that his bright blue eyes were almost as fine as Hubert's brown ones. "That tree is my city of refuge. The others call it 'Teddy's tree.'"

"And you are--" he hesitated.

She laughed, while she chose one of the apples that lay beside her, and plunged her strong young teeth into it.

"Yes, I'm Teddy," she said, with her mouth somewhat too full for elegance. "My real name is Theodora," she added, speaking rather more distinctly.

"I think I like the other best," the boy replied, laughing in his turn.

"I don't. Teddy is like a boy; but Theodora is stately and dignified. I want to be called Theodora; but in a family like ours, there are bound to be nicknames."

"You aren't the only one, then?"

"Mercy, no! There are five of us."

"How jolly it must be! I'm the only one." The boy's tone was a bit wishful. "Are they all like you?"

"I hope not." Theodora's laugh rang out a second time, hearty and infectious. "There are two good ones, and two bad ones, and a baby."

"Which are you?" the boy asked mischievously.

"What a question! I'm bad, of course, that is, in comparison with Hope. She's the oldest, and we get worse as we go down the line. I shudder to think what the baby may develop into."

The boy nestled down contentedly among his cushions and watched her with merry eyes.

"Go on and tell about them," he urged. "It's such fun to hear about a large family."

Theodora's quick eye saw that one of the cushions was slipping to one side. She replaced it with a deftness of touch natural to her, yet seemingly incongruous with her harum-scarum ways. Then she settled herself with her back against a tree, facing her new friend.

"Hope is past seventeen and an angel," she said; "one of the good, quiet kind with yellow hair and not any temper. She's had all the care of us, since my mother died. Then there's Hubert, my twin brother. He's my boy, and a splendid one. You'll like Hu. Phebe is ten, and a terror. Nobody ever knows what she'll do or say next. We call her Babe, but Allyn is the real baby. He's cunning and funny, except when Babe teases him, and then he rages like a little monster. That's all there are of us."

"And you live just over the fence?"

"Yes, we've lived there always, grown up with the place. People used to call it McAlister's Folly; but they're more respectful now."

"McAlister?"

"Yes. I'm Dr. McAlister's daughter. Didn't you know it?"

"How should I? Remember, you came down out of a tree."

They both laughed.

"That's just like me," Theodora returned. "I never do the thing I ought. Hu was coming over here in a few days; but Hope said I must wait to see what papa said."

"What for?"

"Because you're a boy. She said girls don't go to see boys. I told her I would wait, and here I am. I couldn't help it; but Hope will be horrified. She never went to see a boy in her life; but then, she's used to being horrified at me." Theodora appeared to be arguing out the situation, much to her own frank amusement.

"But don't you see it's different in this case?" the boy suggested. "I'm only about half a boy, just now. Besides, Miss Teddy, if you'll only come over again, I promise to make up for it, as soon as I'm able to go to see you."

Theodora's face brightened.

"Do you honestly want me to come again?"

"Of course. Else I shouldn't ask you. Come over the fence again. I shall be up here, 'most every pleasant morning, and everybody else is busy, fixing up the house. Come to-morrow," he urged.

"I will, if I can. Sometimes I'm busy."

"By the way," the boy added abruptly; "maybe I ought to tell you my name. Probably you know it, though."

"No." Theodora looked up expectantly. She had an appetite for high-sounding names, and she had decided that Valentine Mortimer would just suit the present instance.

"Well, I'm Will Farrington; but everybody calls me Billy."

"Oh." Then Theodora unexpectedly began to laugh. "We ought to be good friends," she said; "for our names are about equally imposing. Billy and Teddy! Could anything be more prosaic? Good-by," she added, as she rose. "Truly, I must go home now."

Billy held out his hand. It looked rather white and thin, as Theodora's brown, strong fingers closed over it.

"Good-by," he said reluctantly. "Do come again whenever you can. Remember there are five of you and only one of me, and be as neighborly as you can."

Theodora mounted the fence. At the top, she paused and looked back.

"I will come," she said. "I'll get round Hope in some way or other. Good-by till to-morrow." She nodded brightly, and jumped down out of sight, on the other side of the fence.



CHAPTER THREE

It was the first of September, and the sunshine lay yellow on the fields. Phebe McAlister and her chief friend and crony, Isabel St. John, sat side by side on a rough board fence, not far from the McAlister grounds, feasting upon turnips. The turnips were unripe and raw, and nothing but an innate spirit of perversity could have induced the girls to eat them. Moreover, each had an abundant supply of exactly similar vegetables in her own home garden, yet they had wandered away, to prey upon the turnip patch of Mr. Elnathan Rogers.

"Good, aren't they?" Phebe asked, as the corky, hard root cracked under her jaws.

"Fine." Isabel rolled her morsel under her tongue; then, when Phebe's attention was distracted, she furtively threw it down back of the fence. "I believe I like 'em better this way than I do cooked." This addition was strictly true, for Isabel never touched turnips at home.

"I want another." Phebe jumped down and helped herself to two more turnips, carefully choosing the largest and best, and ruthlessly sacrificing a half-dozen more in the process. "Here, Isabel, take your pick."

Isabel held out her hand, hesitated, then, with a radiant smile of generosity, ostentatiously helped herself to the smaller. But Phebe held firmly to its bunch of green leaves.

"No, take the other, Isabel," she urged.

"I'd rather leave it for you."

"But I want you to have it."

"And I want you to take it."

"I've got ever so many more at home."

"So've I."

Reluctantly Phebe yielded her hold, and Isabel took the smaller one and rubbed the earth away, before biting it.

"It's not fair for me to take it, Phebe," she observed; "when you were the one to get it."

Phebe giggled.

"Just s'pose Mr. Rogers should catch us here, Isabel St. John! What would you do?"

"I'd run," Isabel returned tersely.

"I wouldn't; I'd tell him."

Isabel stared at her friend in admiration.

"Tell him what?"

"Oh--things," Phebe answered, with sudden vagueness. "My papa and mamma are coming home this afternoon."

"Your stepmother," Isabel corrected.

"Well, what's the difference?"

"Lots."

"What?"

"Oh, stepmothers are always mean to you and abuse you."

"How do you know? You haven't got any."

"No; but I knew a girl that had." Isabel took advantage of Phebe's interest in the subject, to slip the half-eaten turnip into her pocket.

"What happened?" Phebe demanded.

"Oh, everything. The stepmother used to take tucks in her dresses, and whip her, and send her to bed, and even when there was company. And her own mother used to stand by the bed and say,--

'How is my baby and how is my fawn?
Once more will I come, and then vanish at dawn.'

Phebe turned around sharply.

"What a fib! That's in a book of fairy stories, and you said you knew the girl, Isabel St. John."

"So I did. Her name was Eugenia Martha Smith."

But Phebe refused to be convinced.

"I don't believe one word of it, Isabel; and you needn't feel so smart, even if you do have a mother of your own. I used to have; and I know my stepmother will be nicer than your mother."

"How do you know?"

"She's prettier and she's younger. She gave me lots and lots of peaches, too, and your mother wouldn't let us have a single one, so there now."

"Do you know the reason why?" Isabel demanded, in hot indignation.

"No, I don't, and I don't believe she does," Phebe answered recklessly.

"She said, after you'd gone, that she'd have been willing to let you have one, but you were so deceitful, you'd have taken a dozen, as soon as her back was turned. Now what do you think?"

Even between the friends, quarrels had been known to occur before now, and one seemed imminent. An unexpected diversion intervened.

"Little girls," a solemn voice sounded in their ears; "do you know you are taking turnips that do not belong to you?"

It was Mr. Elnathan Rogers. Isabel quaked, but Phebe faced him boldly.

"Yes, sir."

"But it is a sin to steal--"

"A pin." Phebe unexpectedly capped his sentence for him. "These aren't worth a pin, anyway, and I don't see the harm of hooking two or three."

"But they are not your own," Mr. Rogers reiterated. He was more accustomed to the phraseology of the prayer-meeting than of the public school.

"Ours aren't ripe yet," she answered, as she scrambled down from the fence. "When they are, I'll bring some of them over, if you want them. Yours aren't very good ones, either."

Isabel also descended from the fence. As she did so, her skirt clung for a moment, and the turnip rolled out from her pocket. Mr. Rogers eyed her sternly.

"Worse and worse," he said. "I would rather feel that you ate them here, where temptation lurks, than that you carried them away to devour at your ease. I shall surely have to speak to your parents, little girls. Who are you?"

Isabel looked to Phebe for support; but Phebe was far down the road, running to meet her brother, who had just come in sight, with Mulvaney, the old Irish setter, at his heels.

"I--I'm Isabel St. John," she confessed.

"Not the minister's girl?"

She nodded.

"Well, I swan!" And Mr. Rogers picked up his hoe, and fell to pondering upon the problem of infant depravity, while Isabel turned and scuttled after her friend.

"What do you want, Hu?" Phebe was calling.

"Hope says it's time for you to come home now, and get dressed."

"Bother! I don't want to. Isabel and I are having fun."

Hubert took her hand and turned it palm upward.

"It must be a queer kind of fun, from the color of you," he observed. "But come, Babe, Hope is waiting."

Isabel had joined them and fallen into step at their side.

"What a queer name Hope is!" she said critically, for she wished to convince Phebe that she and all her family were under the ban of her lasting displeasure.

"It is only short for Hopenstill, and it isn't any queerer name than Isabel."

"Hopenstill! That's worse. Where did she ever get such a name?"

But Hubert interposed.

"It was mamma's name, Isabel; so we all like it. Let's not talk about it any more."

Towards noon of that day, Theodora, who had taken refuge in her tree, heard Hope's voice calling her. Reluctantly she scrambled down from her perch and presented herself.

"There's so much to be done, Teddy," Hope said; "would you mind dusting the parlor?"

Theodora hated dusting. Her idea of that solemn household rite was to stand in the middle of the room and flap a feather duster in all directions. To-day, however, she took the cloth which Hope offered, without pausing to argue over the need for its use.

Once in the parlor, she moved slowly around the room, diligently wiping the dust from exposed surfaces, without taking the trouble to move so much as a vase. At the piano, she paused and looked up at her mother's picture which hung there above it. It was a life-size crayon portrait, copied from a photograph that had been taken only a few weeks before Mrs. McAlister's death, and the sweet pictured face and the simple, every-day gown were the face and gown which Theodora remembered so well. The girl stood leaning on the piano, quite forgetful of the dusting, as she stared up into the loving eyes above her, and, while she looked, two great tears came into her eyes, and two more, and more yet. Then Theodora suddenly bowed her head on her folded arms, and sobbed with the intensity of such natures as hers.

"Oh, Mamma McAlister," she cried; "come back to us! We do want you, and we don't want her. Your Teddy is so lonely. I won't have that woman here in your place. I won't! I won't!"

She raised her head again to look at the smiling lips and the tender eyes. Then abruptly she dragged forward a chair, climbed to the top of the piano and took down the portrait which had hung there since the day of its first entering the house.

It was late, that afternoon, when the carriage stopped before the house, and Dr. McAlister, with his bride on his arm, came up the walk. The children were waiting to greet them, Phebe perched on the fence, Hope on the steps with Allyn clinging to her hand, and the twins in the doorway, while old Susan stood in the hall, ready to welcome her new mistress.

There was the little flurry of meeting, the swift buzz of talk. Then Hope led the way into the great, airy parlor which she had not entered before, that day.

On the threshold, she paused, aghast. Directly facing her stood a large easel which usually held a fine engraving of the Dolorosa. To-day, however, the Dolorosa was displaced. It stood on the floor by the piano, and in its place was the portrait of Hope's own mother, looking up to greet the woman who had come to take her place in the home. Across the corner of the frame lay a pile of white bride roses, tied with a heavy purple ribbon.

"Don't mind it, Jack," Mrs. McAlister said to her husband, as soon as they were alone together. "I like the child's spirit. Leave it to me, please. I think I can make friends with her before long."

Theodora was standing before the mirror, that night, brush in hand, while the wavy masses of her hair fell about her like a heavy cape. Her eyes looked dull, and the corners of her mouth drooped dejectedly. She started suddenly when an unexpected knock came at her door.

"Come," she responded.

The door swung open, and Mrs. McAlister stood on the threshold. In her trailing blue wrapper with its little lace ruffles at the throat and wrists, she looked younger than she had done in her travelling gown, and the pure, deep color was not one bit deeper and purer than the color of the eyes above it.

"May I come in to say good-night?" she asked, pausing in the doorway, for Theodora's face was slightly forbidding.

"Of course." The girl drew forward a low willow chair.

As she passed, Mrs. McAlister laid a caressing hand on the brown hair.

"What a mass of it you have!" she said, seating herself and looking up at her stepdaughter who stood before her, not knowing how to meet this unexpected invasion.

The remark seemed to call for no reply, and Theodora took up her brush again.

"Did you have a pleasant journey?" she asked, after a pause.

"Very; but the home-coming was pleasantest of all. It was very sweet of you all to be at the door to welcome me."

"That was Hope's doing," Theodora said bluntly. "She told us we ought to be there when you came."

"It was good, whoever thought of it," Mrs. McAlister answered gently. "Remember that it is years since I've known what it meant to come home."

Theodora tossed aside her hair and turned to face her.

"How do you mean?" she asked curiously.

"My father and mother died when I was in college," her stepmother replied. "There were only two of us left, my little brother and I, and we never had a home, a real one, after that. I taught, and he was sent away to school."

"Where is he now?"

"In Montana, a civil engineer. I find it hard to realize that my little brother Archie is twenty-two, and a grown man."

There was another pause. Then Mrs. McAlister suddenly drew a low footstool to her side.

"Theodora, child," she said; "sit down here and let me talk to you. You seem so far off, standing there. Remember, I'm a stranger to you all, and I want somebody to cuddle me a little, this first night."

She had chanced to strike the right chord. Theodora never failed to respond to an appeal to her sympathy and care. All enveloped in her loosened hair, she dropped down at her stepmother's side.

"You aren't homesick, I hope."

"No; I couldn't be, with such a welcome home. But papa is down in the office, and I needed somebody to talk to. I thought you'd understand, dear. And then there were things I wanted to say to you."

"What?" Theodora asked suspiciously.

Mrs. McAlister rested her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"About the flowers, for one thing. I know so well how you felt, Theodora, when you put them there."

"What do you mean?" Theodora faced her sharply.

"My own mother died before I was seventeen, a year before my father did, and I used to wake up in the night and cry, because I was so afraid he would marry again."

"But you married papa," Theodora said slowly.

"I know I did. Since then, Theodora, I have come to see the other side of it all. But I remember the way I used to feel about it; and I know that you think I am an interloper here. Hope doesn't mind it so much, nor Hubert; it is hardest of all for you." She paused and stroked the brown hair again.

Theodora sat silent, her eyes fixed on the floor.

"I sha'n't mean to come between you and your father, Theodora," Mrs. McAlister went on; "and I shall never expect to take your own mother's place. And yet, in time I hope you can care for me a little, too."

Suddenly the girl turned and laid her lithe young arm across her stepmother's knee.

"I think I can--in time," she said. "It takes me a good while to get used to new things, some new things, that is, and I didn't want somebody to come here and drive my own mother farther off. She was different from everybody else,

somehow. But your mother died, and you'll understand about it." Her tone was quiet and dispassionate, yet, underneath, it rang true, and Mrs. McAlister was satisfied.

"Thank you, Teddy," she said gently. "Or would you rather I called you Theodora?"

"Theodora, please," the girl answered, flushing a little. "Teddy was my baby name; but I'm not a baby any longer. The others have called me Teddy so long that I can't break them of the habit; but I don't like the name."

"It suits you, though," Mrs. McAlister said, smiling as her eyes rested on the intent young face beside her. "But I'll try to remember. And now I wish you'd tell me a little about the younger ones, Phebe and Allyn. Your father told me that Hope was the housekeeper, but that, in some ways, you were the real mother of them all."

Theodora's face lighted, and she laughed.

"Did he truly say that? Hope has the real care of them, and she never fights with them, as I do."

There was an amusing, off-hand directness in Theodora's tone which pleased her stepmother. Already she felt more at home and on cordial terms with the outspoken girl than with the gentle, courteous Hope; yet she realized that her own course was by no means open before her, that it would be long before Theodora would accept her sway in the home. It would be necessary to proceed slowly, but firmly. Little Allyn and fractious Phebe would be less difficult for her to manage than their older sister. She lingered for half an hour longer, talking with Theodora until she heard Dr. McAlister's step upon the stairs; and when at last she left the room, Theodora's good-night sounded quite as cordial as her own.



CHAPTER FOUR

"I wish I could have all my wishes granted," Theodora said.

She was sitting in her favorite position on the grass beside Billy's lounge, with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her clasped hands. Billy, propped up among his cushions, smiled back at her benignly.

"You'd be most awfully disagreeable to live with," he returned.

"Thank you for the compliment. I'd like to run the risk, though."

"Let me move out of town first," the boy replied teasingly. "But you needn't be greedy; I'd be satisfied to have one wish."

"That's because you don't need so many things as I do."

"It's because I have one thing I want so much more than I do the others," he retorted.

She looked up at him with a sudden flash of tenderness in her eyes.

"I know," she said gently; "but it won't be long."

"Months, though. How would you like it to take a year out of your life?"

Theodora's brows contracted.

"Don't you suppose I ever think about it, Billy Farrington? I should be frantic, if I were in your place, and I don't see how you ever stand it. It makes my wishes seem so small, in comparison. I'd rather be poorer than Job's turkey than spend even one month on my back. Does it hurt; or is it just that you can't do things? Either one is bad enough."

"It hurts sometimes."

"Now?"

He nodded.

"I thought you looked tired, as if something bothered you," Theodora said penitently; "and here I've stayed talking to you, when you'd rather have been by yourself."

"Honestly, no. You make me forget things." He held out his hand in protest, as she started to rise. "Sit down again."

She obeyed him; but she fell silent, as she sat looking up at him. He had more color than usual, she noticed; but there were fine lines between his brows, and his red-gold hair was pushed back from his face, as if its weight irritated him.

"But what are the wishes?" he asked, restive under her scrutiny, and seeking to divert her.

"Oh, I have dozens and dozens; but there are three great big ones which increase in greatness as they go on."

"What are they?" he asked curiously. "You'll get them, if you wait long enough. People always do."

"I don't believe it. These are all impossible, and I never expect to get them; but I want them, all the same. I want--" She hesitated, laughing and blushing a little. "You'll make fun of me."

"No, I won't. Go on and tell."

"I want a bicycle first. Then I want to go to college." She hesitated again and stuck fast.

"And then?"

She raised her head and spoke rapidly.

"Don't laugh; but I want some day to be an author and write books."

She started abruptly, for a white hand suddenly rested on her shoulder.

"Bravo, Miss Teddy!--for it is Miss Teddy; isn't it? Will has told me about you and I'm glad to get a glimpse of you at last. Your wishes are good ones, all of them, and I hope you will get them, and get them soon."

As she spoke, Mrs. Farrington moved across and seated herself on the edge of the lounge.

"How is the pain, Will?" she asked, bending over to settle him more comfortably. "I was sorry to leave you so long; but you were in good hands. Miss Teddy, this boy of mine says that you have been very good to him, since we came here."

Theodora flushed a little. It was the first time she had been face to face with Mrs. Farrington, and she found the slender figure in its unrelieved black gown rather awe-inspiring. She began to wish that she had taken Hope's advice and remained upon her own side of the fence. During the past ten days, her neighborly calls had been frequent; but she had always before now succeeded in making her escape before any one else appeared. Hubert, in the meantime, had dutifully called on his new neighbor; but he had called decorously and by way of the front gate, at a time when Billy was out with his mother for their daily drive, so Mrs. Farrington had caught no glimpse of their young neighbors who had it in their power to make such a difference in her son's life. She had been amused and interested in Billy's account of Theodora's erratic calls, and she had felt an instant liking for the bright-faced, straightforward young girl who was as free from self-consciousness as Billy himself.

"When is your father coming back?" she asked, after a pause, during which she became conscious of Theodora's searching scrutiny.

"Day after to-morrow, I think. We had a letter from him, this morning."

"I am so glad," Mrs. Farrington said. "I want him to see Will as soon as he comes. Dr. Parker spoke so highly of him that I feel it is everything for us to be so near him as we are."

Theodora's color came. She was intensely loyal to her father, and praise of him was sweet to her ears.

"People say that papa is a good doctor," she replied frankly. "I hope he'll be able to help Billy. Anyway, we're all so glad to have somebody living here again. It's ages since the house has been occupied."

Mrs. Farrington smiled.

"I should judge so from the general air of mustiness I find. I rejoice in all this bright, warm weather, so Will can live out of doors. The house feels fairly clammy, and I don't like to have him in it, more than I can help. I hope you are going to be very neighborly, all of you, this coming winter."

Theodora laughed.

"All five of us? Remember, you aren't used to such a horde, and we may overrun you entirely. You'd better arrange to take us on the instalment plan."

"We're not timid," Billy asserted. "Really, I think we can stand it, Miss Teddy."

Theodora shook her head.

"You've not seen Babe yet, and you little realize what she is. In fact, you've hardly seen any of us. I want you to know Hope. You'll adore her; boys always do."

"In the meantime," Mrs. Farrington interposed; "I want to know something about--" she paused for the right word,-- "about your new mother. Some one told me she was at Vassar. That is my college, you know. What was her maiden name?"

"Holden. Elizabeth Holden."

"Bess Holden!" Mrs. Farrington started up excitedly. "I wonder if it can be Bess. What does she look like?"

"I've only seen her once."

"Was she tall and dark, with great blue eyes?"

"Yes, I think so, and I remember that her eyebrows weren't just alike; one was bent more than the other."

"It must be Bess." Mrs. Farrington rose and moved to and fro across the lawn. Theodora watched her admiringly, noticing her firm, free step and the faultless lines of her tailor-made gown. She felt suddenly young and crude and rather shabby. Then Mrs. Farrington paused beside her. "If it is Bess Holden, Miss Teddy, your father is a happy man, and I am a happy woman to have stumbled into this neighborhood. She was the baby of our class, and one of the finest girls in it. When she comes, ask her--No, don't ask her anything. It is eighteen years since we met, and I want to see if she'll remember me. Don't tell her anything about me, please."

A week later, the McAlisters were sitting under one of the trees on the hill, a little away from the house. It was a bright

golden day, and Theodora had lured them outside, directly after dinner. The doctor had been called away; but the others had strolled across the lawn and up the hill as far as a great bed of green and gray moss, where they had thrown themselves down under one of the great chestnut-trees. At their right, an aged birch drooped nearly to the earth; behind them, a pile of lichen-covered rocks cropped out from the moss, against which the twins were resting in an indiscriminate pile. To Mrs. McAlister's mind, there was something indescribably pleasant in this simple holiday-making, and she gave herself up as unreservedly to the passing hour as did the young people around her.

All at once, Theodora pinched Hubert's arm, and laid her finger on her lip. Her quick ear had caught the familiar sound of Billy's wheeled chair, and, a moment later, Mrs. Farrington came in sight over the low crest of the hill, followed by Patrick, whose face was flushed with the exertion of pushing the chair along the pathless turf.

Absorbed in listening to Hope, Mrs. McAlister heard no sound until Mrs. Farrington paused just behind her. Then she rose abruptly, and turned to face her unexpected guests.

"This is rather an invasion," Mrs. Farrington was saying, with a little air of apology; "but the maid said you were all out here, and she told me to come in search of you."

For an instant, Mrs. McAlister gazed at her guest, at the slender figure and the small oval face crowned with its masses of red-gold hair. Then, to the surprise of every one but Theodora, she gave a joyous outcry,—

"Jessie Everett!"

"Bess!"

Side by side on the moss, a little apart from the others, the two women dropped down and talked incoherently and rapidly, with an interjectional, fragmentary eagerness, trying to tell in detail the story of eighteen years in as many minutes, breaking off, again and again, to exclaim at the strangeness of the chance which had once more brought them together. On one side, the tale was the monotonous record of the successful teacher; on the other was the story of the brilliant marriage, the years of happiness, of seeing the best of life, and the swift tragedy of six months before, which had taken away the husband and left the only son a physical wreck. The years had swept the two friends far apart; their desultory correspondence had dropped; and in this one afternoon of their first meeting, they could only sketch in the bare outlines, and leave time to do the rest.

"And this is my only child," Mrs. Farrington said at last. "You have so many now, Bess, be generous with them, and let Will have as much good of them as he can. Your Teddy has been very kind to him already."

"Teddy?"

"Yes, Theodora as she calls herself. She has been making neighborly calls by way of the fence, and she and Will are excellent friends already. What an unusual girl she is!"

There came a little look of perplexity in Mrs. McAlister's eyes.

"Yes; and yet I find her the hardest one of them all to get at. The fact is, Jessie, I have two or three problems to deal with, and Theodora is not the least of them. Hope and Hubert are conventional enough, and Phebe is openly fractious; but Theodora is more complex. She's the most interesting one to me, but she is decidedly elusive."

"I wish she were mine," Mrs. Farrington said enviously. "I have so longed for a daughter, and she would be so good for Will. He doesn't know anybody here, and he is so handicapped that he can't get acquainted easily. I know he gets horribly tired of me. Women aren't good for boys, either; and now that he is so pitifully helpless, I have to watch myself all the time not to coddle him to death. I hate a prig; you know I always did, Bess, and I am in terror of turning my boy into one. I shall borrow your Teddy, as often as I can, for she is the healthiest companion that he can have."

Billy, meanwhile, had promptly been made to feel at home among the young people. With Theodora to act as mistress of ceremonies and introduce him, it had been impossible for him to feel himself long a stranger. Patrick had retired to a distant seat, and the McAlisters settled themselves in a group around the chair, Theodora close at his side with her hand resting on the wheel, as if to mark her proprietorship. She was quick to see that both Hope and Hubert approved of Billy, and she felt a certain pride in him, as being her discovery. Even Hubert's prejudice against the crippled back and the wheeled chair appeared to have vanished at the sight of the alert face and the sound of the gay laugh. Billy was in one of his most jovial moods, and Theodora knew well enough that at such times he was wellnigh irresistible.

Phebe, awed to silence by the chair and the cushions, eyed the guest in meditative curiosity; but Allyn was not so easily satisfied. From his seat in Hope's lap, he lifted up his piping little voice.

"What for you ride in a baby caj?"

No one heeded him, and he reiterated his query, this time accompanying it with an explanatory forefinger.

"What for you ride in a baby caj?"

"Hush, Allyn," Hope whispered.

"Yes; but what for?" Allyn persisted. "Why doesn't you get up and say, 'Pretty well, fank you?'"

Billy flushed and felt a momentary desire to hurl one of his cushions at the child. For the most part, he was not sensitive about his temporary helplessness; yet among all these strangers who had never seen him in his strength, he was uncomfortably conscious of the difference between himself and Hubert.

Theodora saw the heightened color in his cheeks. Without a word, she rose, picked up Allyn in her arms and bore him away to the house, sternly regardless of the protesting shrieks which floated out behind her. She was absent for some time. When she came back, it was to find that Hope had moved into her old place, and that there was no room for her beside the chair. Billy was talking eagerly to Hope, whose pretty, gentle face was raised towards him. Theodora felt a momentary pleasure in her pretty sister; but this was followed by an acute pang of jealousy to find herself quite unnoticed. For an instant, she hesitated; then she settled herself slightly at one side and back of the chair, in a position where she could be addressed only with an effort.

A little later, Billy turned and called her by name. She was sitting in moody silence, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands.

"What?" she asked indifferently.

"Come over here, Teddy," Hope said.

"Thank you, I like it better here."

There was a crushing finality in her tone. For a moment, Billy's eyes met those of Hope, and his lips curled into a smile. It was only for an instant; but Theodora saw the glance, and it kindled all her smouldering jealousy of her sister. For two weeks she had been giving all her odd moments to her new neighbor, and now, because Hope was pretty and dainty and quiet and all things that she was not, Billy had promptly turned his back on her and devoted himself to Hope. In her passing vexation, she quite forgot to take into account that she herself, not Billy, had been the movable quantity, and that the time she had given him had been hours of keen enjoyment to herself. Theodora was no saint. She was humanly tempestuous, superhumanly jealous. She could love her friends to distraction; she could give her time and strength and thought to them unreservedly; but in return she demanded a soleness of affection which should match her own.

"Where are you going, Ted?" Hubert called after her.

"Into the house."

"What for?"

"Because I want to. Besides, I must see to Allyn."

"Coming back?"

She turned her head and looked back. Billy was watching her curiously.

"No; not now."

Two hours later, she was searching her brain for an excuse for going over to the Farringtons'. She felt an imperative need to see Billy before bedtime, to assure herself that they were to meet on the old terms. No excuse came into her mind, however; and she passed a restless evening and a sleepless night.

CHAPTER FIVE

"H'sh!" Phebe said peremptorily.

Isabel giggled again, a little ostentatiously, and covered her mouth with the palm of her hand.

"H'sh!" Phebe whispered. "She'll hear you, Isabel St. John. Wait till she is hearing the first geography, and then we'll do it."

It was at that hour of the afternoon when even the most industrious of grammar-school pupils feels his zeal for learning grow less with every tick of the clock. Isabel and Phebe, however, were never remarkable for their zeal. In fact, their teachers had never been able to decide whether they were more bright or more lazy. Both characteristics were so well developed that the hours they spent in the schoolroom were chiefly devoted to exploits of a most unscholastic nature.

The schoolroom of Number Nine, Union School, was much like all other schoolrooms, save in two essential particulars. The building was old and was heated with stoves, which necessitated the use of two huge zinc screens to keep the direct heat from the pupils near by; and the room boasted, aside from the usual ranks of desks, one extra double desk placed with its back against the window at the side of the room, and in close proximity to the stoves and the sheltering screens. Two months before, when promotion of classes had brought Phebe and Isabel to the room, their quick eyes had taken in the inherent advantages of this position.

"Please, Miss Hulburt, may we sit here?" Phebe had asked.

"What makes you choose that place?" Miss Hulburt had inquired.

"Because the light is so good," Isabel had replied ingenuously.

And Phebe had added,--

"And then, you know, we shall be away from the others, so we sha'n't be able to whisper. Truly, Miss Hulburt, we've turned over a new leaf."

Phebe neglected to state in which direction the leaf had been turned. Miss Hulburt had eyed her distrustfully; then she had granted the favor. Three days later, she had regretted her concession.

The seat was so near the front corner of the room that the schoolmistress was obliged to turn her head to see the children. She was a bloodless, thin-necked, lackadaisical young person, in little-eyed spectacles, who, in her youth, had been compared to a drooping lily. From that time onward, she had given all her thought to the cultivation of slow, graceful, lily-like motions, until it had become second nature for her to ogle and smirk and roll her head gently this way and that. It had not only rendered her intolerable to the unprejudiced observer, but it had made her physically incapable of turning about quickly enough to catch the culprits in the corner. Every disturbance in the room, and they were not few nor slight, appeared to come from the one source; yet by the time Miss Hulburt could focus her little spectacles upon them, Phebe and Isabel were swaying to and fro and whispering their lessons to themselves with an intentness which was almost religious.

It was one of the warm, bright days of late October, and the children had insisted on opening the window behind them, not so much for the sake of the clear, soft air as for the furtherance of their nefarious schemes. In the lap of each child lay a tiny china doll, a long string, and a box of what, at first sight, appeared to be parti-colored rags. A closer inspection, however, showed that the rags were all round and pierced with three holes, one in the middle, the others slightly to one side.

When the first geography lesson was called, the girls propped their open books before them, and abandoned themselves to the task in hand. Selecting a circle of cloth from the box, each one of them proceeded to clothe her doll by the simple process of thrusting the head and arms through the holes and tying a string about the waist. Isabel's doll was a negro and was decked in scarlet. Phebe's was of Caucasian extraction, and preferred blue. The dolls were robed and the long strings were made fast to their necks. Stealthily and slowly the girls poked them through the crack of the open window and let them down, swinging them back and forth until they heard them click against the window of the room below. Then they jerked the strings sharply upward, and Isabel giggled again. Phebe coughed to smother the sound, and then gave her friend a warning pinch.

Miss Hulburt was turning in their direction. Instantly Phebe raised her hand, shaking it slightly and clearing her throat to attract attention.

"Well? What is it, Phebe?"

"Please, how do you pronounce p-h-t-h-i-s-i-c?"

"Phthisic. Where do you find anything about it, Phebe?" Miss Hulburt felt that she was developing in craftiness.

"In my--geography."

Miss Hulburt's smile showed that she believed she had caught the young sinner napping.

"But my book doesn't have any such word."

Isabel raised her hand in support of her friend.

"If you please, Miss Hulburt, we're reading in the back part, about the South Sea Islands. It says it's very common there."

"Phebe," Isabel whispered, a little later; "what is it?"

"What's what?"

"P-h-t-h-You know."

"I d' know, something to eat, I guess. We had it in spelling, last term, and I happened to think of it. Oh, Isabel!" For the door opened, and the teacher of the room below came into the room.

An hour later, Hubert and Theodora sat on the edge of the piazza, discussing a coming entertainment to be given by the pupils of the high school. The piazza came to the side of the driveway, and now they curled up their toes to allow the doctor to pass them, driving his new and favorite horse, Vigil.

"What a beauty she is!" Hubert said, as the carriage passed them.

"Isn't she? I'm dying to ride her."

"Better not," Hubert cautioned her. "She wouldn't stand the things old Prince does, and you wouldn't have any show at all, if you tried to manage her."

"I don't believe it," Theodora returned. "Papa said I was a good horsewoman, and I mean to try Vigil, some day. 'Tisn't strength that counts with a horse, anyway; it's gumption."

"What'll you take for the word?" Hubert asked lazily. He was lounging in the sun with his hands in his pockets and his back against a pillar, and he felt too comfortable to be inclined for a discussion.

"The word's all right." Theodora tossed her book into a chair behind her. "It means exactly what I want. It isn't common sense, nor knowledge, nor reasonableness; it's just gumption and nothing else. It's what Miss Hulburt hasn't," she added, as she glanced up the street. "Here she comes, Hu. How we used to hate her, when we were in her room! Why, she's stopped papa, and he's coming back with her. Babe must be in some fresh scrape."

Hubert rose hastily.

"That settles it. If she's coming here, I'm off."

"Where going?"

"I don't know. Over to the Farringtons', maybe, or else to the library."

"Teddy," the doctor called; "I wish you'd come and see to Vigil. I haven't any halter, and I sha'n't be long. Miss Hulburt wants to see me about Phebe. Just let the reins lie loose on her back, and she'll be all right."

"On Miss Hulburt's back?" Theodora questioned, with a giggle.

The doctor laughed, as he stepped out of the low, open buggy, handed the lines to his daughter, and turned to speak to the teacher who stood simpering at his side.

Within ten minutes, Theodora was heartily tired of her position as amateur groom. Miss Hulburt, always garrulously confidential, was pouring into the doctor's impatient ears all her theory of Phebe's temper and training. She was absorbed in her subject, but to the others the time crept heavily by. Allyn came around the corner of the house, and Theodora hailed him.

"Come, Allyn; want to come and play go to ride with sister?"

With childish clumsiness Allyn clambered into the buggy. For a time, he was content to jounce rapturously on the cushion and snap the buckle of the reins. Then he too wearied for change.

"Make the horsey go, Teddy," he demanded.

"Oh, no, Allyn; sister mustn't. We must wait for papa."

"Make him go," Allyn persisted.

Theodora hesitated. Like the immortal Toddie, Allyn's strength lay in his power of endless iteration. She foresaw a coming crisis in his temper, and, moreover, his wishes coincided with her own to a remarkable degree. Vigil was becoming uneasy, and a belated gadfly was making continued attacks upon her sensitive skin. Why not drive down the street and around the block, and shake off the annoying guest?

"Will you sit quite still, Allyn, if sister will drive just a little, little way?"

Allyn smiled rapturously.

"Ess," he hissed.

Theodora gave a hasty glance at the house, as she tightened the lines.

"I know he'd think it was the best thing to do," she argued with her conscience. "Vigil is so uneasy she wouldn't stand much longer, and this will quiet her down. Besides, I've always been used to driving."

The gadfly went too. Vigil was fretted by standing, and she quickened her pace. Before she quite realized the change, Theodora was being whirled down the street at a round trot.

"Whoa!" she urged. "Whoa, Vigil! Sh-h-h!"

But Vigil refused to *sh-h-h*. She felt an unfamiliar hand on the lines, and her sensitive mouth assured her that the hand was shaking a little. Accordingly, she dropped her ears back, gave an odd little kick with her hind legs, and swung round a corner with the carriage on two wheels behind her.

"Allyn," Theodora said, when they had gone around another corner in the same uncertain fashion; "now you must mind sister and do just what she says." The girl's face was white to the lips; but her voice was steady and brave. "Climb over the back of the seat, lie down flat in the bottom of the carriage, and then roll out on the ground."

"I don't want to," whined the child. "I wants to ride."

"But you must, or sister won't take you again. You may be thrown out and hurt, if you don't mind sister."

"It hurts to roll out," he argued.

"No; not a bit." Theodora felt herself a heartless liar; but she had lost all control of Vigil, and she knew that this was the best chance of safety for her baby brother. "Now hold on tight. I don't believe you can climb over."

All the boy nature inherent in Allyn responded to the challenge. Lithe as a little monkey, he scrambled over the seat, lay down and took the fateful roll. Vigil shied, just then, and Allyn landed in a ball, in a bed of burdocks. His wails followed the flying horse; but they were wails of temper, more than of physical injury, and Theodora's main anxiety was relieved.



Theodora went flying across the road.

Two blocks farther down the street, the buggy collided with a hay wagon. There was a crash, the horse broke free, and Theodora went flying across the road, landing in an indiscriminate, dusty pile just in front of the Farringtons' carriage.

That evening, the doctor came into the library, where his wife sat alone in the fire-light. He looked tired and worried, as he threw himself down into an easy chair. His wife came forward to his side.

"You poor old boy!" she said tenderly, as she stroked his hair.

He smiled wearily.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for any amount of money, Bess," he said, as he reached up and took her hand. "It's smashed the buggy, and demoralized my favorite horse, and bumped Allyn, and given us all a scare."

"How is Theodora?"

"Badly frightened and very meek. Her bruises don't count; but I don't think she'll do it again. I gave her a plain talk, while I was looking over her wounds, and I think she knows I mean what I say. It is a miracle that both children weren't killed; but Allyn is all right now, and Teddy will be, in a day or two. She will be rather stiff, to-morrow, but I'm not sure that I'm sorry."

"Poor Teddy!" his wife said, laughing.

"Poor me!" he answered. "And poor you! You will think I have brought you into an undisciplined horde of savages, Bess. I feel like Job, myself, for one thing follows another. I shouldn't have left the horse with Teddy, in the first place, if Miss Hulburt hadn't come to me with a tale of woe about Phebe."

"What about Phebe?" In spite of herself, Mrs. McAlister laughed.

"Some school scrape or other. Phebe is naughty as she can be, and, worst of all, she is sly. That's not like Teddy. Ted hasn't a dishonorable pore in her skin. She is headstrong and impetuous; but when she has done wrong, she comes

forward and tells the whole story and takes the consequences. She has made me more trouble, one time and another, than all the rest of them put together, and yet--" he hesitated, then he went on; "and yet, I honestly think she's the flower of the flock."

"A climbing rose, not a violet," Mrs. McAlister suggested.

"A snapdragon, if you will. She has character and force and brains enough for a dozen; and if we can provide a safe outlet for her extra vitality, I think she will make us proud of her yet."

"You're right, Jack," Mrs. McAlister answered heartily. "The girl has splendid possibilities. As you say, she only needs some sort of an outlet for her energy. She's a motherly, womanish child, too, as much so as Hope, in her way. She's got to have something to love, and to fuss over, and to fight for. I sometimes think that Will Farrington may supply a certain something that she needs."

The doctor rose and stood on the rug, facing his wife. Little by little, his face had lost its anxiety and now, at her last words, he laughed jovially.

"Will Farrington! Then Heaven help him, Bess! 'Twill be six months at least before the boy can walk to amount to anything, and helpless as he is and energetic as Teddy is, she'll be sure to break his neck. If she is going to devote herself to Will Farrington, I'll send for Dr. Parker and a cord or two of extra splints."



CHAPTER SIX

"But where are you going, Hu?"

"What?"

"Where are you going?"

Hubert crooked his hand at the back of his ear.

"Speak a little louder, please. I'm deaf."

Phebe flew at him and caught his arm.

"Hubert McAlister, tell me where you are going."

"Oh, is that what you said?"

"You knew it perfectly well. Where are you going to?"

"Over to Billy's."

"Then I'm going, too."

"No, you aren't."

"But I will. Why not?"

"Because I don't want you. You're so noisy you tire Billy."

"No, I don't. Boys don't get tired so easy. Besides, he asked me to come."

He shook himself free from her hands. She ran around him and danced down the walk before him, laughing like a mocking elf. All at once, she found herself in Hubert's strong arms.

"Now, Babe, you must go back. I don't want you."

"What can I do?" she whined. "Everybody's gone. Mamma has gone to ride with Mrs. Farrington, Hope's away, Teddy's away, and you're going."

"But mamma told you to stay and play with Allyn."

"I don't like Allyn. I want to go with you."

"You can't."

"I will."

She struggled to free herself. Hubert was tall and strong for his years, so that his sister was powerless in his grasp. He stood for a moment, holding her, while he pondered what to do; then a sudden amused light came into his eyes. Turning, he went away to the barn where, still holding Phebe with one hand, with the other he rolled an empty barrel into the middle of the floor and brought out a bushel basket. Then, before his astonished sister could fathom his intention or rebel, he had popped her into the barrel, covered her with the basket which made a firm, close lid, and walked away to the Farringtons' house.

It was the last of the golden Indian summer, and cold weather was at hand. By this time, the two households were living on a most informal, friendly basis. Mrs. Farrington and Mrs. McAlister had dropped back into the old intimacy of their college days, and the young McAlisters were fast finding out that a boy was a boy, in spite of a crippled back and a wheeled chair. Hubert and Billy were good friends, and Hope treated the invalid with a gentle, serious kindness which won his heart as surely as her dainty beauty appealed to his eyes. And yet, after all, it was Teddy for whom he cared the most, Teddy who coddled him and squabbled with him and ordered him about by turns. For the sake of her bright, breezy companionship, of her original, ungirl-like way of looking at things, he endured the ordering and the coddling, and, in spite of the halo of sanctity which should have surrounded his semi-invalidism, it must be confessed that he bore out his own part in the squabbles.

Even the coddling, as time went on, came to be rather enjoyable. There was nothing sentimental about it; it was only the natural result of the strong instinct of motherhood which belongs to such natures as Theodora's. Moreover, there

were days and days when the old pain came back to Billy and racked him until he was too weak for the wheeled chair, and he could only lie on the sofa and endure the passing hours as best he might. In those days, Theodora never failed him. She learned to know the flush of his cheeks, the glitter in his eyes, and her brisk step grew gentle, her clear, glad voice grew low. Strange to say, it was on those days that Billy wanted her. He seemed to gain rest from her exuberant strength; and Hope he regarded as the pleasant companion for his better days, when he could laugh and talk with her, and treat her with the chivalry which her delicate prettiness appeared to him to demand. It mattered less about Theodora, he told himself. She was only another fellow, and she could be treated accordingly.

Hubert had made his call upon Billy and departed again, and Phebe had freed herself by tipping over the barrel, turning herself about, and kicking away the basket; and still Theodora sat in the Farringtons' cosy library, beside the open fire. Billy delighted in reading aloud, and he had been reading to her for an hour, while she sat dreamily watching the fire. Then he dropped the book face downward on his knee, and little by little their desultory conversation stopped. All at once, Theodora started up.

"Oh, dear, I forgot. I told papa I'd do an errand for him, and I must go."

Billy yawned.

"Wish I could go, too."

She looked at him suddenly.

"Why don't you?"

"As how?"

"In your chair, of course. You needn't think you can walk yet, even if papa does say you are gaining, every day."

"Really, do you want me to go, too?"

"Of course. Shall I call Patrick to bring the chair?"

"I've my whistle, you know." He played with it irresolutely. "Are you sure I won't be in the way?"

"What nonsense!"

She stood leaning on the mantel while Patrick made ready the chair. Then, moved by some sudden sense of delicacy, she busied herself with her own wraps when the man bent down and lifted his young master in his strong arms. Since the first day of their meeting, she had never seen Billy moved, and she was struck more keenly than at first with the contrast between the utter limpness of his lower limbs and the bright activity of the rest of the boy. For an instant, her heart gave a quick thump, half of pity, half of loyalty and protecting affection. Then she laid her hands on the bar of Billy's chair.

"That's all, Patrick," she said, nodding up at the tall man beside her.

Patrick surveyed her approvingly. He was critical by nature, and his smiles were rare; but he liked Theodora for her kindness to his young master, and he unbent something of his majesty before her, rather to the surprise of Mrs. Farrington, who was quite accustomed to seeing her guests quail before the glance of her serving-man.

"Shan't I be going with you, Miss Theodora?" he asked.

"Of course. What do you suppose I am going to do without you?" Billy answered.

But Theodora interposed.

"You needn't come, Patrick. I am going to take Mr. Will, myself."

"Oh, I say, Teddy!" Billy straightened up in his chair.

"That's all right," she said gayly, as she pushed the chair away from the steps. "Let me do it, Billy; it's much nicer to go by ourselves without any Patrick, and I promise not to upset you."

"But you oughtn't to do it; 'tisn't the sort of thing a girl ought to do," he urged. "Truly, Teddy, I don't feel as if I could stand it, somehow."

Looking into his eyes, as he turned to face her, Theodora read his sensitive reluctance to receive a service of this kind from a girl, and a friend of but a few weeks' standing. She let go the handle of his chair and came forward to his side, where she bent over him, under the pretext of settling one of the cushions which had slipped aside.

"I wish you'd let me do it for you, Billy," she said, looking honestly down into his appealing eyes. "I know girls don't usually do this sort of thing for boys; but it isn't for always, you know, and there isn't much that I can do for you. If we're going to be real, true friends, you oughtn't to mind it a bit. You'd do ten times as much for me. Please say I can take you out often, till you are so you can run away from me. You know you'd rather go with me than with Patrick." And she looked down at him with a merry frankness which took away the last shade of sensitiveness which Billy was ever to know in her company.

It was the first of many similar expeditions. The chair was so light, and Theodora was so strong for her years, that it never tired her, while Billy soon discovered that "a walk" with Theodora was quite another thing from the dull and decorous outings when Patrick toiled him along through the town, in a solemnly respectful silence. With Teddy's hand on the bar of his chair and Teddy's chatter in his ears, in a week he learned more of the town than he had done in the past three months, and he came home, hungry and eager as a boy could be, full of blithe gossip and fun, to enliven his mother over the dinner-table.

"Tell you what, it was a good day for us when we came here," he remarked, one night in December, when he and his mother were settled by the open fire in the library.

His mother looked up from her book.

"How do you mean?"

"Everything, especially the Macs. There's Mrs. Mac for you, and Teddy for me. What more can you want?"

"What about Hope?"

"Hope is a stunner, only there's a sort of Sundayfied flavor to her. Theodora is better for every day. Hope goes with my best necktie; 'tisn't always that I am able to live up to her. Ted doesn't care whether I am sick or well, dressed up or rolled in a blanket; she sticks to me just the same. I say, mother?"

"Well?"

"Are we going down to New York, this winter?"

"Not till later, unless you want to go. Aren't you feeling as well, Will?" This time, Mrs. Farrington threw aside her book and came forward to her son's side.

Billy looked up at her with merry eyes which were the duplicate of her own.

"How you do worry about me, mother!" he said. "I'm gaining, every day, and you ought to know it. I shall be walking soon. But you've been saying that we'd go down, some time after Christmas, and I wondered why we couldn't take Teddy along with us. I can't discover that she's ever been anywhere, and it's time she had a chance. Don't you think so?"

Mrs. Farrington looked thoughtful.

"I don't know but you're right, Will. I've been thinking I'd like to give her a little treat, if only because she has been so loyal to you. I had thought of something else; but if you think she'd like this better, we'll see about it. Would you rather have Teddy than Hubert?"

"Yes, I like Ted better, even if she is a girl. Hubert has more variety, too, and wouldn't care so much about it."

"Very well; I will see about it," Mrs. Farrington repeated.

Her son looked up at her gratefully.

"What a trump you are!" he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Well, let's see." Teddy curled one foot under her, in the depths of the great easy-chair. "There must be two heroines, of course, and two,--no, three heroes."

"What'll you do with the odd one?" Billy asked.

"Kill him, to be sure." Theodora smacked her lips. "When the girl, his girl, you know, marries the wrong man, he will--" She paused and meditatively twisted the end of one of her long pigtailed.

"Will what?"

"That's what I'm thinking about. It must be something original, not poison nor drowning. I know; I'll have him turn sleepless, and get up--No, he'll be a sleep-walker. He must dream that her house is on fire, and get up to save her, and walk into the barn and be kicked to death by her pet horse. She'll find him there in the morning, when she goes to give him sugar." In the triumph of her lurid ending, Theodora made havoc of her pronouns.

Billy pondered on the situation, clasping his hands under his head and turning to face his friend.

"Um-m. That's not so bad," he said at length. "It might possibly happen, even if it isn't likely. I had an uncle that somnambulated, and he used to hide the sheets in an old carriage in the barn. I suppose he might just as well have gone into a stall. Well?"

"And the other men would marry the girls. This one, the dead one, would be dark and sallow, with high cheek-bones and a thin nose. The others would be more commonplace. I think I'd have them something like Hu and you."

"Thanks."

"Oh, I don't mean you are too common; but you aren't a bit like my ideal hero," Theodora said bluntly. "I like the dead one best. I always do in stories, if he's only hectic enough. I asked papa once what hectic meant, and you ought to have heard him laugh when I told him the reason I wanted to know."

"Great shame I'm not hectic!" Billy commented. "What about the girls?"

"One is light, with yellow hair and very much fun in her. She's the one the dead man likes. The other is tall and still and stately, like a lily, with soft, dark hair that droops and is caught up with rare old combs."

"How many?"

"Oh, one at a time, of course, only she has ever so many, all of them of old silver. Stop interrupting! She sways when she walks."

"Gout or intoxication?"

"Keep still, Billy, or I won't tell." Theodora's tone was impatient. There were liberties which not even Billy was allowed to take, and this story, the outcome of her girlish dreams, was a sacred subject to her. She had pondered over it for months, and now that she felt the time had come to begin the actual work of writing, she was revealing the secret to Billy. Mrs. Farrington was spending a long rainy afternoon in her own room, writing letters, and the two young people had the library to themselves. For the most part, Billy was listening in respectful silence; but his sense of humor would assert itself occasionally, and Theodora, like all budding authors, was sensitive to ridicule.

Her threat was enough.

"I won't any more, Ted," Billy returned meekly; "only, if she wobbles like that, I don't see what keeps her combs from tumbling out. Don't make her too lop-sided, or else don't match her up to the man like me. I want girls that are put together tight. That's one reason I like you."

Theodora was only half appeased by the intended compliment. She had a secret liking for the "sweet disorder in the dress," and, of late, she had vainly attempted to achieve it.

"That's all right," she said rather loftily; "only you know everybody doesn't feel the way you do."

"Of course," Billy assented hastily. "What are their names, Ted?"

"The dark one is Violet Clementina Ascutney, and the little blond one is Marianne--with a final e--Euphrosyne Blackiston. The men are Eugene Vincent and Gerald Mortimer, and the dead one is Alessandro Stanley Farrington."

"Oh, great Caesar, Ted! I can't stand that. Why can't you have a good plain Jack?"

"Jack is fearfully commonplace, and names do count for so much in a story."

Billy groaned.

"Maybe. Anyhow, you've got to leave out the Farrington. I can't go that. Which does Marianne-with-a-final-e take?"

"That's just it. She's left an orphan, rich as can be, and she asks Violet to live with her. Violet is the only daughter of a decayed Southern family, who had to teach for a living until she was rescued from her life of toil by the generosity of Marianne."

"With-a-final-e," Billy supplemented. His eyes were full of mischief, for Theodora's tone matched the pomp of her words.

"Then they live in this beautiful house," Theodora went on, sternly regardless of his flippancy; "with an old housekeeper, and they have beautiful times, parties and everything. One stormy night in summer, when they are sitting by the fire, watching the blaze and seeing pictures in it, the bell rings and a man in livery comes in to tell them that there has been a runaway accident and a man hurt. That's Alessandro, and I mean to get all this part out of papa's books."

"Well?"

"Well, he's there for weeks, and the housekeeper takes care of him and the girls don't see him; they just make him broth and things, and send them up to his room. One day, when he is pale and interesting, he leaves his room and sees Marianne and falls in love with her; but she never knows it. He is poor and too honorable to tell her his love, so he just wastes away, and she never guesses. It's all terribly sad."

"Well, yes, I should say so," Billy observed. "Are the others as forlorn?"

"No. Gerald is a student, and Marianne's cousin, who lives next door. He's jolly, with yellow hair, and means to be a doctor. He loves Violet, even if she is poor. He has a friend, Eugene, that isn't well,—not hectic a bit, but has trouble with his eyes or something, so he can't work, and comes to spend the summer there, and falls in love with Marianne. They all have great times, and poor Alessandro, in bed upstairs, can hear all their fun, when they sit on the piazza in the moonlight, and he buries his head in the pillows and sobs. One night, just in fun, Marianne makes her will and leaves all she has to Violet. Then Marianne and Eugene get engaged. Then Marianne dies of a fever, and they find the will and accuse Violet of killing her, and Eugene is so sorrowful that he goes into a convent."

"I thought men usually took to a monastery."

"What's the difference? Well, they have a trial, and Gerald stops being a doctor and studies law and makes a brilliant plea and saves her. Then, right in the court-room before them all, he presses her hand to his lips and cries, 'Mine! Mine forever!' and the whole room full of people thunders applause."

Theodora paused. Her cheeks were glowing with excitement. Billy had turned away his head and his arm half shielded his face.

"What do you think?" she demanded.

"It's great," he answered, with an odd huskiness in his tone.

"You really like it? You're not laughing at me?" Her tone was eager, yet mistrustful.

Billy's loyalty asserted itself. He took down his arm.

"Honestly, Ted, it's a great thing," he said with perfect gravity. "It's different, too; not just like all the others."

Theodora drew a deep sigh of relief as she nestled back in the chair.

"I'm so glad you like it, Billy, for I did want you to. You're the only living soul I've ever told, and now, if you don't think it's too bad, I'm going right to work on it." There was still a little note of question in her voice.

Billy held out his hand to her.

"Do you know what I honestly think, Teddy? Some day, you'll get there. If I were in your place, I'd go right to work on this, and I don't believe you'll ever be sorry. This first one may not be the success; but I'd try the chance, and keep on trying."

He was only a boy, though developed and deepened in character by his long illness until at times he spoke with the

dignity and thoughtfulness of a man. Now his words rang true, and Theodora, as she stood beside him looking down into his eyes, was satisfied; and as she went home to begin her great undertaking, she thanked Providence, as she had so often done before during the past few weeks, for bringing her so loyal a friend.

It was with a feeling of elated self-consciousness that Theodora took her place in the family circle, that evening, with her little writing tablet in her hand. As she seated herself near the light, she cast a pitying glance at her family who were talking of trivial details, quite unconscious of the fact that that evening would mark an epoch in the literary history of America. They were used to her and to her tablet, and beyond the slight shifting of the group needful to give her a place by the table, she called forth no comment from anyone but Phebe, who, bent on teasing, turned the fire of her questions upon her older sister. Mrs. McAlister promptly quieted her by a suggestion of bedtime; and Theodora, left to herself, paused to smile in anticipation of the day when, book in hand, she could remind them all of that evening. Then she launched forth into a description of the swaying figure and drooping hair of Violet, too eagerly intent upon mustering the forces of her adjectives to heed the scratching of her own pen, or the conversation of the others. Once only she was roused from her writing to hear her father say, as he entered the room,--

"Yes, I've just been over there, and Will is improving, every day. I can't see why he won't be walking a little, in a week or so. I hope so, for he's had a long pull of it, and he has shown splendid pluck."

For an instant, Theodora was conscious of a jealous pang. Once on his feet and independent, good-by to her good times with Billy. He would be free to seek boy society and boy sports, and her company would cease to interest him. Angry at herself for her selfishness, yet conscious of a vague dissatisfaction with the future, she bent still closer over her writing, while her stepmother answered,--

"Really, Jack? I had no idea of it's coming so soon. Did you know that Jessie has asked us all to eat Thanksgiving dinner with her?"

The talk strayed on, but Theodora had lost herself once more. She had finished with Violet, and was now painting the horrors of the stormy night outside the house where the two girls sat over the fire. Like most girls of her age, Theodora had a natural talent for melodrama, and she revelled in her description, as her pen raced over the paper. Pausing at last to decide whether *lurid* or *murky* best described the night, she caught Hope's eyes fixed on her steadily.

"What is it?" she asked abruptly.

"I was thinking it was about time you began to put up your hair," Hope answered, rising and laying her hand upon Theodora's heavy braids.

The transition was sudden and sharp. Theodora had been feeling as if she trod on air. Now the clouds seemed to part and let her drop into the common clay. She shook off her sister's hand.

"I don't want to put up my hair," she said sharply.

"But you're old enough, and you would look so much better. Don't you think so?" Hope appealed to her stepmother.

"I don't care how I look. I want to be comfortable." Theodora threw her pen down on the table.

"But you're almost a young lady," Hope urged, with a quiet persistency which exasperated Theodora. "You are really too old to wear two tails, any longer."

"I don't care if I am!" Theodora exclaimed hotly. "It's neat, and it's comfortable, and I intend to wear it like this till I get ready to put it up. You can take care of your own hair, Hope McAlister, and I'll take care of mine."

At best, Theodora was hot-tempered. To-night, excited by her attempt at writing and tired with the unwonted effort, she flashed like a train of powder. She realized, even in the midst of it, that her annoyance was out of all proportion to the cause. Before she could control herself, Hubert gave a new direction to her thoughts.

"If all you're after is comfort, Teddy," he drawled; "I'd advise you to get a hair-cut. It's much the most comfortable thing you can find."

For the moment, Theodora was too angry to see the humor of his suggestion.

"I will," she exclaimed. "Hope McAlister, if you say another word, I'll have my hair cut off."

"Oh, Teddy dear!" Hope's hand was very gentle, as it touched her hair. "You wouldn't do anything so crazy. Just see how pretty I can make you look."

But Theodora jerked herself away, rushed out of the room and up to her own room.

"I won't! I won't!" she said fiercely. "I hate Hope. She's jealous because my hair is better than hers. I won't put it up. I'd rather cut it off, myself, short off."

She paused to listen. Hope was coming up the stairs. She recognized the slow, gentle footfall. It came nearer the door. Theodora took a quick step to the table and caught up the scissors from her little work-basket.

"Come, Teddy," Hope called; "don't be silly and get cross about a little thing like that."

Theodora clashed her scissors ominously. Even in her anger, there came a sudden wonder how Marianne would meet such a crisis, and her voice took a higher, more incisive note, as she said,--

"Hope, unless you let me alone, I'm going to cut it off."

"But, Teddy--"

There came a snip and a long, grinding cut, followed by a light thud, as one heavy braid fell to the floor. Startled at what she had done, Theodora turned to the mirror. One side of her head was covered with loose, shaggy locks standing out in wild disorder. As she looked, she grew white and her lips quivered. She hesitated for a moment; then, shutting her teeth, she sheared away the other braid. For a moment longer, she stood staring at the white face and wide, terrified eyes reflected in the mirror. Then, throwing aside the scissors, she cast herself down on her bed and pulled the pillows over her head to smother the sound of her sobs.



CHAPTER EIGHT

MY DEAR TEDDY,—If you haven't entirely forsaken us, can't you come over and spend the afternoon and dine here? We both of us miss your calls, Will especially, since he hasn't been so well; and we can't think why you have turned the cold shoulder to us. I wanted to send for you, yesterday; but Will wouldn't let me, for fear you had something else to do. To-day, I haven't told him, so he won't be disappointed.

Come if you can, dear, and stay to dinner with us. Will is so blue that he needs you to brighten him up, now he is on his back again.

Sincerely,

JESSIE FARRINGTON.

This was the note which Patrick had brought over, that morning, and which Theodora now sat twisting in her fingers, while she anxiously wondered what it all meant. She had not heard that Billy was worse, and it was a week since she had seen him, for she still lacked courage to show him her shorn head. She dreaded his teasing; most of all she dreaded the questions he must inevitably ask. Her own family was bad enough; she felt that she could not face him, if once he knew the secret of her missing locks.

Never was a hasty, hot-tempered act more thoroughly punished than this. There had been little need for the doctor or his wife to add a word. Theodora's sorrow and shame were intense; intense, too, was her power of self-abasement. For a week, she spent most of the time in her own room, as if she feared to meet the eyes of her family; and, in this self-imposed isolation, it chanced that she had heard no mention of the Farringtons.

It had taken repeated calls to bring Theodora down to breakfast, the morning after her outbreak. In all her after-life, she never forgot the exclamations of horror and surprise which greeted her when she appeared, half-defiant, half-sulky, and altogether shamefaced. For a few moments, there was a babel of comment; then Mrs. McAlister rose and took her hand.

"Theodora, dear," she said gently; "come into my room, and tell me all about it."

The door closed behind them, and for two hours they were alone together. What passed between them, no one else ever knew. When the long talk was ended, and Theodora, clinging to her new mother just as she had been wont to cling to her own mother, years ago, had sobbed till she could sob no more, Mrs. McAlister left her and went to her husband.

"She's punished enough, Jack," she said to him. "There wasn't much need for me to say anything; but I think perhaps this has given me my opportunity. I've come closer to the child than I ever dared to hope, and, with Heaven's help, I mean to stay there."

Her husband bent over her.

"You're good to my naughty girl, Bess," he said gently.

She smiled; but her eyes looked heavy.

"She is worth it, Jack. At heart, she is sweet and sound as a girl can be. It is only this ungovernable temper of hers. She is quick and impulsive; but she is sorry enough now. I think she won't do anything like this again. And I have promised that she sha'n't be teased about it, and, above all, that no one shall speak of the affair to the Farringtons. Can you see about it, Jack? A word from you will help me in this."

For the next few days, a spirit of heavy quiet rested on the McAlister household. As a rule, Theodora was the life of the house, and now that she moped in corners, hiding her shorn head as best she could, the others were dull and listless in sympathy.

"I hate everybody," Phebe said, coming into the dining-room where Hope was arranging flowers, one morning.

"Why, Babe, what's the matter?" Hope looked up in surprise.

"Nothing, only I'm lonesome."

"Where's Allyn?"

"In the attic. He spoils everything, and I don't want to play with him. Teddy's cross, and Hu won't do anything."

There was a silence, while Hope filled a tall vase with late chrysanthemums.

"I wish I were a flower," Phebe said moodily; "only Allyn would tear it to pieces. I'd rather be a vine; that's tougher."

"What has Allyn done?" Hope asked.

"I don't tell tales, Hope McAlister." And Phebe departed with her chin in the air, leaving Hope to console herself for the rebuke with the reflection that Phebe's code of honor, in such cases, varied according to her own share of the blame.

Half an hour later, Phebe appeared to Billy, who sat in an easy-chair before a crackling fire in the library.

"Hullo, Phebe!" he exclaimed. "How you was?"

"All right. I thought I'd come over and see you, a while."

"That's good. You don't often come. Sit down, won't you?" He waved his book hospitably in the direction of a chair.

"Where's Teddy? She hasn't been over here for an age."

"She's--busy." Phebe spoke with a tone of conscious mystery.

"What do you mean?" Billy turned to look at his guest in astonishment.

"Oh--nothing."

"What is the matter? Is Teddy sick?"

"No; she's all right." Phebe gave a hostile sniff.

"Then why doesn't she come over?"

"I s'pose because she doesn't want to."

"Is she mad about anything?"

Phebe shook her head mockingly. Then she rose and stood facing him, with her back to the fire.

"It's all Teddy, Teddy, Teddy!" she said complainingly. "Nobody takes the trouble to talk to me, and you're just as bad as the rest of them. You needn't think your old Teddy is perfect, for she isn't."

"Maybe not; but she is a blamed sight better than you are," Billy answered more bluntly than courteously.



"What do you think of this?" she demanded.

"Is she?" Phebe plunged her hand into her pocket. "What do you think of this?" she demanded, pulling out a long brown pigtail and brandishing it before Billy's astonished eyes.

"What's that?"

"Can't you tell? You've seen it often enough."

"Let me see." Billy held out his hand.

"Sha'n't. It's Teddy's. She cut it off."

"I don't believe it. Let me take it, Babe." His tone was commanding.

For her only answer, Phebe sprang back out of his reach, caught her heel in the rug and fell. Her stiff white apron lay for an instant against the grate; the next moment, it blazed above her head.

With a swift exclamation, Billy struggled to move, to go to her assistance. Again and again he tried to wrench himself from the chair; then, with a groan, he fell back and blew a long, shrill note on the silver whistle which never left him.

In a moment, it was all over. Patrick had rushed in and wrapped Phebe in a rug. Then, more frightened than hurt, the child had started for home, concocting, as she went, a plausible story to account for her charred apron. The maid came in to put the room to rights, and no one knew but Billy, as he ordered Patrick to move him to the sofa, that the sudden strain had done his invalid back a lasting injury. That was three days before, and now Theodora sat twisting his mother's note in her hands and wondering what it all meant.

The doctor was away, that day, and Theodora was too proud to ask the others any questions. She briefly explained to her mother that Mrs. Farrington had invited her to spend the afternoon and dine there, and, putting on her broadest hat, she went away across the lawn.

Patrick admitted her, and, even in the momentary glimpse she had of him, she saw that he looked unusually grave. As

she entered the library, however, she was reassured, for the room looked just as usual, with Billy lying on the familiar lounge by the fire. It seemed so good to her to get back there, after her self-imposed banishment, that, forgetful of her cropped head, she sprang forward to his side.

"Oh, Billy!"

"Have you really come, Ted? I began to think you'd cut me. Where have you been?"

"At home. But what's the matter, Billy?" For, as she took his hand, she was startled at his pallor and at the heavy shadows under his eyes.

"Only this set-back," he answered. "My back's given out again, so I can't move a bit."

"What do you mean? When was it?" She dropped down beside him, and rested her arm on the edge of the lounge.

"Didn't you know it?"

"No. When was it?"

"How queer you didn't know! It was three days ago. I strained myself somehow or other, and it kept getting worse, till it's about as bad as it was at first."

"Oh, Billy!" Theodora's overstrained nerves were giving way. After her outbreak, after the shame which had followed and the week when she had missed her friend daily and hourly, this last was too much. After all her protestations of loyalty, he had been ill and suffering, and she had not known it, nor been near him at all.

"And you have to lie flat on your back, like this?" she demanded almost fiercely.

"Yes."

"And it hurts?"

"Yes."

"Much?"

"Some--yes, a good deal."

"All the time?"

He nodded.

"And I didn't know it, and you wanted to see me, and I never came near you." All at once, Theodora's head went down on her hands. "What did you think, Billy?"

"I thought you'd got sick of me," he answered frankly. "I couldn't see any other reason you should go back on me just now. I did miss you like fury, Ted."

"Why didn't you send word to me?"

He looked up at her with an odd little smile.

"Wait till you are flat on your back and no special good, and you'll know why."

His smile hurt her. She laid her hand on his again.

"Did you think that, Billy, really and truly?"

"Yes; that is, sometimes, but I don't now. You've stuck to me pretty well, Teddy."

"Do you know what was the reason I didn't come?" she asked impulsively.

"No."

"It was this." She pulled off her hat and sat before him, a strange, forlorn-looking Teddy, with her cropped head and tear-stained eyes.

"Jove!"

"Yes, I did it," she confessed bluntly. "I was mad at Hope and cut it off."

The boy lay staring at her in surprise. She drooped her head, unable to meet the amused look in his eyes.

"It's awful, isn't it?" she asked.

"Why, no; I don't think it is so bad," he said consolingly. "It isn't exactly pretty, and you look a good deal like a boy. When I get used to it, though, I think I shall rather like it. It seems to suit you, somehow."

She looked up gratefully.

"What a dear old fellow you are, Billy! That was the reason I didn't come. I couldn't bear to have you see me, or to know about it. Now I don't mind anybody else. I hated to have you know I was so horrid."

"You are peppery, Teddy, for a fact. Don't get in a tantrum again, or you will cut off your nose next, and that won't grow again." He tried to laugh; but his color was coming and going, and Theodora saw that he was suffering.

She sprang up and stooped to arrange the cushions about him.

"What is it?" she asked, startled at his changing color.

"It's the old pain. It won't last but a minute."

"What does papa say?" she asked, when he was easier again.

"Nothing, except that it's a strain and that I must keep quiet."

"How long?"

"That's the worst of it." There was an utter dreariness in his tone which Theodora had never heard before. "I didn't mean you to know; but I was going to surprise you all by walking over to your house, Thanksgiving morning, and now--" he hesitated, and, boy as he was and a plucky boy, too, two great tears came and splashed down on Theodora's fingers; "now he says it will be two or three weeks before I can even sit up again."

That night, when Theodora rose to go home, she turned back to the lounge once more, after she had said good-by to Mrs. Farrington.

"You must come in, every day," Mrs. Farrington said. "Will is better already for your being here."

Theodora herself saw the change, as she bent down to shake hands. He looked brighter and better than when she had come, more animated and eager, more like his old self.

"Billy," she said steadily; "I want you to promise me something."

"What's that?"

"That, if the time ever comes again when you want me, or when I can help you, you'll send for me, without waiting. I'm only a girl, I know; but I'm better than nothing, and I never go back on my friends."

Billy smiled up at her benignly.

"No, Ted; I don't believe you ever do. And there are times when 'only a girl' is about as good as anything you can find. Come again."

"I will," she answered.

She kept her word so well that, during all Billy's imprisonment, she never failed to spend a part of each day with him. It did her good to feel that some one counted on her coming and was the better for it. It made her steadier, more reliable; and, in the long, dreary days that followed, she gained a new gentleness from her constant association with her suffering friend. There were days when he was irritable and nervous, days when he was despondent, days when he was too weak with pain to talk; but, during all this time, Theodora was loyal to him, soothing him, cheering him up and bearing his ill-temper with a gentleness which surprised even herself, ministering to his comfort and content to an unmeasured degree, and at the same time gaining a quiet womanliness which she had never known before.

And the days passed on, and the youth and the maiden reaped from them all a harvest of good, a mutual gain from their frank intimacy.

CHAPTER NINE

"And I want a horsey, and a wagon to hatchen on behind," Allyn shouted.

"And I must have a new sled, and I want a set of furs and a canary bird," Phebe clamored.

"Is that all?" Hubert inquired blandly. "Why not ask for a wedding gown and a pink elephant while you are about it, Babe? Don't be modest. I know what Teddy is going to have."

"Oh, what?" Theodora looked up from her game of euchre with Billy, who, promoted to his chair again, was spending the evening with the McAlisters.

"She'd better have a chunk of ice, to cool her off when she gets mad," suggested Phebe with sudden asperity, as she thought of a recent passage at arms with her elder sister.

"Phebe!" Mrs. McAlister's tone was ominous, and Phebe subsided, grumbling, while her mother rose to put Allyn to bed.

Allyn retreated to Hubert's knee and pressed his rosy cheek against that of his brother.

"No, mamma," he urged. "Can't Phebe be tendooed first?"

"Allyn-esque for attended to," Theodora explained to Billy, while her mother dislodged the child from his place of refuge and marched him out of the room. "But does it seem possible that Christmas comes, next week?"

"Well, yes, I think it does. This year has been long enough to make over into a dozen ordinary ones. Let's see, when is Christmas?"

"Why, don't you know? Christmas is our great day of the year, and we count the days for months ahead. This year, it will be an extra jolly one, for we want to show mamma our ways." This from Hubert, who sat with his elbow on the arm of Billy's chair, superintending his play.

"What do you do?"

"Just what everybody else does, I suppose; give presents and make a row generally."

"Hubert, what will Billy think of us?" Hope interposed. "It's this way: mamma, our own mother, always said that Christmas was the day when we all should be children together, and play plays and have a grand frolic. Years ago, when Hu and Teddy and I were little bits of children, we began having our basket, and we have kept it up ever since."

"We do all the things, jokes and presents and all, in bundles," Theodora said, taking up the story in her eagerness; "and we put them all in this basket. It is an old clothes-basket, large as the house and broken, but we never change it. And then we draw them out, one at a time."

"It's covered, you know, and we just fish under the cover, so as not to see what comes. They used to begin with me; but Allyn is the baby, and has the first chance now." In her interest, Phebe quite forgot to resent it when Theodora pulled her down into her lap.

Billy sat looking from one to another of the group, wondering to see the faces brighten and grow eager as the talk ran on.

"It sounds good fun," he said rather wishfully, as soon as there was a pause. "I suppose it's because there are such a lot of you."

"The more the better, of course," Hope said. "We always have Susan and James come in to look on, and even Mulvaney has his new ribbon and a bone. He has learned to know the basket, and he lies down beside it as soon as it is brought in to be filled."

"When do you do it?"

"Christmas eve," Hubert answered. "We never could stand it till Christmas day. We always rush through supper, Christmas eve, to be ready as soon as we can. You should see our house when we get everything out of the basket."

"I wish I could."

"What do you do?" Phebe demanded.

"Why, we give presents at breakfast; that's all. Of course it will be different, this year. Papa was here, last Christmas. He gave me my watch then."

"Oh!" Phebe became round-eyed with admiration. "Did he give you that? I should think you would miss him."

Hope came to the rescue.

"It will be lonely, this year. I remember how it was, after mamma died. We didn't want to have any Christmas; but papa said she would rather we kept up the old ways, so we did just as we always had done."

"I wish we did things the way you do." Billy pushed his hair impatiently away from his face. "You don't know how it seems to a fellow to be alone. It is no sort of fun."

"Adopt us," Theodora suggested, laughing.

Billy flashed at her a swift glance which told, plainly as words, how gladly he would carry out her suggestion.

Passing through the hall, Mrs. McAlister had heard the children's talk. A little later, she knocked at the door of her husband's office. The doctor pushed aside the sheets of the essay he was writing for a medical journal, and rose to greet his wife.

"Well, Bess, the sanctum is glad to see you."

"Am I interrupting?" she asked, as she sat down by the table.

"Not a bit. You never do."

"So glad, for I want to talk, Jack."

"What now? Is Phebe in mischief, or is Teddy proving obstreperous?"

"Neither; it's only this." And she repeated the substance of the children's conversation. "Now are you ready to do some missionary work, Jack?"

"Of course; anything you like. What is it?"

"May Jessie and Will come to your Christmas eve?"

"Ours," he corrected gently.

"No, yours. You know I've never been here for it, and it is all new to me. I don't want to crowd your good time; but the boy is so lonely."

"Have him, of course. The Savins is large enough to hold a few more, and he needs all the fun he can get," the doctor said heartily. "There's only one thing I am afraid of."

His wife looked up quickly.

"I thought that all over before I came to you, Jack; but I have known Jessie longer than you have, and I know she won't misunderstand us. She knows we can't give expensive presents, and she will care, as we do, for the fun and the Christmas spirit. I know she will be glad to come, if only for Billy's sake."

But Mrs. Farrington demurred a little, the next day, when the plan was suggested to her.

"I have just promised Will to have you all over here," she said. "Still, if you all will promise to come here for Christmas dinner and a bran pie afterwards, Billy and I will come to your basket. We are so lonely that it is a deed of charity to take us in."

For the next week, mystery lurked in every corner of the McAlister house. With three novices to be trained in their Christmas rite, Hope and Theodora and Hubert felt that this basket must surpass all those of previous years, and they ransacked their brains, their house, and the shops for the jokes and nonsensical offerings which added spice to their simple presents. If the Christmas spirit of happiness and good-will were the true test, the McAlisters lived up to the full tradition of the day. Gifts simple and elaborate, hoary jokes and brand-new ones, quips and cranks of every description, were enclosed in the bundles which went into the shabby old basket, and the only clue to the possible contents of the bundles lay in the fact that, the older the joke, the more fresh and dainty was its outward disguise.

The basket stood in a deep bay-window; beside it on an easel was the portrait of the children's own mother, placed there and wreathed in Christmas greens by Mrs. McAlister's own hands. Old Susan had told her that it had stood there

in past years, and, that afternoon, the doctor had come in, to find her bending over to wreath it with holly and trailing pine.

"It's like you, Bess," he said. "The children will be so happy. They felt that Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without this."

Supper was a hurried meal that night, and it was still early when they gathered in the parlor, with Mulvaney beside the basket and Susan in the doorway, to wait for their guests.

"Oh, I can't wait," Phebe wailed. "I know such lots of things in there. I put in four bundles for Hu, and seven for Allyn, and two for papa, only one's broken, and two for Teddy."

"Let me see." Hubert counted on his fingers. "I put in six for Ted, no, seven, and four for Hope, and nine for Allyn."

"And me?" Phebe pranced impatiently.

"Oh, Babe, I forgot you."

"Hush, Babe; there's Billy's chair," Hope said, endeavoring to suppress her young sister.

"Did you know Patrick brought over a bundle, Hu?" Theodora whispered. "I saw mamma slying it into the house. 'Twas a big one, too."

"Really?" Hubert tried to look as innocent as if Billy had not consulted him about Theodora's Christmas gift.

"Yes, I'm so glad now that I hemstitched that handkerchief. It is fairly covered with my gore where I pricked myself; but he won't be critical, I hope."

The babel of greeting and chatter was hushed, as Hope took her seat at the piano and the children gathered around her to sing their favorite carol. The last note had scarcely died away when Allyn, at a signal from Hubert, gave a joyous shriek and plunged upon the basket.

"One at a time," Hope cautioned him; "and bring the bundle to sister, so she can read the writing on it."

The first package chanced to contain his much-desired horsey, and he retired to a corner to embrace it, while Phebe and then Theodora took their turns at drawing.

"Draw for me, please," Billy asked Theodora, when his turn came.

"Not a bit of it. You must do your part." And she had whisked him across the room and landed him beside the basket, before he could realize her intention.

For two hours, the fun was fast and furious. Mulvaney, on the floor in a nest of papers, was wrestling with a vast bone, Mrs. Farrington was admiring a bit of Hope's dainty handiwork, and Hubert was trying hard to realize that at last he was the proud owner of a watch. Everyone was happy, and Hope and Theodora congratulated themselves upon the success of their Christmas frolic.

"It's your turn to draw, Billy." And Theodora rolled him across the floor to the fast-emptying basket.

"Bah! I can't reach it. Get the one in the corner, Ted. It's a big square one."

"Is this it?"

"Yes." Billy took it and read the label. *Theodora, with love from Babe.*

"Why, Babe dear, you gave me the gloves."

Phebe flushed.

"It's probably some grind on you, Teddy," Hubert suggested, as his sister tore away the wrappers.

Inside was a box, then another. Phebe smiled in conscious satisfaction, while Theodora opened one layer after another of the papers within and at last drew out a long flexible bundle.

"Phebe, you dear, it is the new belt I've been wanting," she said.

Phebe began to look rather uneasy.

"Wait and see," she advised. "It may not be as nice as you think it's going to be."

With eager hands, Theodora unrolled the tissue papers, while the others gathered round to see what was inside. Then there came a sudden hush of surprise and consternation. Out from the papers had slipped a long, soft braid of brown hair, and, with a startled sob, Theodora had buried her face in her hands. The next instant, Hubert's hand descended on Phebe's cheek with a ringing blow.

For a few moments, it seemed that the evening was to end in dismal failure. Then Mrs. Farrington, with her arm about Theodora's waist, marched her across the room to the basket to renew the drawing, and soon the little incident was apparently forgotten. Later, when the merriment was subsiding, Mrs. Farrington missed Theodora and went in search of her. She found her in the library, standing alone before the open fire.

"It was too bad, dear," Mrs. Farrington said. "Phebe didn't realize what she was doing, of course; but it was hard for you. But I want to thank you for the pleasant evening and for the pleasant months Billy has had with you. This little package was to go in the pie, to-morrow; but I wanted instead to give it to you when we were alone, so I could say to you how I appreciate all you have done for my boy."

And Theodora, as she looked at the little sapphire on her finger, felt that not all the Phebes in creation could spoil her merry Christmas.

A week later, she went racing across the lawn to the Farringtons', with a long brown bundle over her shoulder.

"Let me in quick, Patrick," she cried, as she dashed through the door. "Happy New Year, Billy! I've brought you a New Year's present. I said I must be the one to bring it, and papa is coming over in a few minutes to teach you to use it." And, with a clatter and a bang, she cast a pair of crutches on the floor at Billy's feet.



CHAPTER TEN

Billy sat in his chair before the McAlisters' front steps. Theodora sat beside him on the steps, with her chin in her hands. Though it was late in January, the midday sun was warm around them, and they were basking in it like two young turtles.

"I know," Theodora was saying restively; "but I want to do something really and truly useful, something that will help on the world. Here I am, sixteen years old, and I've never been of the least use to anybody."

"How about me?" Billy suggested, luxuriously stretching and then clasping his hands at the back of his head.

"You? Oh, you don't count."

"Thanks."

Theodora sprang up and whirled the chair to the gate and back again to the steps.

"What a tease you are, Billy! Next time, if you don't behave, I'll tip you out. You know what I mean. I get just as much fun out of this as you do. What I want is to help on the masses."

"Rats!" Billy remarked profanely.

"Not rats at all. You don't need me; they do."

"So do I. Who takes me all over town?"

"That's selfish, Billy. They need me more than you do, then."

"No, they don't either. Who'd take me?"

"Patrick. Besides, you'll take yourself soon, and then you won't want me any more."

There was a little involuntary note of sadness in her tone, and Billy smiled to himself, as he shifted his position to face her.

"What's started you to talking all this flummery, Ted?" he asked bluntly, heedless, in true boy fashion, of the vague aspirations and aims of sweet sixteen. "I thought you had too good sense to get sentimental."

The word stung Theodora, and she started up abruptly.

"Let's go to the shore," she said shortly.

"Aren't you too tired? I am growing fat and heavy, you know."

For a week, now, Billy had been installed at the doctor's, while his mother had been called away by the illness of her only brother. The arrangement suited them all, Billy and Theodora even more than the others. The two friends never seemed to weary of the long hours they spent together, never appeared to be at a loss for subjects of conversation. For the most part, Hubert was with them; but there were times, like the present, when his other friends demanded his whole attention, and Billy and Theodora were left to each other's society. Hope was absorbed in other interests, though she was always kind and considerate of their guest; and, by a tacit consent, Phebe's company was shunned rather than courted.

The winter had been good to Billy. Day by day, his strength was coming back to him, slowly and by almost imperceptible stages, it is true; but by looking back from month to month, they could see his steady progress. In his better days, he could walk about the rooms now, and even this slight advance had put fresh life into him.

"Some day, I may begin to have a little respect for myself again," he had said to Hubert, the day after his first expedition across the library. "I've been like a rag doll for so long that I began to think I'd never stir alone any more. Now it looks more as if I might be somebody in time, and I can wait."

"Strikes me you've been waiting about long enough," Hubert returned impatiently. "I wish you'd hurry up and come to life. There's fun enough to be had, as soon as you're on your legs again."

"I should think it would seem queer to you to see me walking," Billy observed reflectively.

"It does. I can't make it seem a part of you, somehow. I'm so used to the chair," Theodora said, as she joined the group. "After all, Billy, I think I shall miss it a little."

Well she might, for by this time the chair had become a part of her life. Leaving Patrick to his own devices, the two young people had explored the town, wandering here and there as Billy's curiosity or Theodora's whim took them. There were days when Billy was too weak for his ride, there were days when Theodora was too busy with other things to take him out during the warmer part of the day; but, as a rule, three or four times a week they wandered away in search of fresh scenes and an occasional adventure.

"By the way, Ted, how comes on the story?" Billy asked, as they drew near the steps once more and Mulvaney came forward to meet them.

"Seventeen chapters are done," she answered, slackening her pace a little.

"Moses! How many do you expect to have?"

"I don't know. They seem to count up awfully fast. I've only just come to the first of the loving. I can't seem to make much of that. I do wish I knew how people make love."

"Perhaps you'll find out, some day," Billy suggested.

But Theodora frowned on him.

"Don't be silly. I'm not that kind, nor you either. I wish you could help me out on it. Don't people ever--"

"Collaborate? Yes. When are you going to read it to me?"

"Do you really want it?"

"Yes."

"Well, to-night, perhaps, if we can get away by ourselves."

However, fate willed otherwise.

"Theodora," the doctor said, as they were leaving the dinner-table, that day; "there's an errand I'd like you to do for me, about four o'clock. I promised to send some medicine down to a house in Water Street for a sick baby. Can you take it down? It's nothing catching," he added reassuringly to his wife.

"I'll go. Can I take Billy?"

"Better not. It's a wretched region for wheels, and you might have an upset," the doctor advised. "Come to the office, soon after four, and I'll have it ready. You're getting to be your father's right-hand man, Teddy." And he rested his hand affectionately on her shoulder before he left the room.

A month before that time, Mrs. Farrington had received a visit from an old college friend, one of the energetic workers in the university settlements, and her stories of life in the slums had made a strong impression upon Theodora's mind. For the time being, other interests lost their charm. Theodora was content to sit by the hour and listen to the experiences so remote from her own sheltered life. She was as impressionable as most girls of her age; more than most girls, she retained her impressions, dwelling upon them and magnifying them until they seemed to become less a day-dream than a part of her actual experience.

For the past three weeks, she had been filled with vague, restless longings to have a share in the vast work of social reform; most of all, her warm young heart turned to the neglected children. It was the same impulse of protection which had first roused her interest in Billy Farrington, the helpless invalid; and now, had Billy been a less well-trying friend, he might have found himself forsaken to make room for this new hobby of Theodora. As it was, she merely used him for a safety-valve, and poured into his ears mysterious hints of the career for which she was temporarily yearning.

The medicine was delivered, and, in the gathering dusk, Theodora's face was turned towards home. It was a part of the town into which she rarely penetrated,--a network of squalid streets near the water front; and, a month ago, she would have swept through them with her nose in the air. Now, however, she looked to the left and the right, as she walked onward, hoping almost against hope that her secret prayers would be answered, and that, even in this hasty progress, she might see some work ready for her hand. Providence, always kind, was in a benign mood, and her desire was fulfilled with unexpected promptness.

Down the street towards her came a forlorn little figure. It was a child of nine, a girl whose grimy face was streaked and swollen with tears, whose red hood was faded to a dull yellowish shade, whose coarse gray coat was so many sizes too large for her that the sleeves were folded back to allow her blue, chapped hands to come forth to the light of day and to their destined usefulness. Theodora's heart gave a quick bound, and, stepping forward, she bent over the wailing child.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

The child stopped sobbing and blinked up at her, disclosing a face of unmistakably Keltic ancestry.

"What is the matter?" Theodora repeated.

"Huh?"

Theodora experienced a momentary shock. Not thus had her dreamed-of foundlings answered to her imaginary queries. She rallied and reiterated her question. The child's tears fell again.

"I'm--I'm losted, and I'm tired and so hungry."

Even in this woful climax, Theodora noted the gurgle of the child's sobs. She told herself that it was like water bubbling from a bottle, a large earthen bottle. Then she reproached herself for her misplaced sense of humor.

There followed a little question, a little answer, a little consolation. Then, before she quite realized what she was doing, Theodora was walking rapidly towards home, with brotherly love swelling in her heart, and the child's smutty hand clasped in her woollen mitten. She had delayed longer than she knew, the walk home was long, and before she reached there, the twilight had quite fallen, the house was brightly lighted, and the family were gathered in the dining-room.

"Dear me, they're all at supper!" she said to herself, as she went up the steps. "Never mind, little girl," she added, with a conscious patronage which not even her sympathy could keep down. "They're having their supper now. I'll take you up to my room, and, as soon as they're through, I'll give you something to eat."

Her feminine intuition told her that the child's welcome would not be so warm if she were presented at the supper-table. For a moment, she hesitated what disposition to make of her charge. Then, herself hungry and eager to get to the table and tell the story of her adventure, she led the way to her room and popped the child into her own dainty bed.

Mrs. McAlister looked up as Theodora entered the room.



"Teddy, dear, this is my brother Archie, come at last."

"You are late, Teddy, and I was just getting anxious about you. Archie, this is my twin daughter, Theodora. Teddy dear, this is my dear brother Archie, come at last." There was an exultant note in Mrs. McAlister's voice which Theodora had never heard before.

Theodora gave a quick glance at the stranger who sat between her stepmother and Hope, and the first look told her that she had found a friend, one who would be true and loyal as a man could be. There was nothing especially distinctive about Archie Holden. He was tall and blond and athletic, sufficiently good-looking, and with easy, off-hand manners. But his keen blue eyes, the curve of his little blond mustache, above all, the grip of his hand and the ring of his voice suited Theodora, and, long before supper was over, she had forgotten her protegee in the excitement of the unexpected addition to their family circle. It was fortunate, perhaps, that the child, more tired than hungry, had fallen asleep in the midst of Theodora's soft white bed.

As they were leaving the table, Mrs. McAlister laid a detaining hand on Theodora's arm.

"Teddy, I've had to put Archie into your room, to-night. Can you sleep in the little back chamber? I am sorry to turn you out, but Billy has the spare room, and I didn't like to put Archie with him. Do you mind, dear? It's only for one night; then we can make some other arrangement."

"I don't care at all," Theodora answered readily. "It wouldn't do to put him in with Billy. When did Mr. Holden come?"

"At five. It was such a surprise, too. You know we didn't expect him for a week; but the heavy snow sent the party in, and he is to have a vacation till the middle of March. What do you think of my little brother, Teddy?"

"I think he's splendid," Theodora replied so emphatically that her mother smiled.

"Run along after him, then," she said. "I want you and Hope to see that his visit is a good one. Hope took your things into the back room, Teddy, so you'll find everything ready for you at bedtime."

To Theodora's eager young mind, it seemed that the evening was the shortest she had ever spent, and, when ten o'clock struck, she was still sitting perched on the arm of Hope's chair, while she listened to Archie's stirring tales of life in camp and field, in mountain and canon and desert. Then there was an interruption, for the bell rang and a voice was heard asking for the doctor. Archie rose.

"Another patient, doctor? I believe I'll go to bed. Three nights in a sleeper are too much for me. No, don't come with me, Bess; I know the way perfectly."

However, Mrs. McAlister went to his door with him. As she came downstairs, her husband met her in the hall.

"I don't quite comprehend this mystery, Bess," he said, while an anxious frown puckered his brows. "There's a policeman here that accuses me of having abducted a child. There's one missing from Water Street, it seems, and he claims that she is here in this house."

"What?"

"'Tis a remarkable story. I can't seem to get at the bottom of it. He doesn't know me; and he says his orders are not to go away without the child. I can't convince him that there's no child here."

Just then they both started violently, for a double sound broke on their ears, a long-drawn shriek as of a child in pain, followed by Archie's voice, loud and remorseful,--

"Oh, by George!"

An instant later, Theodora appeared on the landing, ejaculating,--

"Gracious me! I forgot her."

"Theodora, what does this mean?" the doctor demanded breathlessly, as he rushed up the stairs. Then, at the open door, he paused in sheer amazement. In the middle of the floor stood Archie Holden, staring at the bed with a face devoid of all expression. Sitting up in the bed and staring back at him with a face of injured innocence and pain, was an unwholesome child of Keltic extraction and unneat exterior, with a dingy knitted hood in lieu of nightcap, and two chapped hands appearing from two vast gray sleeves.

Archie appeared to think that it devolved upon him to explain the situation.

"I'm sorry," he said meekly. "You see, I didn't turn up the gas at first, but I just sat down on the edge of the bed to take off my shoes. I didn't know this--this young person was here, and I suppose I sat on her. But really I can't imagine where she came from. I didn't bring her."

"Theodora!" said the doctor, sternly.

But Theodora had vanished, to hide her head from the sight of her protegee, and from the merriment shining in Archie's blue eyes.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Do you often do that kind of thing, Miss Teddy?"

Theodora, with her hands full of books, was passing through the lower hall. At the sudden question, she glanced up to see Archie Holden leaning on the banisters and looking down at her.

"What thing?" she asked.

"Oh, adopting stray babies. You gave me a fine fright, last night."

Theodora blushed. Then, as she met his merry eyes, she burst out laughing.

"Wasn't it awful? I put the child to bed and promised her some supper, and then I forgot her."

"And I sat on her," Archie supplemented. "I don't know which of us was the more astonished, she or I. What were you going to do with her?"

"Why, you see," Theodora dropped her books on the seat by the staircase and settled herself beside them; "you see, it was my first experience with slumming."

"With what?"

"Don't you know? Or don't you have any slums in Montana? Everybody does it here, and it's beautiful."

"What's the usual *modus operandi*?"

"The what? Talk English, please."

"How do you go at it?" Archie sat down on the top step, to talk at his ease.

"Oh, they go to see poor people, and take them food and soap and madonnas and fumigate them."

"The madonnas?"

"No, the people. It does them ever so much good. Mrs. Farrington, Billy's mother, had a friend here that did it, and she told us all about it."

"I begin to comprehend," Archie said gravely, as he looked down at the animated face below him. "And does it belong to the plan to bring them home and hide them in the guests' beds?"

"How was I to know you were here?" Theodora demanded. "Didn't you take us all by surprise?"

"I meant to surprise Bess, and I rather flatter myself I succeeded. I say, Miss Teddy, what relation are we, anyhow?"

"Hm-m." Theodora pondered on the matter. "Cousins? No; I suppose you're my uncle. Uncle Archie. How respectful that sounds!"

Archie made a grimace of disgust.

"It suggests carpet slippers and an ivory-headed cane and a bandanna. I don't believe I care to be related at all, if that's the way you're going to work it."

Theodora laughed wickedly. She was keen enough to see that the young man was nettled by the implied addition to his years, and she was too much of a tease to allow her opportunity to slip by, unheeded. She gave him a mocking bow.

"I'm sorry you don't care to claim us, Uncle Archie," she said, as she rose. "Still, you can't expect us to call mamma's only brother Mr. Holden."

"Call me Archie, then."

"How disrespectful! No, Uncle Archie is quite nice and proper."

"I won't answer. Where are you going?"

"To do my lessons with Billy. We have a tutor." Theodora spoke with a sudden air of complacency.

"What a bother! I wanted you. Do you do them, every day?"

"Yes, every morning, only we're generally at Billy's. What did you want?"

"Nothing much; only I brought on some stuff for Bess and for--my new nephews and nieces, and I thought, if you weren't busy, I'd bring it down."

"How lovely! I'll wait."

"Oh, Ted-dy!" Billy's voice, though distant, was emphatic and distinct. "Do hurry up!"

She gave a longing glance back at the young man at the top of the stairway.

"I can't wait," she said regretfully. "I don't want to go; but--it's Billy, you see."

Archie liked her loyalty.

"No matter; they can wait till noon. Farewell, my niece, and mind your teacher."

"I will, Uncle Archie."

Two months before this time, soon after Billy had begun to rally from the mysterious strain to his back, Mrs. Farrington had appeared in the doctor's office, one evening.

"As usual, I am asking a favor," she said. "At last, I have succeeded in getting a really good tutor for Billy. The man was instructor in Yale till his health failed, and he is highly recommended to me. Billy is bright and well advanced for his age, so I think he and Hubert must be doing about the same work. It is so lonely for him, do you suppose Hubert, or Theodora, or both of them, would be willing to study with him, to keep him company?"

The matter was settled in family council, that same evening. Though it seemed to Dr. McAlister too fine an opportunity to be lost, he left it entirely to the choice of the children. Theodora accepted the new plan with prompt delight. Hubert hesitated, chose the tutor, chose to stay in school with his boy friends, dreaded to be separated from Theodora, and finally decided to remain in the school. Two months later, Theodora was reading the Anabasis, while Hubert was still toiling over the intricacies of the irregular verb.

The tutor proved to be a good one, and, from the start, it was a close race between Theodora and Billy. He was eighteen months the older; she was in perfect health, and her lithe young body held an equally active mind. Moreover, she was determined not to be outdone by Billy, nor yet be a drag upon him, so she fell to work with a will and accomplished wonders, while Mr. Brown daily rejoiced that his lines had fallen in such pleasant places.

At dinner-time, Archie appeared, laden with his offerings for his adopted family circle.

"I shot this beast, myself, Bess," he said, as he threw a great rug at her feet. "He was an eight-hundred-pound grizzly who liked the smell of our supper. If you feel of his head, you can find the holes where I shot him. Tom Keyes and I tracked him by the blood on the snow, and we finally cornered him. I thought Hubert might like these antlers, and here's some trumpery for the others."

As he spoke, he tossed a handful of little packages about the group, which quickly became clamorous in its joy. Theodora looked up from her great nugget mounted on a slender pin, to discover that Billy too had been included in the frolic, and she shot an approving glance at Archie just as Allyn climbed to the young man's knee.

"Fank you," the child said, with a sounding kiss. "I love you, and I wish you'd come again and bring me nonner engine, Uncle Archie."

Over Allyn's head, Archie made a gesture of defiance at Theodora.

"That's your work, Miss Ted. I owe you one for that."

"This one?" she asked, holding up the pin. "It's beautiful, Uncle Archie, and I am in love with it already."

For the next month a spirit of revelry appeared to fill the McAlister household. It was an ideal New England winter, and plenty of snow and cold weather kept the young people out of doors. The McAlisters taught Archie to skate; he taught them to run on snowshoes; they had merry coasting parties and long sleigh-rides by day. In the evenings, the Farringtons usually joined them for games, chafing-dish suppers, impromptu theatricals, and the thousand and one other amusements of a winter evening. Strange to say, the closest intimacy sprang up between the invalid and the energetic young engineer, and Billy, who at first had jealously regretted Archie's coming, found that his own range of sports was broadened by the strength and care of the young man's arm and eye.

They were all down on the ice, one moonlight evening, Archie and the McAlisters taking turns in pushing the skating-

chair in which Billy sat, wrapped in furs. Hubert was at the back of the chair, leaning on the bar, while the others stood gathered about, resting from a network of figure eights.

"To-morrow night, the moon will be full," Theodora said, as she rubbed her nose with the back of her mitten. "I do so hope it will be good skating, for it will be about our last chance. Next night, we have to go to that stupid old party, and, the night after, we give our play."

"I'm getting to the end of my nights," Archie said regretfully. "I had a letter from the chief, to-day, and he wants me to report to him, the first."

"So soon as that?" Hope's tone was remonstrant, as she looked at him with startled eyes. "You didn't mean to go so early."

"No; I meant to stay till the fifteenth; but this will take me off, next week."

"Does mamma know?" Theodora asked.

"Not yet. Don't tell her, please, till to-morrow. She always hates to have me start off again, when I've been home."

"No wonder," Theodora said impulsively. "You aren't half so bad as you might be, Uncle Archie."

He bowed low.

"Thanks awfully. But I am freezing. I'll race you two girls to the dead pine and back."

"All right. You be umpire, Billy. What's the prize?"

"A mate to your nugget. Come on."

With a laughing word to Billy, they swept off up the pond, while the ice rang hard under their long, swinging strokes. Archie led; but Hope and Theodora were close behind him when he reached the old pine-tree. As they turned to face the sheet of silver light reflected back from the surface of the ice, Theodora gasped with the beauty of it all, and with the tense physical excitement of the moment. For one instant, she seemed possessed with the glorious madness of living, with the splendor of the night, with the cold, sharp air and the exhilaration of the exercise. The next moment, as she mustered all her strength to pass Archie, she saw him stagger and fall. He had skated on a half-buried stick, and the sudden check to his progress had thrown him headlong on the ice.

There was an instantaneous hush, when it seemed to Theodora that all the glory had died out of the universe. When she regained her scattered senses, Hubert had whirled Billy up to the spot, while Hope, quiet and dainty as ever, but a shade paler than usual, sat on the ice with Archie's head resting in her lap and her handkerchief pressed against the cut in his forehead.

"Be quiet, Teddy," she said gently. "Archie isn't dead, dear. I think it has only stunned him a little."

With a gasp of shame, Theodora realized that she had been crying aloud in her excitement, while the blurred scratches on the ice showed that she had been flying about the group in a futile distraction. With a groan of self-disgust, she dropped down on the footboard of Billy's chair.

"I didn't mean to," she said contritely. "How can you always know just what to do, Hope? I wish I didn't act like an ape, whenever I'm frightened. But do you think he's much hurt?"

Archie answered the question by opening his eyes. He looked up at Hope for a minute, first in wonder at his position, then with an expression of infinite content, as he saw her pretty face bent over him and read the anxiety in her eyes. Then his own eyes grew merry, as he glanced at the tearful, dishevelled Theodora.

"I'm not dead yet," he said. "You came near beating me; but you haven't done it yet, my fair niece." He tried to rise as he spoke.

Hope's hand on his forehead grew a shade heavier.

"Wait a little," she said. "You've cut yourself, and I want it to stop bleeding, first. Aren't you comfortable?"

For a second time, Archie looked up into her eyes.

"Perfectly," he answered briefly.

The pause which followed was an expressive one. Hubert broke it.

"Ye-es," he said critically, as he bent over Archie for a moment; "you aren't looking your very prettiest, Archie. When you do get up, I advise you to go in search of a mirror."

"Hu!"

But Hope's remonstrance came too late, for Archie had already sat up.

Hubert helped him to take off his skates, and the little party started for home. It was the same walk they had taken many times before; but there was a difference now. Instead of going up the hill in a merry group, with Archie pushing the chair and Theodora prancing along by his side, Billy and the twins took the lead, and Archie and Hope, in the shadow of the trees, followed along slowly, very slowly.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Slowly, very slowly, Theodora was turning about in front of her mirror to inspect her new suit. It was her nearest approach to that glory of modern womankind, the tailor-made gown, and Theodora's face was expressive of unmitigated approval. The dark green cloth suited her complexion to perfection, the jacket was edged with fur, and the dark green hat, rolled sharply upwards, framed her eager young face in a soft setting of velvet and feathers. Theodora looked her best, and, like a true daughter of Eve, she was perfectly aware of the fact. With the aid of a hand-glass, she studied her right side, her left side, her back, petulantly brushed away the heavy masses of her short hair, made sure that Archie's pin showed its gleam at her throat; then she descended the stairs in search of admiration.

She found Archie in the parlor, the symmetry of his face somewhat marred by the patch of plaster on his right temple.

"How do you like it, Uncle Arch?" she demanded, clasping her hands and revolving before him like a teetotum.

"It's good. You look warm and comfortable, and not a bit floppy," he answered. "When do you go?"

"Friday. I'd much rather wait till Tuesday, and see you off; but beggars mustn't be choosers, and it was lovely of Mrs. Farrington to ask me."

"You'll have a great time with them," Archie returned, privately reflecting that Mrs. Farrington had no cause to be ashamed of her charge. For the past three days, he had been devoting most of his spare time to gentle Hope, yet he confessed to a hearty admiration for off-hand, boyish Theodora, who had done so much to make his stay a pleasant one. "Going to write to me, Ted?" he added persuasively.

"I don't know. What for?"

"To tell me the gossip, of course. When a fellow is away in camp, it's good to get letters from friends at home." Archie's tone was charged with the sentimentality of his years. He was sorry to turn his back upon civilization once more, sorry to lose touch with his adopted nieces; and, above all, most humanly sorry to find that Theodora was taking his approaching departure in such a philosophical spirit.

"Oh, I'd just as soon write, if you want me to," she answered, while she settled her collar and gave a feminine tweak to her sleeves; "only I don't see the use of it. Mamma will be sure to write, and there's no use wasting stamps in telling you the news twice over."

Assuredly Theodora was not inclined to sentiment, and Archie strolled away to Hope, in search of appreciation, just as Phebe bounced into the room. At sight of Theodora's new gown, she halted abruptly.

"I suppose you think you look pretty well," she said crushingly.

"Well, yes, I do," Theodora replied, with feigned indifference, for she always shrank from Phebe's criticism. "How do you like it?"

Phebe walked around her and inspected her from top to toe with provoking deliberation.

"It wouldn't be so bad," she remarked at length. "The coat isn't quite right in the back, somehow; and isn't your hat a little mite one-sided?"

"Oh, Babe, I wish anything ever suited you," Theodora broke out impatiently. "You always find something wrong somewhere."

But Phebe rebuked her.

"Now, don't get cross, Teddy. Mrs. Farrington won't think you're a good companion for Billy, if you are as cross as that."

"Companion?"

"Yes. Of course she wouldn't have taken you to New York, if she hadn't wanted somebody to take care of Billy when she was busy."

Phebe had a genius for aiming her shafts which was far in advance of her years. Theodora winced; then she turned to her little sister with a sort of fierceness.

"Who said so?" she demanded.

"I say so," Phebe returned calmly, as she settled herself on the sofa; "and so does Isabel St. John."

Theodora's exasperation reached a climax.

"If you two children don't stop talking over my affairs, I'll tell papa," she said in impotent rage, for the McAlister code of honor scorned brute force, and she dared not give her young sister the shaking she so richly deserved.

"Tattle-tale!" Phebe replied in brief derision.

Theodora fled to her room, for she felt that she was no match for her composed young adversary. Hope found her, an hour later, sitting in a heap on the side of her bed.

"Don't mind, dear," she said gently. "I knew Babe had been saying something hateful; but it's only her way. Mrs. Farrington wants you to have a good time, and I'm so glad you are going. Three weeks in New York will be good for you, and you will see ever so much. Just think how lonely we are going to be without you and Archie!" Her voice broke a little.

Theodora kissed her impulsively.

"Truly, are you going to miss me so much, Hope? I'll stay at home, if you will. I really shouldn't mind."

"Of course we shall miss you, Ted, you and Archie both. Hu and I are going to be forlorn and dull enough; but that's no reason you are to stay here, and lose such a chance. Archie has asked me to write to him," she added a little inconsequently.

Not even Phebe's cutting remarks could blunt the edge of Theodora's happiness, three days later, as she went gliding into the vast babel of the Grand Central Station. It had been her first real journey; it was her first sight of New York, that Mecca of all true and loyal Americans, and she gave a little gasp of sheer delight while she followed Mrs. Farrington from the car and turned to wait for Patrick and Billy. She watched it all with open-eyed content, the uniformed porters, the throng of hungry-looking cabmen, the comfortable carriage, and the broad, crowded streets through which they drove to reach the hotel. The hotel itself completed her satisfaction. Mrs. Farrington liked luxury, both for herself and for the sake of her invalid son, and Theodora could not wonder enough at the greatness and glitter of it all, the halls and parlors, the huge dining-room and their own cosy suite of rooms near by. Strange to say, after the first night, she was quite at her ease, and settled into her luxurious surroundings with an apparent unconsciousness which was as gratifying to Mrs. Farrington as it was amusing.

It was all old ground to Mrs. Farrington and Billy; but they enjoyed exploring the city with their eager young guest, who revelled in it with all the enthusiasm of her years. Wherever a carriage could go, wherever the faithful Patrick could help his young master, there they went, until Theodora, with the aid of her well-studied map, knew the city from the Battery to the fastnesses of Harlem. It seemed to the young girl that the ordinary laws of time and space had been suspended, and that she was living in a gilded fairyland which would continue till the end of days.

There was even one wonderful evening when Theodora, in a fresh, light gown which had mysteriously appeared from one of Mrs. Farrington's trunks, and Billy, in a brand-new suit and immaculate tie, went with Mrs. Farrington to hear Calve and the De Reszkes sing *Carmen*. After that, the rest was rather of the nature of an anticlimax, and Theodora spent the next day in a grove of paper, transporting Marianne and Violet to the Metropolitan Opera House in a blaze of diamonds and yards of white silk gowns.

On the following morning, she was still deep in this pleasant task. The rain was sweeping against the windows; yet, in imagination, Violet was cantering through one of the bridle paths in the Park, with Gerald at her side, when Mrs. Farrington came into the room.

"May I interrupt you, Teddy?" she asked, with the gentle courtesy which made Theodora feel so grown-up and elegant.

Theodora threw aside her pen.

"What is it?" she asked with alacrity.

"Nothing very pleasant, for I shall have to send you out in this storm. I've just taken Will down to Joe Everard's to spend the morning, and I promised to call for him, this noon. When I came back, I found a note from Mrs. Keith, asking me to come to lunch, to meet one of our California cousins. Do you feel as if you could go down in the carriage and come back with Will? I hate to have him alone, in case anything happens."

Theodora laughed contentedly.

"What an idea! Of course I'll go. I always love to drive, you know. Where's the place?"

"Away down town, near Washington Square. You'd better go right down Fifth Avenue. I'll dress, then, and go to Mrs. Keith's; and then send the carriage back for you, if you'll be ready."

Theodora went back to her writing, and the moments slid away only too rapidly. Whatever was the result of her labors, she enjoyed them keenly. All through the winter, though Phebe scolded and Allyn teased and the world about her went awry, she had been able to forget it all in the adventures of her imaginary friends, the tale of whose doings had come to be bulky and dog's-eared from frequent readings. She was still busy over her work, when Patrick came to the door.

"The carriage is here, Miss Theodora."

She quickly put on her hat and coat. Patrick banged the carriage door behind her and mounted the box beside the driver, and they drove away. It was the first time she had driven out in solitary splendor, and Theodora felt very dignified and luxurious as she leaned back on the cushions and idly watched the passing show which had grown so familiar to her during the past two weeks. When they came to the lower end of the Avenue, she sat up in quick attention, for she was passing window after window full of books spread out in enticing array, and above the doorways she read on the gilded signs the names which she had learned to know were on the titlepages of the books within. At the sight, there came into her mind a sudden recollection of her well-worn manuscript at home, and of the tales she had read of young writers who had made their way into the publisher's presence.

With an impulsive movement, she tapped sharply on the window.

"Stop, please," she said. "On this side."

Obediently the driver drew up opposite the doorway of a firm of international fame, and Theodora, secure in the consciousness of her new gown and the unwonted luxury of the carriage and Patrick, entered the store. It was a dreary day of a dull season, and with comparatively little trouble she found herself in a quiet office on the third floor of the building. Its occupant, a tall, thin man with iron-gray hair, looked up at her approach, and a slight expression of wonder came into his eyes as they rested on his girlish visitor.

"What can I do for you?" he asked courteously.

Theodora was breathing a little quickly, and the bright color came and went in her cheeks. All unconsciously, she was looking her very best.

"I came to ask you about publishing a book."

"Mm. Is it one you have written?"

"Yes."

There was a pause, slight, yet perceptible. Then the man asked,--

"What sort of a book is it?"

"It's a novel. Kind of a love story."

"How long is it?"

"There are thirty-seven chapters done."

"Then it isn't finished?"

"No; but I could end it off about any time, if you are in a hurry for it."

In spite of himself, the publisher smiled. Theodora's girlish naivete was refreshing to him. He liked her face and manner, and he was curious to see more of this young aspirant for fame, so he pushed forward a chair.

"Sit down," he said genially; "and tell me more about it."

With the off-hand, healthy directness of a boy, Theodora plunged into the midst of her plot and unfolded all its intricacies. The publisher listened till the end, always with the same little smile on his face.

"How old are you?" he asked, when she paused for breath.

"Sixteen."

"And you want to write books?"

"Awfully." Theodora's hand shut, as it lay in her lap. "I'm going to do it, too, some day."

"Good! I think perhaps you will. And you live in New York?"

"No; I live in Massachusetts; but I'm here with Mrs. Farrington."

"Mrs. Farrington? Mrs. William H. Farrington?"

"Yes."

"Is it possible! Did she send you to me?"

"No; I came. Do you know her?"

"Very well, and for ever so many years, since she was younger than you."

"I never heard her say anything about you," Theodora said, with unflattering directness.

"Very likely not. But now, my dear little girl, I am going to give you some advice. I am afraid we can't take your book. It isn't in our line; but some day you may write something that is, and then I shall be glad to see it. Now, if you really mean to write good books, you must read good ones, the best ones that are written; you must study a great deal and study all sorts of things, for you can never tell what will help you most. Keep on writing, if you want to; but don't expect to have anything published for ten years. By that time, you will just be ready to begin your work. Sometime, we may meet again," he added, as he rose; "and then you must tell me all you have done. I think I shall have reason to congratulate you. Till then, good-by. Give my regards to Mrs. Farrington, and tell her that I shall try to call on her before she leaves the city."

Theodora read her dismissal in the shrewd, kindly brown eyes. She went away in a glorified dream of the future which lasted until she saw Billy crossing the pavement, leaning on one crutch and with Patrick's strong arm supporting his weight on the other side. He looked tired, and his brave helplessness struck her in strong contrast to her own exuberant happiness. It suddenly seemed to her that it would be selfish to boast of her own hopes, in the face of his uncertain future, so she locked her lips on the subject of her morning's adventure, and turned to greet him with a bright interest which concerned itself with his doings alone.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Spring has come, and the McAlisters are putting on their annual addition," Hope wrote to Archie in April. "It is on the west side, a new wing. Mother calls the upper room Archie's room. At present, the downstairs room goes by the name of The Annex, because we have exhausted our ingenuity in naming the other rooms, and have nothing left for this."

The name proved to be an enduring one, while the process of building was more exciting than usual. Dr. McAlister had decided to have the cellar extended for the wing; and the rocky ledge on which the house was perched rendered blasting a necessity. For a week, they lived in a state of alarm lest the house should be jarred down about their ears. For a week, they heard the steady *clink, clink* of the hammers on the drills, the thud of the stone-laden hogsheads rolled over the boards above the rock, and the thunder of the blast as it exploded. By the time the week was ended, the noisy work of the carpenters seemed, in comparison, like sweet music.

Strange to say, it was Allyn who most gloried in the confusion, and, from the first shovelful of earth to the last nail, he was always to be found in the thick of the fray. No matter how often the workmen picked him up and returned him to his mother, he invariably reappeared under their feet again, five minutes later, to be alternately a target for their profanity and a receptacle for choice morsels from their luncheons.

"No, Allyn," Hope said, with decision, when she found him investigating the tip of a freshly-lighted fuse; "you mustn't go there again, ever. Do you hear sister?"

"Ess," lisped the culprit. "I hears; but it is so instering."

"Too interesting for a baby like you," Hope said, laughing, in spite of her pale cheeks. "If you do that again, Allyn, sister won't have any little brother to cuddle."

"Why for not?"

"Because you'll be killed, dear."

"And will I be a little boy angel?"

"Yes."

"And do little boy angels have stomachs?" was the next unexpected question.

"I don't know. Why?"

"'Cause then I can have all the pieces of cake I want," he answered, with a vengeful recollection of the angel cake forbidden the night before.

Since Theodora's visit to New York, there had been no fresh excitement in the McAlister household, and the young people had settled down into the peaceful routine of work and play which had preceded Archie's coming. To be sure, it was never quite the same as in past years, for their circle had been widened to admit Billy Farrington, and, moreover, Archie's letters created a new interest for them all, for Hope more than for the others, since to her they were more personal than to the rest, and on her devolved the necessity of answering them. Mrs. McAlister used to smile quietly to herself, at times, and she had even spoken of the matter to the doctor, who nodded approvingly, even though there was no actual thing to which he could give his assent.

"Say, Hu," Theodora asked abruptly, one night; "wouldn't it be funny if Archie married Hope?"

Hubert stopped whistling and stared at his sister in surprise.

"What an idea, Ted! Your brain must be 'way off, to think of such a thing."

"Stranger things than that have happened, Hu," Theodora said shrewdly. "Just wait a few years and see."

"Archie's no fusser," Hubert said, with some scorn.

"Maybe not; but he likes Hope, and she thinks he is perfect. Of course, they won't do it yet, but they may in time. Here we are. Come in."

For the first time in their lives, the twins were on their way to a temperance meeting. Dr. McAlister had always felt that such meetings were no place for impressionable children, that the sensational methods of oratory were not for young ears; and Hubert and Theodora had experienced some difficulty in coaxing their father to give his consent to their hearing a famous young Irish orator who was holding a series of meetings in the town. It was a new experience for

Theodora, who, from the first moment, was swayed to and fro at the speaker's will, now laughing at his broad humor, now winking away her tears at his pathos, now thrilling through all her lithe young body at his stirring appeals for help to raise the drink-sodden world around him. Hubert was more sceptical.

"What a fib!" he remarked, at the close of the story which ended the lecture. "I know things never happened as pat as that. They don't, out of books, I bet. What are you going to do, Ted?"

Theodora, her face flushed and her eyes like stars, had started forward to the stage.

"I'm going to sign the pledge, Hu."

"What for? You don't get drunk."

"For my example. Oh, Hu, think of the saloons in the east end of town! And we've never done anything to help them! It's terrible."

She came back to him with her hands full of pamphlets. Hubert eyed her askance.

"I say, Ted, what are those?"

"Tracts."

"What for?"

"I am going to take them to some of those people, to-morrow. It may wake them up to what they are doing."

"They're more likely to wake you up, Ted. Go easy. You know papa never will let you."

"I sha'n't ask him, then," she said proudly. "If it's right, it's right, and nobody ought to stop me."

Hubert whistled softly.

"Look out, Ted. Remember the kid you stole? This may come out as your slumming did, you know."

But Theodora started out, the next morning, the tracts in her hand and zeal in her heart. At the very first saloon, she was doomed to disillusion.

"It is a wicked life," she said firmly; "and you ought to be ashamed."

For a wonder, the man knew neither Dr. McAlister nor his daughter, and he was not moved to awe by this child.

"Do you think it is any of your business, my fine lady?" he demanded sharply.

Theodora quailed.

"N-n-no-o-o-o; I don't," she said faintly, and fled from the door into the arms of her father, who chanced to be passing by.

"Theodora!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir." She hung her head guiltily, for she instinctively felt his disapproval.

"What are you doing here, in such a place?" he asked more sternly than he was wont to speak.

"I'm--I'm--I'm--" she faltered.

He held out his hand for the tracts. She gave them up reluctantly, and she saw him frown as he read their lurid headings. For a moment he looked perplexed; then he said quietly,--

"Theodora, I wish you to go home at once, and to say nothing of this to anyone. To-night, after supper, come to the office. I want to talk this over with you."

"Yes, papa."

Her lip quivered, and he relaxed a little of his sternness.

"I know you didn't mean to do wrong, my dear. I am not going to scold you; but there are a good many things I want to say to you,--things we can't say here. That is all."

To Theodora's mind, the day dragged perceptibly. She was conscious of her father's disapproval, conscious that, in her

girlish impulsiveness, she had gone where she had no business to go. It was a relief when supper was over, and she followed her father into his office.

He pulled out a great easy-chair and sat down.

"Come here, my girlie, and cuddle in beside me, as you used to do," he said, with an inviting gesture. "Now tell me all about it."

Theodora poured forth her tale in an incoherent tide. Her father, listening and stroking the brown head, smiled a little, from time to time. When she had finished,--

"What is temperance, Teddy?" he asked abruptly.

"Not to drink rum," she answered, with glib promptness.

He smiled again.

"That is only a tiny little part of it, my girl."

"Of course. I mean whiskey, too, and beer, and--and--"

"Never mind the rest of them now. It's a good long list, and the worst of the drinking isn't always done in the saloons."

"Where is it, then?" Theodora looked at him in astonishment.

"At banquets and dinners and receptions. Too often at college suppers, and by boys not much older than Hu."

"Really?"

"Yes, Ted. Now, my dear, I'm going to give you a lecture. It won't be like the one you heard, last night, for I'm not a temperance orator, only a plain old doctor. Temperance isn't signing the pledge, or keeping it after it is signed; it is keeping one's self free from all kinds of badness and excess, whether it's drinking or smoking, or too much dancing, or tight shoes. It is taking all our pleasures moderately, so that they can never hurt our bodies or our minds. Do you see what I mean?"

"But oughtn't all liquor to be taken away?" she urged, still mindful of the orator's sounding periods.

"Like any other powerful drug. It's one thing to use it, Ted, another to abuse it, as we doctors know. There are times when it must be used, just like any other medicine. Because I give you a dose, one day, you don't need to go on taking it forever, dear."

He paused for a minute, then he went on,--

"That is one side of it,--a side that we must look at. On the other is the horrible danger of forming the habit of taking wine and such things to excess. The suffering is terrible, and the poverty. That comes from intemperance in drink more than from any other form of it; and the only way that it is to be prevented is for us parents to teach our boys and girls all the danger, teach them that, because they want it, there is no excuse for their taking it. If you aren't strong enough to deny yourself something you know is a sin, you haven't learned the first lesson of good living. But it isn't drinking alone; there are other sins that are as bad and as dangerous; and a man or woman, to be strong and pure and good, must turn his back upon them all."

"But I did want to help," Theodora said. "There ought to be something that a girl can do."

"So there is," her father answered quickly.

"What?"

"From now on, through all your young womanhood, be sure you stand on the right side of things. Don't preach. That never does any good. Just frown down any fastness in your friends. Let it be understood that you have nothing to do with a man who drinks and swears, with a girl who is fast or familiar, who laces till she can't breathe, and dances all night with men whom she hardly knows. Let my Teddy, even if she must stand alone, stand for all that is truest and best in women, and the young men and women around her will respect her and try to pull themselves up to her standard. You needn't be a prig, Ted. Be as full of fun as you can; the more, the better, only choose your fun carefully. Your old father knows what he's talking about, and he knows that girls have more influence than most of them are willing to use."

Theodora's cheek was resting against her father's shoulder, and her eyes had drooped.

"I will," she said humbly.

"And remember this, my girlie; I am always here to talk things over with you and advise you. When you are older, perhaps you can help me with my poorer patients. Till then, Teddy, wait, and don't try to do too much. You're only my little girl yet; and the world is too big for you to understand. Good-night, dear. Now I must go."

It was the last of the lecture; but, simple as it had been, Theodora never lost the memory of the quiet hour in the office, and in after years she learned to know the value of the lesson so gently given.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Back again, at last?" Billy looked up with a smile, as Theodora came flying into the room.

"Yes. Have you missed me?"

"Haven't I? You mustn't go off again, Ted. You are altogether too frisky."

"What could I do? Papa took me."

"Had a good time?"

"Beautiful. It's too much for one spring,—three weeks in New York, and this lovely week of driving."

"You had good weather, sure enough. Also, ma'am, you're brown as a squaw. Also, I think your hair has grown."

"Wish 't would; but that's a forbidden subject. I'll tell you one thing, Billy Farrington: if I ever do get any hair again, I'll guard it like the apple of my eye. But what about you?"

"News."

"Oh, what?" she questioned eagerly.

"Well, we went down to see Dr. Parker, last Saturday."

"What did he say?"

"That I'm doing as well as could be expected."

"What else? I know there's something good; you show it all over."

Billy tried to draw down his face, failed, gave up the effort, and laughed instead.

"'Tis good, Ted. I told them not to tell you, for I wanted the fun of it. He says I can plan to enter college, a year from this fall; he says in three months I can walk as far as my crutches will take me, and he says in a few years I'll be as well as ever. Isn't it fine? Why, Ted, what's the matter?"

"Nothing; only I'm a goose." And Theodora looked up, her eyes shining with happy tears. "You know I'm glad, Billy; only I don't know how to say it straight."

"That's all right, Ted. It sort of took my own breath away at first. I couldn't wait to tell you, for you've been the best friend I've had. You've pulled me through lots of bad places."

Theodora's face was very gentle; but she laughed.

"The chair runs easily, Billy. It didn't take much pulling."

"That's another thing." Billy's face was growing brighter with every moment. "I've said good-by to the chair."

"What do you mean? You can't walk yet?"

"No; but I'm going to have a tricycle that runs with my hands, and I can go wherever I choose. How will you like to have me running away from you?"

"You can't; I'll hang on behind, Billy. A tricycle? How splendid! I believe I envy you more than ever."

"I'll swap my tricycle for your back," he retorted.

"I wish we could take turns. When is it coming?"

"Friday, the letter said."

"All right; I'll make the most of the time till then. After you get it, there'll be no catching a glimpse of you."

Billy laughed, and it seemed to Theodora that his laugh was a little mocking.

"I'll whistle to you, as I go by. Honestly, Ted, it does seem hard to leave you alone, when we've had such great times together."

His words were the echo of her thoughts. For a moment, Theodora struggled with herself. Then her real love for her

friend triumphed.

"It will make ever so much difference, Billy; but I'm glad of it. We've had our good times together, lots of them, and there'll always be our lessons, you know. Truly and honestly, you've had about all the girl you can stand, and it's time you were able to ride off with the boys."

Billy leaned back in his chair and surveyed her through narrowed lids.

"Girls aren't half bad, Teddy," he observed; "but I'm glad you take it so philosophically."

There was a long pause. Then Theodora spoke.

"I've some news, too, Billy."

"Good?"

"I thought so, till I heard yours. Now it seems rather flat."

"What is it?"

"My story is done," she answered quietly, but with a little heightening of her color.

"Done? To the very end? Get it," he commanded.

"No; not yet. I only finished it, last night, and I want time to look it over, myself, before I show it to you. I may not let you see it, after all."

"Oh, come now, that's not square! Didn't I help you, I'd like to know?"

Theodora cocked her head on one side, and meditated aloud.

"He furnished hair and eyes for one hero, and a nose for the other. There are seven of his speeches, not very bright ones, and he gave me points for one love scene. I wonder if he's earned the right to see it."

"Course I have. Go and get it, and bring it over here."

"Wait," she begged. "Truly, I'm not ready yet. I'm afraid you'll laugh."

"Do I ever laugh at you,--in earnest, that is?" he demanded.

"No," she confessed honestly; "you never do."

"Then you ought to trust me with this."

"You couldn't read it."

"Read it to me, then."

"Well, maybe."

Late that same day, in the long May twilight, they were coming up town together, Theodora pushing Billy in the familiar chair which was so soon to be discarded. With Mulvaney trudging solemnly at their heels, they had been loitering along in the sunset, while Billy gave himself up to the bright companionship which he had so sorely missed during the past ten days, and Theodora tried to talk as blithely as usual, while she told herself again and again that her opportunities for such walks were growing few.

"Lessons to-morrow," Billy said at length. "I've got to grind in earnest now, Ted, if I'm to be ready for Yale, next year. Old Brownie has promised to put me through, though."

"I wish I were going, too."

"To Yale? But you'll do better; you'll write books and get famous, while I'm racketing around New Haven. By the way, you're going to bring it over, to-night."

"It?" Theodora tried to look as if she failed to catch his meaning.

"The great and only IT,--the novel. What's its name?"

"I'm not sure. But I'll bring it, in a day or two," she answered.

It was not until the following Saturday morning, however, that she appeared at the Farringtons' with a bulky parcel of papers in her hands.

"I knew your mother was going to be out, this morning," she said, as she slid out of her dripping mackintosh; "so I thought I'd get it over with."

"That's good. Take the big chair. Wait a minute, though."

He whistled for Patrick to put more wood on the fire, and to place a glass of water within Theodora's reach.

"There!" he said approvingly. "Now we're comfortable. Hold on a minute, Patrick; just boost me over to the sofa, while you're about it. I may as well take life easily."

Theodora stuffed the cushions about him with the swift, sure touch he knew so well, and he nodded blithely up at her, in thanks.

"Oh, but it's good you're back, Ted!" he said gratefully. "I've missed you like thunder. Now fire ahead. What are you going to call it?"

Theodora blushed, and the name stuck in her throat.

"I thought I should call it *In the Furnace of Affliction*," she said hesitatingly.

"Wow! How doleful!"

"Don't you like it?" she asked.

"It's rather taking, only it isn't exactly festive," he answered.

"Neither is the story, I suspect," she said, laughing a little nervously.

"Go on," he said so imperatively that, with one long breath, Theodora began to read.

It was more than two hours before she finished her story, and during that time Billy's attention and respect never failed her. There were moments when his gravity was sorely tried, for, more mature than Theodora, and, by stress of circumstances, far more at home in the world of books, he realized all the unconscious humor of some of the overdrawn scenes and melodramatic conversations. Still, his loyalty to Theodora would not let him waver, and, in spite of its crudeness, he was honestly surprised at some of the really telling points of the story.

"It is good, Ted," he said, as she dropped the last page into her lap. "It isn't quite up to *Treasure Island* or *Ivanhoe*; but it's as good as half the rubbish that gets published, and some of it is most awfully fine. I like that scene where Violet and Marianne tell each other their love affairs. Girls talk just like that, you know."

"You really think it is worth publishing?" she questioned, while her color came and went.

"I most certainly do. Chop it down a little and copy it out, and then send it to a man."

"But I don't want to cut it," she protested.

"It's too long," Billy urged, with more practicality than tact.

"Not a bit. It's no longer than *Robert Elsmere*, and everybody has read that."

"Have you?"

"No; but I counted the pages and words and things. This isn't long a bit, Billy."

The discussion was never ended, for just then Patrick came into the room.

"The expressman has been here, Mr. Will."

"And has brought the tricycle? Hurray!" And Billy seized his crutches. "Where is it? Help me up, Patrick! Come along, Ted!"

"I had it taken into the kitchen. Shall I open it, sir?"

"Of course. Hurry up about it, too. Did anything else come?"

"Yes; but not here, sir."

With a little feeling of envy, Theodora followed Billy to the kitchen and stood by, while Patrick opened the crate and took out the light tricycle so carefully packed within.

"Isn't it a beauty? Isn't it fine? Oh, why does it have to be raining, Ted, so I can't try it? Put me into the thing, Patrick. This floor is so large that I can see how it is going to work."

The story and even Theodora herself was forgotten, while the boy grasped the handles and rolled himself up and down the floor. For the moment, he was half beside himself with joy. It was as if his prison door suddenly had opened, after having been closed and barred for more than a year. After months of the stuffy couch, after months more of Patrick and the chair, it was good to be able to move himself about, once more. But he was weaker than he knew, and the excitement was more than he had the strength to endure. Theodora, who had been watching him, saw him grow a little white around the mouth.

"Take me out, Patrick," he said wearily. "I sha'n't run away, to-day. I think, if you don't mind, I'll get back on the lounge again."

Theodora lingered beside him until he was his usual bright self once more. Then she started for home. Allyn met her on the steps.

"Tum in," he said imperiously.

"What for?"

"'Cause. Hope said I wasn't to tell."

"Tell what?"

"Sumfin's here."

"What kind of a sumfin, Allyn? Wait till sister gets her mackintosh off."

"No; tum." He tugged at her hand.

Laughing at his eagerness, she threw off her mackintosh, caught him in her arms, and went in the direction of the voices which she heard in a confused, excited murmur. As she opened the door, she was saluted with a chorus.

"Here she is!"

"Oh, Ted, just look!"

"Now she won't speak to the rest of us."

"Teddy, do see here!"

She looked and saw. Then, regardless of Allyn in her arms, she cast herself into the middle of the group and seized upon something that stood there,—something with a gleam of black enamel and a flash of nickel and the lustre of polished wood.

"Oh, Hu! Mamma! Hope! What is it? Where did it come from?"

"The expressman left it here, addressed to you, Teddy; and here's a note in Mrs. Farrington's writing, tied to the bar."

Theodora snatched the note and broke the dainty seal, but it was a moment before she could realize the meaning of what was written within.

"MY DEAR TEDDY," it ran; "Will is so happy in his tricycle; but I knew it wouldn't be quite perfect unless you had the mate to it. He is so used to going with you, in his chair, that I am sure he would miss you, now he can go alone. Will you accept this bicycle from us both, dear, and remember that we give it to you, not because you have been so kind to Will, but because we care so very much for your dear little self?"

"Sincerely,
JESSIE FARRINGTON."

"My!" Phebe commented, when Theodora folded up the note. "I wish I had somebody to be good to, Teddy McAlister. I'd like to earn a bicycle as easy as you have."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

For a week, Theodora gave herself over to the most violent gymnastics she had ever known. For a week, she toiled and perspired and suffered and was strong. Day after day, she patiently indented the floor and walls of the riding school with every possible variety of tumble known to aspiring humanity. Night after night, she counted her bruises and anointed them with liniments. She tore her clothes, and knocked the skin off one side of her nose, and rasped her temper. At the end of the week she emerged, chastened and humbled, yet triumphant. She could ride her bicycle.

The whole family came out on the lawn to see her mount. No one of them but Hubert had ever mastered the intricacies of a wheel, and, in consequence, they were loud in their advice.

"Why don't you ride here on the grass?" Hope suggested. "Then it won't be so hard, if you fall off."

"I don't mean to fall," Theodora protested. "Besides, it's all down hill."

"Huh!" Phebe sniffed with scorn. "It's easy enough to ride down hill. I should think anybody could do that; shouldn't you, Isabel?"

But Isabel, who knew how to ride, prudently forbore to express an opinion.

"Where are you going, Theodora?" Mrs. McAlistler called after her.

"Out here, where the road is better."

"But we want to see you start."

"It's sandy here."

"What difference does that make?"

"Why, I can't push through such sand as that."

"How strange! I always thought you were so strong."

Theodora clashed her bell in a spirit of wild protest.

"How can I do anything, with you all standing here to criticise me?"

"Oh, Teddy, how selfish!" Hope's tone was rebuking.

"I don't care. Do go in!" she said petulantly, as she started to mount.

"Can't you mount any better than that, after all those lessons?" Phebe asked, a moment later, as Theodora picked herself up from beneath her wheel. "I know I could do better than that."

"Try it, then." Theodora faced her little sister hotly.

Phebe drew back.

"I'm--I'm going to the post-office with Isabel, and her mother told us to hurry."

Allyn added his voice to the chorus.

"Wait," he proclaimed; "I wants to talk. Phebe spokes so much, she takes up all the room."

"What now, Allyn?" Hope inquired.

"Teddy tumbled over," he returned gravely. "I should fink she could ride now, and not tumble over so much."

There was a silence, while Theodora wrestled with her feelings and her wheel. Then Hubert's voice rang down from an upper window, clear and encouraging,--

"Try it again, Ted. You're all right, only you don't know it."

She did try it again, and went reeling down the street and in at the Farringtons' gate, where Billy met her with applause. The more stable nature of his own machine had allowed him to master it at once, and now he was only waiting for Theodora, that they might start forth together and conquer the world.

The days flew by, each one more perfect than the last. In the golden May weather, when the world never looks more

green and fresh and lovable than in its yellow sunshine, they rode forth to take their places in the young life about them. It was scarcely more new to Billy than to Theodora. Everything wears a changed aspect when viewed from the saddle, and the girl felt that never before had she seen in its full beauty the miracle of the opening leaves. For a few days, Dr. McAlister watched Billy with some degree of care, fearful lest he be led too far by his new enthusiasm, and exhaust his strength. Then the doctor breathed a sigh of relief. Billy thrived under it as a true boy should do, and, from week to week, he gained new vigor as fast as he gained new sunburn.

Hubert, meanwhile, was passing through an ignominious experience. He was having measles. Alone of all the McAlisters, he had contrived to escape the epidemic of two years before. Even Allyn had had it, and Billy Farrington counted his convalescence as among the golden memories of his boyhood, no school and endless goodies. For Hubert, sixteen years old and five feet, ten inches, in height, it was reserved to go through the disease alone. He was not seriously ill; but his whole soul revolted at the babyish nature of his complaint, and at the tedium of the darkened room.

"Where going, Ted?" he demanded, one day.

"To ride with Billy."

"Bother Billy! I hate him."

"What for?" Theodora stared at her brother in open-eyed consternation.

"Because he's always round in the way. You aren't good for anything, now he's here, always running off with him," Hubert grumbled.

"Poor Billy! How'd you like it not to be able to go out alone? He needs me."

"I can't go out at all."

"But he's been so for more than a year," Theodora said sharply; "and you have only been in the house four days. I should think you could stand that."

"I should think you could stay in, once in a while, with your own brother," Hubert retorted. "Charity begins at home."

"But I promised Billy--"

"I don't want you. Do get out and let me alone."

As a rule, Hubert was the most even-tempered of boys. Now, however, he felt himself aggrieved and deserted, and his tone was not altogether amicable.

"How cross you are!" Theodora snapped.

"Oh, get out!" And Hubert turned his back on his sister and yawned.

The door closed with a bang, and he heard Theodora's feet descending the stairway, with a vengeful thump on every step. Then he yawned again. There was nothing on earth to do; he was not ill enough to make it interesting, only a bore. Time was when Theodora would have stuck to him like a burr, and they would have contrived to have some fun out of even such untoward circumstances as this. Now she deserted him and went off with that confounded Billy. At this point in his musings, he dropped to sleep.

In the mean time, Billy was having a bad afternoon of it. Never had he seen Theodora in a more fractious mood. She scolded about the road and the heat, snubbed all his sympathetic suggestions, and contradicted all his efforts at conversation. Under such conditions, the ride was a short one, and it was less than an hour from the time they had started that they reappeared in the Farringtons' drive. Theodora refused all invitation to stop.

"Thanks; but I must get home," she said curtly, and she rode away with her teeth set and her chin aggressively in the air, leaving Billy with the impression that he had unintentionally stepped into a hornets' nest.

Hope was spending the day with a friend, and Mrs. McAlister was superintending some belated house-cleaning, so that Hubert was alone, as when she had left him. She ran directly up to his room; but, when she saw that he was asleep, her step softened, and she stealthily advanced to his side and sat down on the edge of the bed. Something of the mood in which he had gone to sleep still remained, and his boyish face, even in his dreams, was dull and unhappy. Theodora reproached herself, as she sat looking down at him. She reproached herself more, while she looked about at the disorderly room and recalled her mother's words, as they left the dinner-table, that noon.

"I shall be busy, this afternoon, Teddy, so I shall leave Hu in your care."

A vase of fading flowers stood on the table, and beside it was a plate of half-eaten fruit. Odds and ends of clothing lay about, and the bed on which he had thrown himself looked tumbled and unattractive. It seemed impossible that, since the morning, a room could get into such a state of dire disorder.

Rising, she crept softly about the room, setting things to rights and giving the place the look of feminine daintiness which she knew so well how to impart. Not even Hope had so much of the true home-making instinct as Theodora, when she chose to turn her wayward interest in that direction; and within a few moments the room looked a different place altogether.

Hubert stirred slightly, and Theodora whisked her duster out of sight and went back to the bed.

"Hu, I'm awfully sorry," she said, in explosive contrition. "I never meant to be so piggable."

The memory of their brief passage at arms had faded from Hubert's mind, and he answered, with a yawn,--

"What do you mean?"

"About leaving you and going off with Billy. Really, Hu, I didn't s'pose you cared, and Billy was used to me, and--I rather guess I've been a good deal selfish; but I won't, any more."

"Why, Ted!" For her head had dropped on his shoulder, and he felt the hot tears falling on his wrist.

"I like you so much better, Hu. You're my twin, and there's nobody like you, and to think I left you all alone!" In her excitement, the tears came fast.

"Ted, don't be silly! Look up, old girl! I don't want you hanging round here with me. I'll be out of this in a week, anyway."

"I know that, Hu." Theodora raised her head and spoke proudly. "But you're my twin and my other half, better than all the Billys in creation, and I ought to stay with you. What's more, I don't mean to go off again till you can go with me. Billy is Billy, and good fun; but you--" she cuddled her head against him with one of her rare demonstrations of affection--"are my Hu."

"I'm sorry, Billy," she said, that evening; "but I can't go out with you, to-morrow. Hu's shut up in the house, and I don't think it is quite fair to leave him, all the time."

"Leave him, half the time, then," Billy suggested.

Theodora shook her head.

"Hu stands first, Billy; and I must look out for him when he's ill."

Loyally she kept her word, and, for the next week, she was Hubert's constant attendant and slave. He lorded it over her and played with her by turns; but he appreciated the sacrifice she was making for him and, more than he realized, he enjoyed the return to their old intimate relation. It was not that he was jealous of Billy. It was not that Billy had intentionally come between them. There had been a time, however, when the twins were all in all to each other. Then Theodora's horizon had suddenly broadened to admit Billy. Among his many boy friends, Hubert had found no one with whom he could be on correspondingly intimate terms. He frankly avowed that he liked no one else so well as Teddy, and he had been a little hurt to find that he apparently no longer occupied a similar place in her affections. But, whatever danger there had been of their drifting apart, Hubert's opportune attack of measles seemed to have vanquished it, and the twins stood more firmly than ever before upon their old footing of mutual and unrivalled intimacy.

Two days after Hubert went out of doors for the first time, Billy appeared at the McAlisters', demanding Theodora. She was long in presenting herself; and, when she came down, her face was flushed and her lips a little unsteady.

"Hullo, Ted! Come for a ride?"

"Don't feel like it."

"Why not?"

"My head aches."

"The air will do it good. It's a fine day. Come on."

"But I can't."

Billy looked perplexed.

"What's the row, Ted? Have I done anything?"

"Of course not."

"What is it? Something's wrong."

She hesitated a moment.

"Nothing, only my story has come back."

"The mischief! When?"

"To-day."

"What for?"

"He said 'twas crude and sensational, and the work of a child."

"The old beast! Truly, Ted, I'm so sorry."

"So am I; but crying won't mend matters."

"Send it to mamma's friend in New York," he suggested kindly.

"And be pulled through by force? Not much, Billy Farrington! If my story won't go of itself, I won't have any friends at court helping me on. Some day, I am going to write a novel that will be worth taking. Till then, I won't be helped out on poor work. Wait a minute. I will go to ride, after all."

Billy sat looking after her, as she went away in search of her hat.

"She has good grit," he observed to himself; "and I believe she'll get there, some time or other."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"But it would be such fun, papa," Theodora said, with a suspicion of a pout.

"It's too far, Teddy. It must be twenty miles each way."

"I rode thirty, yesterday."

"I think that is too far for you."

"Oh, please."

"We could take the train back, if Ted should get used up," Hubert suggested.

"Yes, only it's going to be such lovely moonlight."

"Then take the train over and ride back," Hubert amended. "Truly, papa, I think Ted could do it. She rides like an Indian."

"I didn't know that Indians had taken to bicycles," Mrs. McAlister said, with a smile.

"Like a tomboy, then."

"That's not polite," Theodora protested.

"Never mind; it's true. But can't we try it, papa? Aunt Alice is always asking us to come over to see her, and this is such a splendid chance, before I go back into school, or it gets too warm. We can ride over, Friday morning, stay all day, and come back at night. The twilights are long, at this season, and the moon will be full."

Hubert's persuasion carried the day, and the doctor gave a reluctant permission. Three days later, the twins set forth on their ride. Theodora, in her spotless linen suit and with her pretty wheel, was radiant with anticipations. It was her first all-day trip on her bicycle, and she felt that it would be a much more enjoyable experience than her shorter rides, which, for the most part, had been beside Billy's tricycle. In some mysterious manner known only to boys, Hubert had learned to ride without being taught, and an occasional spin on a borrowed wheel was apparently all that was needed to keep him in perfect training.

The whole family assembled on the piazza to see them start.

"You'd better not ride back," Mrs. McAlister called after them. "If you are at all tired, Teddy, you must take the train."

"Yes," Theodora said, with outward obedience and an inward resolve not to be at all tired.

"If you do ride, when shall you get home?" the doctor asked. "Give yourselves plenty of time, only set some limit, so that we sha'n't be anxious."

"Hm," Theodora said thoughtfully. "Supper at five, start at six, two hours to ride, and an hour for delays. We'll be at home at nine, at the latest."

"Very well. Say half-past nine, then. We won't worry till then. Take care of yourselves and have a good time." And the doctor flourished his napkin in farewell, and then went back to his breakfast.

"Dear old Daddy!" Theodora said, while she turned in her saddle to look back, and then waved a good-by to Billy on his piazza. "He didn't want us to go. I do hope he won't be anxious."

"Don't you suppose I can take care of you, ma'am?" Hubert asked, in mock indignation, and Theodora smiled back at him contentedly.

The day was hot and dusty, and the roads more sandy than they had supposed possible, so that it was a very limp and demoralized Theodora who landed, three hours later, on her aunt's piazza. Theodora was always destructive to her toilets, and in some mysterious manner she had parted with all of her starch and most of her neatness, in the course of the last nineteen miles. Once inside the cool, dark house, with a glass of lemonade in her hand, however, Theodora forgot the discomforts of the road.

"How goes it with you, Ted?" Hubert asked, late that afternoon. "Shall we ride, or take the train?"

She pointed up at the clear sky, broken only by a few fleecy masses of cloud on the western horizon.

"Think what that moon will be, and then ask me to take the train if you dare."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Not a bit. Don't you think we can do it, Hu?"

He laughed at her spirit.

"All right. Don't blame me, though, if you are dead, to-morrow."

She tossed her head proudly.

"I don't die so easily; but, if you 're tired, we'll take the cars."

They had planned to start for home at six; but callers delayed the supper, and, when they finally mounted, the moon was standing out in the eastern sky, like a thick, white vapor. There was a chorus of good-byes, a clashing of two bells, and the twins started off upon their homeward ride.

For the first hour, it seemed to Theodora that she had never ridden more easily. The fatigue of the morning had worn away, leaving only the exhilaration; and, like most riders, she came to her best strength late in the day. Slowly the twilight fell about them, and, as the golden light of the sunset died away in the west, the silver lustre of the full moon brightened the eastern sky. Theodora's gown was damp with the falling dew, as they rolled quietly on between fields pale with sleepy daisies and nodding buttercups. One by one, the cows in the pastures stopped grazing and lay down to rest; while, above their heads, the birds drowsily exchanged sweet good-nights. Then the last glow faded from the west, and the world fell asleep.

"I don't half like those clouds, Ted," Hubert said suddenly. "If they come up much faster, they'll play the mischief with us before we get home."

"Oh, they won't do any harm," Theodora said easily. "It will be light enough to ride to-night, even if it is cloudy."

"But we have that long stretch of woods, you know."

"I forgot that." Theodora spoke lower, and involuntarily glanced over her shoulder. "How far is it?"

"Five miles. That won't take us long, and we're almost there now."

"Yes; but it's hilly and no track to speak of. Hurry, Hu! Let's ride faster and get through it before that cloud gets over the moon. I wish we had lanterns."

It is exciting work to race with a cloud. Vapors are unreliable things at best, and are prone to roll up the sky with fateful swiftness. As Hubert and Theodora came under the first of the trees, the cloud came above them, and the moon vanished. Theodora was as plucky as a girl could be; but there was something rather fearful to her in this dark and lonely road, where she and Hubert were the only moving objects, but where unknown beings might lurk in every shadow, ready to spring out and drag her down to the earth. The formless fear lent an unsteadiness to her progress, and she began to wobble.

"How dark it is!" she said, in an odd, constrained little voice. "It must be very late, Hu. Can you see your watch?"

"It's not light enough."

"Haven't you a match?"

"No."

"I know we sha'n't get home at nine."

"We have till half past, you know. Keep up your pluck, Ted. We're all right. Let's ride a little faster."

Half-way down the next hill, there came a clatter and a bump, followed by a little moan from Theodora. Hubert sprang to the ground and ran to her side.

"I slipped in the sand and had a fall, a bad one. I've done something to my ankle."

"Is it sprained?"

"I'm afraid so."

Leaning heavily on his arm, she scrambled to her feet.

"What is it, Ted? Shall we go back?"

She shut her teeth for a moment.

"No; what's the use?"

"Shan't I go for somebody?"

"Where's the nearest house?"

"Two miles back."

She gave a little sigh of pain. Then she said steadily,--

"Take the wheels, Hu, and let me walk a little. It's better to go on, and perhaps I can ride, if I get quieted down a little. I'm sorry to be a baby," she added piteously; "but it does hurt so."

"Baby! You!" Hubert longed to pick his sister up in his arms and carry her to a shelter; but it was impossible. Worst of all, he dared not openly pity her. He knew that she was using all her self-control to keep from crying with the pain, and that a single sympathetic word would break down her courage. "Good for you, Ted! I knew you had the sand in you," was all he ventured to say, as she limped slowly along at his side.

"I had too much sand under me," she answered, with a giggle which threatened to become hysterical.

The next mile was apparently endless, and Theodora, as she looked this way and that with stealthy, fearful glances, felt that the terrors of the darkness almost swallowed up the pain in her ankle. Underneath the rest, moreover, was the anxiety in regard to the delay. She knew the strictness of her father's discipline well enough to fear his displeasure and alarm, when nine o'clock passed and half-past nine, and still they did not appear.

Strange to say, the pain in her foot grew less and less unbearable, as she plodded along the sandy road. The sand was everywhere; it filled her shoes and made each step drag more heavily. She felt as if they only crawled along, as if the moments raced by them on wings. In sheer desperation, she fell to counting the passing seconds, that she might form some notion of their progress. Hubert was trudging on beside her, whistling softly to himself. Like a true boy, he was totally oblivious of every anxiety save for the pain which his sister was suffering, and she had just assured him that that was better.

"Let's mount, Hu," she said desperately, when it seemed to her that they had walked for several miles.

"Pretty bad here, Ted. Do you think you can ride?"

"I will," she answered indomitably.

She mounted, rode for a hundred yards, and fell again.

"That slippery sand!" she said petulantly. "What shall we do, Hu? We must ride, and I can't find the path."

"You're rattled, dear; and I can't ride, myself, any too well. Follow me."

How patient he was! Even in her anxiety and alarm, Theodora realized all the kindly care he gave her, all the generosity with which he tried to prevent her feeling herself a drag upon his freedom. She was quite unconscious that she had earned his patience by showing the one quality which boys too rarely find in their girl companions, the lack of which leads them to take their out-of-door pleasures alone. Theodora rarely grumbled; in a real emergency, she never complained.

It had seemed to the girl that all fun had died out of the universe, that the mental outlook was as black as the physical one. Ten minutes later, the woods echoed with shrieks of laughter,--laughter so infectious that Hubert laughed in sympathy, without in the least knowing the cause. The sounds came from some distance back of him. He dismounted and ran along the road, unable to see his sister, and guided only by her voice, which appeared to proceed from a bed of tall weeds by the wayside.

"I'm here, Hu," she gasped.

"Where in thunder?" He parted the weeds at the edge of the road and peered in. There on her back lay Theodora, with her bicycle on top of her.

"I lost my pedals and couldn't stop till I ran into these weeds," she explained hysterically. "It was just as soft as a bed, and I went down, down, down, and landed in about six inches of water. Pull me out, Hu. I'm drowned."

With the help of his hand, she struggled out and stood beside him in the road, with the water dripping from her short skirt. Just then, the clouds parted, and the moon, slanting down through the trees, fell upon her bedraggled figure. The brother and sister looked at each other in silence for a moment. Then they burst into a shout of laughter. It was the best tonic they could have had, and Theodora's courage rose even as she laughed.

"I know where we are now," Hubert said, while he looked about him in the growing light. "The good road is just ahead. It's as well 'tis, Ted, for you'll have to ride like the dickens, to keep from taking cold."

"It's a warm night," she answered as blithely as she had spoken to her father, that morning; "and I never take cold. Come on, then. It's only six miles more, and I'm ready to spin."

As they turned in at the gate, the hands of the town clock marked ten minutes after ten, and Theodora's spirits fell slightly. They found the doctor and his wife playing cribbage. The doctor looked up with the content born of that unwonted luxury, an evening quite to himself.

"Home so early?" he said, with a smile. "Have you had a good time? I've really envied you, enjoying all this superb moonlight, when we old folks had to stay indoors."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Come and ride with me this morning, Ted."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm busy."

"That's what you said, last Saturday, and week before. It's a fine morning, and I do wish you'd come. I've a headache, and I want to ride it off, if I can." Billy took off his cap, and brushed away his hair, with a little weary gesture which went to Theodora's heart. She was not discerning enough to discover that Billy's headache had developed under the inspiration of the moment, so sure was he that this was the most certain method of bringing his friend to do his will.

"I'm so sorry, Billy," she said gently. "I do want to go; but I must go somewhere else this morning."

"Let me go, too," he suggested. "I'd as soon ride one way as another."

"Oh, no," she said hastily; "and I'm not ready yet. Does your head ache very badly, Billy?"

"Very," answered the deceiver, assuming the look of a martyr. "And I didn't sleep any, last night."

"What a shame! Aren't you well?" Theodora sat down on the steps and gazed so steadily at him that he blushed.

"I believe you're shamming, Billy," she said sternly. "You've no more headache than Mulvaney."

He laughed, with conscious pleasure in his guilt.

"Well, what if I haven't? I shall have, some day. Really, Ted, what is the reason you won't ride with me?"

"I can't, Billy; that's all there is about it. I've something else I must do."

"You might tell me what it is," he observed persuasively.

"I might, but I won't." Then her heart smote her at sight of his disappointed face, as he turned away. "Some day, Billy," she called after him.

He nodded, as he pulled off his cap. Then he left her.

She stood looking after him, as he went rolling away down the street. It was good to see him so independent with his new tricycle. He was growing almost as independent in the use of his crutches, and his life was quite another thing from the old limited existence when Theodora had first known him. But through it all, in gray days and in bright, she had always found him the same Billy, always ready to enter into her interests, from which of necessity he had been shut out, ready to give her a share in his own more luxurious existence. In a sense, he had been a sort of fairy godfather to Theodora, and to him and to his mother she owed a large part of her pleasures during the past few months.

How would he take the news of this last venture of hers, she asked herself. Still, he was responsible, indirectly at least, if not for the fact itself, yet for the ambition which had led to the fact. Theodora's brows puckered into an anxious frown for a moment. Then they cleared, and she hummed lightly to herself, as she stood looking up the street after her friend, who had long since disappeared from her view. It would have been an ideal morning for a ride, she knew, and she wished she might have gone off for a long spin over the country roads. Still, her face wore a very contented expression as she turned away and entered the house.

Going up to her room, she dressed hastily and ran downstairs again to the closet where her bicycle was kept. Fifteen minutes later, she stopped at the door of a book store. There, instead of leaving her bicycle outside, she coolly rolled it through the open doorway and on into a room at the back of the shop, where she also left her hat. Then she came back to the desk, mounted a lofty stool, drew a heavy book towards her, and fell to work.

She had gone to her father's office, one evening, a little more than a week before. There chanced to be no patients, but Phebe sat reading before the fire.

"I want to talk to papa, Phebe," she said.

"Talk away, then." And Phebe returned to her book.

"But it's business."

"I don't care. You won't disturb me any."

"Tisn't that I'm afraid of. I want to see papa alone."

"You'll have to wait, then."

"Please go, Phebe."

"Sha'n't. I was here first." Phebe yawned, and nestled deeper into her chair.

"Babe, I think you will have to make way for Teddy," the doctor said, laughing. "You can read just as well somewhere else, and if Teddy really wants to talk--"

"I do, papa," she urged eagerly.

Phebe retired, grumbling.

"What is it, my girl?" the doctor asked, as Theodora perched herself on the arm of his chair.

"I want my own way, as usual, papa, and I want you to stand up for me when the others howl," she answered coaxingly.

"Howl? Do they usually howl at you?"

"Not literally, of course, and not half as much as I deserve. But then, I want moral support."

"What now?"

"I want--" Theodora paused impressively--"I want to go to college, and I want to go into business."

The doctor smiled.

"Well, my aspiring daughter, and which will be your choice?"

"Both; one for the sake of the other. It is this way; I want to go to Smith. It is the best place for me, and I do want to go more than you've any idea. You don't disapprove, do you?"

"Not if it can be arranged," he answered thoughtfully. "But what has started you on this so suddenly, Teddy?"

"It isn't so sudden as it seems; but I didn't want to talk about it too soon. You see, mamma and Mrs. Farrington both are college women, and their talk makes me half wild to go. Billy goes, next year, and I shall be all ready to enter at the same time. Should you mind very much?"

"I should hate to lose you for four long years, Ted."

"That's only a little while, and there are vacations and things, you know. That is only one side. The other is the expense, and that's what worries me. Hubert will be ready, the year after, and you can't afford to send us both."

"It would be a tug; but it might be done," Dr. McAlister said thoughtfully. "Besides, I'm not at all sure that Hu will care to go. If you are more anxious for college than he, you ought to have the chance."

"He must go if he wants to," she responded energetically. "I've set my heart on his going. He's a boy, too, and should have first chance, if he wants it. It is more necessary for a boy. But what if I were to begin to save up my money for my expenses, so I could pay part? Then may I go?"

"How? You don't seem to me to be rolling in wealth, Teddy."

She shook her head gayly.

"Oh, but you don't know. That's where the business part comes in."

The doctor looked rather anxious.

"What is it now, Ted?"

"It's Mr. Huntington, down in the book store. He has sent off his book-keeper, and he wants somebody to come in, every Saturday morning, to write up his accounts and things. Every month, it's all day, and he pays ever so much for it."

"But can you do it? Will he take you?"

She nodded.

"You don't know how valuable I am, papa. Mr. Huntington is a dear old man. I heard about it and went to see him. He made me write for him and do some accounts in a hurry; and he told me to come back, last Saturday, to try. To-day he told me I could have the place, if I'd only make my *m*'s and *n*'s and *u*'s not so much alike." Theodora laughed gleefully at her father's astonished face.

There was a pause, while the doctor reflected rapidly. Theodora was very young to enter into any such venture as this, and there was no real need of her doing anything of the kind. On the other hand, her father approved of business habits for women; he liked her independence and spirit, and he felt that it would be well for her to learn the real value of money. He knew Mr. Huntington well. His store was a quiet, homelike place, where Theodora could be brought under no demoralizing influences, where she would be likely to meet only refined, book-loving people. If she must try her experiment, this would be an ideal place for the attempt.

Theodora eyed him askance, trying to read his thoughts. Even before he spoke, she knew his decision, and she seized him by the beard and kissed him rapturously.

"Oh, you dear man!"

"But I haven't said yes," he protested.

"You are going to; your eyes show it. Oh, Papa McAlister, you are such a dear!"

"Am I? Well, my girl, you shall have your way. All in all, I think your little plan has no harm in it. I was thinking of something else, though."

"Oh, what?"

He smiled at her disappointed face.

"Nothing bad. It is only this. If your courage holds out, and if you cultivate that crazy handwriting of yours a little, perhaps when Sullivan goes to Boston, next fall, I'll see what you can do with my bills. I can't pay as well as Mr. Huntington; but it may help on a little."

"Oh, papa!"

Ten minutes later, Theodora looked up into her father's face. Her own face was flushed, and her lips were unsteady.

"There's something else, papa."

"What now, my girl?"

She drew a letter from her pocket.

"It's not much, only a little bit of a beginning. Nobody knows it, and I wanted to tell you first."

He took the letter, opened it with a feigned curiosity, more to gratify her whim than from any real interest in what it could contain. He read it, glanced at the slip of paper it enclosed, then bent over and kissed her scarlet cheek.

"My girlie, I congratulate you."

It was a letter from a well-known magazine for children, accepting a story from Miss Theodora McAlister, and suggesting that another story of equal merit might find a welcome, later on in the season.

For the next three weeks, Theodora kept the secret of her experiment to herself.

"It's all right. Papa knows," was all the reply she could be induced to make to the questions which assailed her from all sides, in regard to the way she was spending her Saturday mornings.

It would be impossible to say how long the mystery would have been kept up if she had had her own way. One Saturday noon, however, Phebe came bouncing into the dining-room, her eyes blazing with righteous indignation and injured pride.

"Theodora McAlister, I'm ashamed of you, perfectly ashamed!"

"You've said so before," Theodora answered tranquilly, while she went on eating her dinner. "What is it, this time?"

"You've gone into a store." Phebe's tone was one of scathing scorn.

"Yes. What of it?"

"My sister a clerk in a common store!"

"Yes, in Huntington's."

"But it might have been a grocery."

"It might have been an undertaker's," Theodora answered sharply. "I don't see what difference it makes to you."

"Is this really true, Teddy?" Mrs. McAlister questioned.

Theodora glanced about her at the astonished faces of her family. Surprise and disapproval seemed to be meeting her on every hand. Even Allyn stopped eating his bread and milk, and pointed his spoon at her accusingly. Then she turned to her father, who was entering the room.

"Phebe has just found out about Huntington's, papa," she said, with brave dignity. "Are you willing to tell them how it happened, and why I did it?"



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Ted! Teddy! Theodora McAlister!"

Theodora was passing the Farringtons' grounds. At the third call, she looked up. Billy, on the piazza, was waving his cap in one hand and pounding the floor with one of his crutches with the other.

"What's the matter?" she called, at a loss to account for these vigorous demonstrations.

"Come up, and I'll tell you," he shouted. "Hurry up about it, too."

"Is the house on fire?" she demanded in feminine alarm, as she turned and sped across the lawn.

Billy laughed derisively.

"If that isn't just like a girl! It's nothing of the kind, Ted; it's good news."

"What a scare you gave me, you sinner!" She dropped down on the step below him and fanned herself with her hat, for it was noon of an August day. "What is your great news, anyway?"

"Uncle Frank is sick again."

"But I thought you said it was good news," Theodora said, in some perplexity.

"So 'tis. Wait till you hear the rest of it. He isn't dangerous, only comfortable; but the doctors say he'll die unless he goes up into the mountains. He won't go unless mamma goes, and so she's going."

"But for the life of me, I don't see anything so very good in all that," Theodora said again.

"It is very solemn and serious so far, for he's really awfully ill, and mamma doesn't want to leave me, and she feels that it is her duty to go," Billy answered, trying to subdue the rapture written in every line of his face. "Now we're coming to the good part,—good for me, that is, for I don't know what you'll say to it. She is going to be away for six weeks, and I'm to be at your house."

"Oh, Billy, how splendid!" Theodora's tone left no doubt of her sincerity. "When are you coming?"

"Day after to-morrow. Mamma had a letter, this morning, and she's been in a great pickle about it. She felt she ought to go, for there isn't anybody else; but she couldn't take me. I'm not up to mountain climbing just yet, and she was bound she wouldn't leave me alone. Finally, I suggested going to your house, and that struck her as a good scheme. She's had a long session with your father and mother, and it's all settled, unless you veto it."

"I'll be likely to. Now we shall have a chance to work on our play."

"And to develop our pictures," added Billy, who just now was suffering from an attack of the photographic mania.

"Yes, dozens of things. We can do so much in six weeks."

"The worst of it is," Billy remarked pensively; "I'm sure to have such a fine time of it at your house that I can't seem to get up much regret over my mother's departure."

"You'll be homesick enough," Theodora predicted. "Wait a week and see."

Two days later, Mrs. Farrington took the morning train for New York, where she was to meet her brother and go with him to the Adirondacks. Billy stood on the steps to wave her a farewell; then he slowly crossed the lawn towards the gate which had been cut through the fence under "Teddy's tree." For the next week or two, he and Theodora were busy from morning till night, revelling in the thousand and one interests for which the days had been all too short, when they were obliged to take their meals and to sleep in places six hundred feet apart.

One golden September day, Billy and Theodora were out under the old apple-tree, hard at work on the play which they had long been planning to write. It was to be given on the following Christmas; and the parts, written to order, included the three older McAlisters, Billy, and Archie who had promised to come East in time for the holidays. There was need for strict division of labor. Billy, more familiar with theatres, was able to supply the stage craft and the plot, while Theodora padded the skeleton and covered the dry bones of his outline with sonorous speeches over which she was forced to pause, now and then, to smack her lips.

"Die, villain, die; and drink the cup of retribution for all your sins!" she read. "How does that go, Billy?"

"All right. Do I say that, or does Hu?"

"Hu. Poor Uncle Archie! Then he tumbles over with a whack and dies in Hope's arms."

"What kills him? You never do half kill people, Ted. You take too much for granted."

"Conscience. No; Hu, that is, Sir James, shoots him."

"I remember now. I'd forgotten. I hope Hu's a safe shot."

"He couldn't hit a church, if he tried." Theodora giggled. "What's the matter, Hope?" For she saw Hope coming rapidly across the lawn towards them.

"Bad news, dear." Hope's eyes were full of tears. "Mamma has a letter from Butte, and Archie is in the hospital there, with typhoid fever."

"Hope! Not really?"

"Do they think he'll die?" Billy asked anxiously, with boyish bluntness.

Hope's tears began to fall on the letter in her hand.

"They say he's very ill, and that they felt it was best to write. Papa says typhoid is always uncertain, and he wants mamma to start West, to-night."

"Will she go?"

"I don't know yet. She's half wild, for Archie is her only brother, and she loves him so."

"Don't we all?" Theodora questioned impulsively.

Even in the midst of her tears, Hope blushed scarlet.

"Not in the same way, Teddy," she said gently. "You know they were all alone with each other for so long. I hope she will go."

"It would be better if I weren't here," Billy said thoughtfully.

"No; you're like one of us, Billy, and it's easier, with you here to be sorry for us," Hope said gratefully, for she had been quick to realize the sympathy in his look and tone. "Besides, it may not be so bad. Mamma, if she goes, may find him better and able to come home with her."

Back of Theodora, Billy stretched out his hand to Hope and pressed her hand in silent token of understanding and pity. Nothing increases the power of observation like suffering. Billy's long months of helpless idleness had taught him to read the faces and moods of the people about him as a strong, active boy could never have done. He had fathomed the true state of affairs between Archie and Hope. He knew how much of Hope's future happiness, unknown to herself even, was depending on the outcome of that illness of Archie, and he saw her present pain, and the brave self-control which helped her to master it.

Mrs. McAlister left for the West, that night. The days which followed were gloomy ones to them all, anxious and busy ones to Hope in particular, for upon her devolved the care of the housekeeping and much of the responsibility over Allyn and Phebe who was as fractious as never before and resented Hope's gentle rule. Two more letters came from the hospital; but they reported no change. Until Mrs. McAlister could reach her brother, they could know nothing definite. They could only wait and hope.

During all these weary, dreary days, it was a comfort to them all to have Billy with them. It had long been impossible to think of him as an outsider; but now he came closer to them than ever before, comforting Hope, helping Theodora to pass the time of restless waiting, cajoling Phebe into good humor, and entertaining Allyn by the hour. Blithe and sunny-tempered himself, he kept them from becoming too blue, while the little care and half-tender, half-playful coddling which the girls gave him was a safety valve for their tensely-strung nerves.

"I believe I love those old crutches of yours, Billy," Theodora said impetuously, one night.

He had been unusually weak, all that day. Even now, there were times when his strength failed him and when, for the passing hour, the old pain came back to give him a few twinges, as a reminder that he could not afford to be too careless. He had been lying stretched out on the sofa with Theodora sitting beside him, while the twilight dropped over the room. At her words, he looked up abruptly.

"I can't say that I do."

"No; I suppose not. Still, I owe them a good deal."

"I don't see why," he said vaguely, as his eyes rested on her bright face, just now looking unusually dreamy and thoughtful, while she sat staring at the long rosewood staff in her hand.

"Perhaps it's selfish," she said, with a smile; "but I've an idea that if, when I first knew you, you'd been strong and--just like other boys, I should never have known you half so well. Do you know, Billy Farrington, I'd just like a chance to fight for you, to do something to show I'm not a friend just in talk and nothing else."

He laughed at the sudden fierceness of her tone, little thinking how soon her words would be put to the test.

"I hope you won't have the chance, Ted; but I've an idea that, if ever I were in a tight place, you'd help me out of it sooner than anyone else."

"Try me and see," she answered briefly.

Good news came to them, only the next day. Mrs. McAlister had reached her brother, to find that convalescence had already begun. The attack of fever had been sudden and sharp; but Archie's fresh young strength had held its own, and his recovery was likely to be a rapid one.

"I shall bring him home with me," Mrs. McAlister wrote. "He oughtn't to go back into camp, this fall; and the doctor says that the long rest will be the best tonic he can have, for he's been working altogether too hard. If he is able, we shall start for home, next week, and get there by the twenty-fifth."

Hope sang blithely to herself, all that day, and even Phebe was moved into a more agreeable mood than was her wont. Allyn took a more materialistic view of the situation.

"Uncle Archie's going to get well," he remarked to Billy. "Now he can bring me nonner engine."

For two days, the McAlister household felt that it was living in an atmosphere of perpetual sunshine. Then the clouds fell again. It was one Saturday morning. Theodora was at her desk, straightening out the account of Mr. Huntington's weekly sales, Hubert was playing football, and Hope had gone to market, taking Allyn with her. Out on the lawn west of the house, Phebe and Isabel St. John were playing tennis and wrangling loudly over the score. Left to himself in the house, Billy threw aside his book, took up his crutches, and went away to the barn, where Dr. McAlister had given up an old harness closet for his use in developing his pictures. It opened out of the barn not far from the stalls where Vigil and Prince were kept; but it was easily accessible and sufficiently roomy, and Billy had accepted the doctor's offer eagerly.

Once shut up in the dark in company with his ruby lantern, Billy fell to work on a picture of Allyn, taken only the day before. So absorbed was he that it was only vaguely that he heard the voices of Phebe and Isabel in the barn close at hand. The murmur went on for some moments, broken by girlish gigglings and little squeals of merriment. Suddenly there came another squeal, louder, this time, and more earnest; there was an interchange of swift, low words, and then silence fell, and Billy dismissed the incident from his mind.

The picture proved refractory and refused to come out. Then at length Billy gave it up in despair, threw away the developing fluid, cast the plate into a pile of similar failures, took up his crutches, and started for the house again. On the way, he met Phebe and Isabel. They looked at him furtively as he passed.

"What's up, Phebe?" he asked.

"Nothing. I only thought you looked tired," she replied, with unusual thoughtfulness.

"So I am, of doing nothing. Come in and play casino with me."

"Can't," Phebe said hastily. "We'd like to, Billy; but there's something else we've got to do."

"All right." And he passed on.

They were all seated at the dinner-table, that noon, when the doctor came into the room. His face was white and very stern.

"Vigil is dead," he said abruptly. "Do any of you children know anything about it?"

"I don't," said the twins, in a breath, and Hope echoed them; but Phebe started and cast a swift glance at Billy.

"Do you, Billy?" the doctor asked, for the glance was not lost on him.

"No; of course not. When did she die?"

"This noon, when I came in, I found her. She was groaning pitifully, and very weak. I wonder that you didn't hear her."

"She died?" Billy asked sympathetically, for the doctor's voice broke over the last words. Vigil had been his favorite horse, and together, man and beast, they had passed through many a tragic night and day. Such friends cause bitter mourning.

"I shot her, to put her out of her misery," he responded briefly. Then he turned to Phebe.

"Phebe, do you know anything about this?"

She grew white.

"No," she stammered. "At least, not exactly."

"What do you mean? Do you know anything about Vigil?"

"I--I'd rather not tell."

"Answer me," he said sternly.

For her only reply, she burst out crying, and cast another glance at Billy. Her father took her hand and led her away to the office.

"Now, Phebe, I want you to tell me about this," he said.

"Oh, no."

"Did you do anything to Vigil?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"N--no."

"Phebe, this isn't a time to shield the culprit. Tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything," she sobbed.

"Were you at the barn, this morning?"

"No."

"Did you see any one go there?"

"No--only Billy."

"Was Billy there?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"About ten o'clock."

"You saw him?"

"Yes; Isabel and I were playing tennis, and I saw him go. When he came back, I met him, and he looked so queer that I asked him if anything was the matter."

"Queer? How?"

"Dark, sort of, under his eyes, and--scared."

"Phebe," the doctor looked at her steadily, searchingly; "is this all true?"

"Yes."

He took a quick turn up and down the room.

"And I thought the fellow was true as steel," he muttered to himself. "Those eyes ought to be true. Poor fellow! I wish Bess were here to talk to him."

His face was very gentle as he went back to the dining-room. As soon as the meal was over, he turned to Billy.

"Come to the office a minute, Billy," he said.

With a look of wonder on his face, Billy followed him to the door. When they were alone, the doctor spoke.

"Billy," he said quietly; "Phebe says you were at the barn, this morning."

"So I was," he answered.

"That you were the only one who went there."

"How does she know?" Billy asked easily, for as yet he did not see whither the doctor's questions were leading.

"Did you see Vigil?"

Then, of a sudden, the truth burst on the boy, and he flushed with anger. The doctor saw his heightened color, and mistook it for guilt.

"And I trusted you so, Billy," he said sorrowfully.

"Dr. McAlister, do you think I did anything to your horse?"

"Who else?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," the boy returned recklessly. Then, with an effort, he regained his self-control. "Dr. McAlister," he said, and his true, honest blue eyes met the doctor's eyes steadily; "Dr. McAlister, on my honor, I have not been near Vigil, nor done anything to hurt her. That is all I can say about it."

There was a silence, long and tense. Then, as the doctor made no sign, Billy turned away and went out of the office.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The doctor was attempting to argue with Theodora.

"But, Teddy, who else can have done it? Nobody else had been to the barn."

"How do you know?"

"Because the only way to get in was through the front door. Phebe and Isabel were in plain sight of that, all the morning, and they saw no one but Billy go there."

Theodora's lips closed stubbornly, and her eyes, as they met those of her father, flashed with defiance. When at last she spoke, her manner was respectful, but her voice had an odd, metallic ring.

"And so Billy must have done it. What do you suppose he did to Vigil?"

"She was poisoned," the doctor answered briefly, for the subject was as painful to him as to his daughter.

"Do you think he did it on purpose?" Theodora's tone was hostile.

"Teddy!"

"Well, I know," she said passionately, for her self-control had been exhausted during the past half-hour; "but you might as well say he gave the horse poison out of spite as to say he did it at all. It's so like Billy to go meddling with what doesn't belong to him. It's so like him to lie about it afterwards. Papa McAlister, Billy Farrington doesn't lie, and he has said to you over and over again that he had nothing to do with it!"

"But Phebe says--"

"Phebe!" Theodora's voice was expressive. "You believe her above Billy?"

"Teddy, dear," the doctor's voice was very low and sorrowful; "don't make it harder for me than you can help. I have loved Billy like my own boy, and I have believed in his honor as I have in Hu's; but I have found something that tells the story. Down in the hay in Vigil's manger, I found this bottle." He held it up as he spoke, and Theodora read the label. "It is what Billy uses for his pictures; no one else touches the stuff."

"And you think he put it there?"

"Accidentally. He may have dropped it, you know, as he went in. Of course, he didn't mean to be careless, and when I first spoke to him about it, he probably didn't know. I could have forgiven the accident; but when I showed him the bottle, and he lied about it to save himself--" Dr. McAlister paused.

At sight of the overwhelming testimony of the bottle, Theodora had dropped down into a chair. Now she sprang up again.

"I'll never believe it as long as I live, bottle or no bottle!" she said violently. "It is mean and cruel and abominable to lay it to Billy Farrington; and I will never believe he had anything to do with it till he says he had. I never thought you'd treat a guest in your own house like this, Papa McAlister. You can everyone of you go back on him, if you want. I intend to stand by him." She gave a nod of emphasis to her words; then, bursting into tears, she banged the door and rushed away to Billy.

She found him in his room, sitting by the window and trying to read. He looked pale and worried, for it had been impossible for him to blind himself to the attitude of the family towards him during the past three days. Hope and Hubert were scrupulously polite, with a frigid, remote courtesy which was worse than open hostility; Phebe avoided him as if he had the plague; and Allyn showed a marked inclination to converse about the present state of affairs which was scarcely soothing to Billy's irritated nerves. After the first day, he had remained most of the time in his own room, whither Theodora followed him and insisted upon admission.

"What do you care if they do act like idiots?" she demanded fiercely. "I'm ashamed of them all, utterly ashamed; but I wouldn't care."

"Yes, you would," he returned drearily. "It's no fun to be sent to Coventry like this, Ted. I wish Hope and Hu would speak out, and have it over with. I'd like a chance to defend myself; but, if this keeps on, I shall begin to think I did do it."

"Haven't you any idea?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No."

"Honestly? You're not trying to shield some one?"

"I'm not in a Sunday-school book," he returned. "Besides, who is there?"

"Somebody. You didn't do it. Oh, Billy, I wish I were good for anything!"

"You're pretty much all there is, Ted. Perhaps, when your mother comes, it won't be so bad."

She came, the next evening, escorted by Archie, who looked white and thin, but otherwise appeared like his usual self. Theodora felt that his coming brought a whiff of fresher air into the sultry life of the family circle. He was so gay, so full of the breezy atmosphere of the western mountains, that his coming seemed to scatter a little the clouds which had gathered; while his honest, kindly face made her feel, as it had done before, that he was a friend to be trusted.

The doctor had met the travellers at the station, and Theodora knew that they were in possession of the story long before they reached the house. It was impossible from Mrs. McAlister's manner to read her decision in regard to the rights of the case. She met Billy as cordially as ever, when he came down to supper; and during the meal she forced him to take an active part in the conversation. As soon as they left the table, Billy turned away and went to his room. A moment later, she tapped on his door.

"Come in," he said, for he supposed it was Theodora.

She came in and sat down beside him.

"Billy, my boy," she said gently; "tell me all about it, as if I were your own mother."

He looked up, and something in the expression of his blue eyes reminded her of a hunted animal.

"What is there to tell?"

"There ought to be a great deal," she said, smiling faintly. She was startled at the change in the boy, at his pallor and at the listlessness which pervaded his whole being.

"But Dr. McAlister has told you."

"Yes; but not all." She paused expectantly.

He misunderstood the pause. As if goaded to desperation, he turned on her.

"Are you going back on me, too, Mrs. McAlister? I thought you would stand my friend."

"I do."

"But you doubt my word?"

She was silent, unable to say yes or no.

He changed the form of his question.

"Do you believe me?"

"Billy, dear, I don't know what to think."

He shook back his hair impatiently.

"That's it. I'm not used to having my word doubted, and--it hurts."

Meanwhile, Theodora and Hubert were in the hall.

"Where are you going, Ted?" Hubert had asked, as they left the table.

"To Billy."

"I should think you might stay here, to-night, when Archie has just come."

"Archie has you and Hope."

"But it's not decent, Ted, to leave him."

"It's not decent to send Billy off by himself," she retorted.

"Who sends him?"

"All of you."

"He needn't sulk like a baby."

"It isn't sulking, Hu. I'd go off and not stay with people who doubt my word."

"Hm! He needn't lie, then."

Theodora faced him angrily.

"Shame, Hu! How do you know he lies? Is this the way you stand by your friends?"

"He is no friend of mine."

"He was. He is my friend now, as much as ever."

Hubert shrugged his shoulders.

"Girls always are sentimental, and your head is full of yarns, Ted. You are welcome to believe your Billy as much as you want to. Nobody else does."

"I do." And Archie came striding into the hall. "I didn't mean to listen to you; but I couldn't help hearing. I know something of men. I haven't roughed it all this time for nothing, and I've seen all kinds. You will never make me believe that Will Farrington has lied to get himself out of a scrape. I'd sooner think that Allyn himself did it. Billy is a good fellow, and I'll stand by him and see fair play. Here's my hand on it, Ted."

There was a manly ring to Archie's words and a hearty grip of his hand, and they sent Theodora to bed happier than she had been for days. It had been impossible for her to throw off Billy's trouble. The whole atmosphere of the house had seemed to be tainted by it. They all felt the weight of uncertainty and gloom more or less; but for Theodora, loyal to Billy as a girl could be, it amounted to a species of torture, and she felt an Ishmael indeed, with every man's hand against her. She never thought of swerving from her allegiance, however. Alone and unaided, she would fight for Billy against the world. Still, it was very good to find that Archie was upon her side.

"If I could only go away somewhere!" Billy said disconsolately, the next night. "I thought your mother would stand by me, but she doesn't. It's awful to be here in your house, when you are all down on me like this."

"I wish your mother would come home," Theodora responded.

"She won't."

"Not if she knew?"

"She couldn't very well. Besides, what good could she do?"

"Everything. She'd believe you."

"Of course."

"That's something, and she'd find out, somehow or other. Send for her, Billy."

"No; she'd only worry. She'll be home before long."

"Not for two weeks. We shall all be dead by that time."

"I wish I could go to her."

"Why don't you?" she asked impulsively.

His smile was very sad, as he pointed to his crutches.

"I'm not up to a journey like that, Ted. I shouldn't make much of a figure, travelling alone."

"I'll go, myself, and bring her home."

"You can't. You're too young to take such a journey alone, Ted. It's good of you to think of it, but it wouldn't do. No; we'll stick it out somehow. It isn't as bad as if you weren't here to stand up for me."

She rose and stood beside him, resting her hand on his shoulder.

"It's not much I can do, Billy; but I'm bound to do something. My whole family appear to have gone mad over that old horse. I can't help their stupidity; but maybe I can help you out a very little. Whatever I do, remember what I said, only a few days ago, that I'd like the chance to fight for you, to show that I'm a friend in something besides words."

He looked up at her gratefully.

"You are a plucky champion, Teddy. I wish I knew what to do, myself; but they seem to have me on all sides. No matter, with you and Archie to back me up, I'll manage to pull through somehow."

She patted his shoulder encouragingly.

"That's right. Keep up your pluck, Billy. Something can be done about it, I know. You can furnish the brains and I the backbone. Good-night, old boy."

She went away to her own room, but not to bed. For two hours, she could be heard moving stealthily to and fro, opening a closet door, closing a bureau drawer. Once the floor creaked softly, and a door latch clicked. Then silence fell again, and no one was the wiser for Theodora's sleeplessness.

She was late in appearing at the breakfast table, the next morning. Mrs. McAlister rang the bell for a third time. Then she sent Phebe to call her sister. A moment later, Phebe came flying back, with staring eyes.

"Oh, mamma," she panted; "Teddy isn't anywhere! She didn't answer, so I opened the door. The room is empty, and the bed hasn't been slept in at all."

CHAPTER TWENTY

LAKE LODGE, 28 *September*.

TO DR. JOHN McALISTER:

Theodora reached here safely. My brother worse. Send for her.

JESSIE FARRINGTON.

This was the telegram which was delivered at the doctor's door, two days later. It came in upon an anxious household, for up to that time they had been able to gain no clue to Theodora's disappearance. Billy alone had had an inkling of the truth, but he dared not hint it to the rest. It was only an inkling, vague and groundless, and he felt that it would do no good to speak of it. At best, he would be accused of urging his friend to take the sudden journey, and he was unwilling to increase the suspicion which already lay heavy upon him.

He knew, however, that Theodora's departure had something to do with himself. Her last words seemed to him, as he went back to them, to convey no doubtful hint of her intentions. He had had no suspicion at the time; but now he realized how like her impulsive loyalty it would be to go flying off somewhere, anywhere, to get help for him, to find some way of putting an end to the wretched situation. He was thoroughly sorry for her absence, and uneasy about her; yet he felt little alarm, for he was perfectly convinced of her ability to look out for herself. Moreover, he was human enough to watch the distraction of the family with a certain amusement. He was sure that Theodora would turn up soon, alive and well, and full of entertaining stories of her adventure. Meanwhile, it was their turn to be anxious.

Then a new anxiety came into the household. Phebe, who had been nervous and irritable, all the day after Theodora's disappearance, grew feverish at night. Her father made a short examination, pronounced her to be suffering from the epidemic of chicken pox which had infested the schools of late, and ordered her to bed. She obeyed him by going to her room, escaping by way of the back stairs and taking a long walk in the twilight with Isabel St. John, with whom lately it had been necessary for Phebe to hold many secret conferences. The next morning, the rash had entirely disappeared, and Phebe lay tossing in delirium.

It was into this household that Mrs. Farrington's telegram came, like a message sent from Heaven.

The doctor tore open the long yellow envelope. His face, already of a dull grayish color, grew a shade more pale, and he shut his teeth together, as one prepared for bad tidings. He read the few words; then he drew his hand across his eyes.

"Thank God!" he said brokenly. "Teddy is safe."

The news went like wildfire through the house. There was a babel of rejoicing and exclamation; but it was to Billy that the doctor had turned.

"My dear boy," he said, laying his hand on Billy's shoulder; "our troubles are over now, if Phebe pulls through."

Billy answered his handclasp.

"We'll forget it ever happened," he said jovially.

"One doesn't forget such things," the doctor said gravely; but Billy laughed his old glad, clear laugh.

"You've done enough for me, Dr. McAlister, to balance anything else. Remember what I was when I came here, and look at me now."

The family council which followed was short. Neither Dr. McAlister nor his wife liked to leave Phebe while she was still so ill; Hubert was too young, they felt, to go to his sister; so it was Archie who finally volunteered to bring back the runaway.

"Shall I scold her very hard?" he asked, laughing, as he took up his dress-suit case, an hour later.

"Leave that to me," the doctor replied, while he tried in vain to look stern.

As Archie passed him, Billy slipped a note into his hand.

"Take that to Ted," he whispered, and Archie nodded.

It was high noon, the next day, when Archie walked into the Lodge. Theodora met him with a little, glad outcry.

"Archie! Did you come for me?"

"It looks like it. What's more, I've brought good news."

"What?"

"Billy is cleared, and I left the whole family munching humble pie."

"Archie!" And Theodora cast herself into his arms and wept hysterically.

The young man looked half abashed, half pleased, at his burden.

"Go easy, now, Ted," he remonstrated. "Don't take all the starch out of my collar, you know."

"Who did it?" she demanded.

"Phebe."

"Archie Holden! The little wretch! And she let Billy bear the blame! I--"

"She's getting her come-uppance," Archie observed, with scant pity for Phebe. "She's no end ill with chicken pox. That's the reason your father couldn't come for you."

"I don't care; she deserves it," Theodora said vengefully. "How did it come out?"

"Providence seemed to take a hand in it, Ted. 'Twas the queerest thing. The night after you left, when the family were all half wild about you, and no wonder, Babe took her hand in the game by coming down with hen pox. She caught cold somehow, the rash went in and struck on the brain, and she turned delirious. The first thing she did, she told the whole story. I suppose she had been harping on it so much that it came out, like murder."

"What did she do?"

"As nearly as we can piece it together, she and Isabel went into the barn, that morning, and started to feed Vigil. Then in fun they began firing things at each other, till at last Babe picked up a box of Paris green and shied it at Isabel. It struck the manger and broke all to pieces. They cleaned up what they could, and sneaked away. Whether Babe started to throw the blame on Billy at first, they don't know; but, after dinner, Babe hunted up the bottle and hid it in the manger. It isn't a pretty story, Ted; but it's true."

"Babe ought to be--"

"Abolished," Archie supplemented, with a jovial laugh. "No matter, your father will have something to say to her by and by. By Jove, Ted, I wish you'd seen him go down on his knees to Billy! There was something grand in it, to see him, with his gray hair and great brown eyes, apologizing to a boy like that. Of course, he owed him an apology and a big one; but not many men would have made it so generously before us all."

"There aren't many men like him," Theodora said proudly. "And Billy? How is he?"

"Jolly as a sandpiper. He vows that there's no one quite like you, though. You did stand by him like a good fellow, Ted, for a fact."

"You too, Archie. You helped me out, when you came. I wish you were my brother."

Archie laughed a little consciously.

"Maybe we can fix that up in time. Now go along and pack up your trumpery."

Theodora's face suddenly grew grave.

"Are they very angry at me at home, Archie?"

He laughed.

"Horribly. Still, I've an idea that, if you're meek enough, you'll be in a fair way to be forgiven."

And she was forgiven. Her welcome home was hearty and loving from them all, pathetically so from Billy, who tried in vain to cover his real emotion under a boyish indifference. The last words were still to be said, however; and it was not until Theodora sat alone in the office with her father, that night, that she felt the incident was ended and she stood among them on precisely the old ground.

"I can't blame you, my girl," he said at last, as he drew his arm yet more tightly about her waist. "You were rash and headstrong. You caused us two days of terrible anxiety, and you might have run into serious difficulties; but your

purpose was a good one, even if it was too impetuous and daring for a child like you. We were all blind, Teddy, strangely blind; and I can never forgive myself for my unjust suspicions, nor be glad enough that you stood by your old friend in the face of all this evidence." There was a silence. Then he bent over and kissed her forehead. "Teddy dear, if you can only tame down this rashness of yours, and yet be the same loyal girl you are now, your womanhood will be very big and beautiful. But remember this, dear, in all this wilful, hasty end of the century, a true woman must be as gentle as she is brave, as thoughtful as she is loving."

"But I'm glad it's all over," Theodora said contentedly, the next day.

She and Billy sat on the piazza, in the golden noon of an early October day. Hope was in the hammock, with Allyn beside her and Archie on the floor at her feet, while Hubert sat on the rail facing them all. Theodora had been entertaining them with an account of her journey, and she ended her story with these words.

"It has been a terrible month," Hope said thoughtfully. "After our years of placid existence, it seems as if a cyclone had struck us, all at once. I should think you'd wish you had never set eyes on us, Billy."

"I do," he replied tranquilly, as he stared at Theodora's bright face.

"Poor old William!" she said, laughing. "It was a sorry day for you when I descended on you from the apple-tree."

"Adam and Eve never knew how well off they were, till the serpent came," Archie suggested. "I have a notion we shall have a better time than ever, now it's all over."

"You can crow over it, if you like," Hubert said remorsefully. "You and Ted were on the winning side of things. Billy, my friendship isn't good for much; but I'll be hanged if I ever expected to go back on you and make such a jay of myself."

"Never mind, Hu; it's over now," Theodora said consolingly.

"Yes, thanks to you," Hubert returned. "My share in it isn't much."

Theodora laughed.

"Thanks to Babe, you'd better say. We should still have been a divided household, if Babe hadn't been benevolent enough to have chicken pox."

"She didn't," Allyn objected suddenly. "The chicken didn't come out any. I watched to see it, and I couldn't, and papa said so, too, and that's what made her so wretchable."

"But it's over, as Teddy says," Hope observed, breaking in on the laugh that followed Allyn's contribution to medical science; "and I can't help feeling that we are going to have a lovely winter, with Archie here, and Billy to stay on till Thanksgiving. There's time to make up for all we've lost now."

"We'll make the most of it, then, for this will be my last winter here, for ever so long," Billy said, rising. "If I enter college, next fall, it will be a good while before I settle down at home again."

"And I too," Theodora added, as she rose and stood beside him.

He smiled down into her eyes for a moment, as they stood there. Then together they turned and walked away. The world about them lay golden in the sunlight and in the glow reflected back from the yellow leaves of the hickories; but not one whit less golden was the future, as it stretched away and away before their glad young eyes.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was commencement week at Smith College. To the alumna and the student, the picture called up by those words is sufficiently definite and demands no amplification. To them, is no prettier sight possible than the broad campus dotted with buildings, and the knots of daintily-dressed girls moving slowly to and fro along the winding paths. The Meadow City always puts on her most festal array in honor of the occasion; the very heavens seem to watch for that week, and to provide for it the finest moon of the whole summer.

Baccalaureate was over, and, early Monday evening, groups were already gathering on the campus at the rear of College Hall, eager to secure comfortable places for the glee club concert. It was one of the charming pictures of the year, that concert, the cluster of girls on the steps facing the long rows of well-filled benches below. Beyond the benches, and extending far across the grass to the very steps of the old Dewey House, was a moving, shifting crowd, changing in form and color, as the brightly-dressed girls came and went, like the varying slides of a kaleidoscope. Back of the glee club, again, the open windows of the reading-room were filled with faces of old graduates who knew the place, and who chose this point of vantage either to protect their gowns and their elderly necks from the dampness outside, or to use their position facing the crowd to discover returning classmates whom they had missed in the throng.

"There's the class president," one of them said to a friend who had arrived, only that afternoon.

"Which?"

"That tall girl in pale green at the left. She's in the fourth, fifth, sixth row; and a tall, gray-haired man is with her, and a young man the other side."

"Looking this way now?"

"Yes. I don't see anything so remarkable about her; but they say she's one of the most popular girls they've ever had here."

"That is saying a good deal," her companion answered loyally, as she raised her lorgnette.

"They wanted her for ivy poet, but she couldn't be everything. She's class poet, though, and was Portia in the dramatics, Saturday night."

"What's her name?"

"McAlister. Theodora McAlister. She looks it, too; but these soulless girls all call her Teddy."

"McAlister? That is the name of the girl who made such a record in basket ball, when I was up here, last winter. They had a song in her honor."

"Probably it's the same one. My cousin says she is very all-round. All the under-class girls adore her, and they say she'll be heard from, some day. Did you say Edith Avery is back?"

Theodora, meanwhile, had settled her guests comfortably to listen to the concert. They were all there, Dr. McAlister and his wife, Hope and Hubert, Phebe and Allyn, and the Farringtons. Among so many girls, Hope, in her pretty pink gown, was quite capable of holding her own; and Billy and Hubert were in such demand that, all that day, Theodora had scarcely had a chance to exchange a word with them. It was just as well, however, for the girl's hands were full, with the active part which her offices had imposed upon her.

During the whole week, she had borne her part admirably. When she came out on the stage for the first time, on Saturday night, she had faltered. For a moment, the sea of upturned faces had terrified her, and she could distinguish nothing but a formless blur. Then, all at once, Billy's red-gold hair and clear blue eyes had detached themselves and caught her attention, and she flashed upon him one glance, half proud, half appealing. He smiled back at her broadly and waved his programme. An instant later, she was speaking her opening lines.

She had led the baccalaureate procession; she had presided at the ivy exercises, that morning; and to-night, at the reception which followed the glee club concert, she was expected to show herself in her official capacity. The next day, she would lead her class in the commencement procession, and preside at the class supper. No wonder that she was tired, and that dark circles were beginning to come beneath her eyes. Popularity has its price, though it is a price well worth the paying. It had come to her unsought, unexpected, and she enjoyed it. Still, she was undeniably tired. She was glad for the moment to settle down on the bench, unnoticed in the crowd, with her father's arm across her shoulder and Hubert by her other side.

"Tired out, Ted?" her father asked tenderly, as she nestled against him, regardless of her finery.

"Oh, no; only glad of a chance to see my people. I have been in such a whirl, all the week, that I feel as if I had neglected you."

"We haven't suffered, and you'll rest from the whirl. You can't be graduated but once, my girl, and I want you to have the best of it," he said proudly. "Next year, you will be with us again, so don't worry about us now."

"You'd better sit up straight, Teddy," Phebe said, bending forward and speaking in an aggressively audible whisper. "You're leaning against your dress, and that thin stuff crushes awfully. Do be careful."

"Never mind," Theodora answered, with a lazy disregard of her fluffy sea of pale green chiffon. "Papa and I shall never be here again just like this, and I mean to have the good of him."

They lingered there until the concert was over and the tide was turning towards the Art Gallery. Then she rose reluctantly, and shook out her gown.



"Give me my fan and gloves, Hu,' she said."

"Give me my fan and my gloves, Hu," she said. "I must fly to my post. I'd much rather stay here."

As she turned away, a young man abruptly took leave of two juniors, and went hurrying after her. He was tall and alert, yet he walked with a certain stiffness, which gave an almost military erectness to his carriage.

"The Philistines be upon me, Ted! Do save me!"

She turned back to meet him.

"What is the matter, Billy? I thought you looked content while the concert was going on."

"Content! I'm distracted. I've been introduced to seven thousand girls. They all look alike, and I can't tell 'em from those I don't know."

"Smile on them all, Billy. You're equal to it."

"But I don't want 'em. I came here to see you, not Miss Swift of Chicago."

"You don't appreciate your advantages, Billy," she said, laughing, as they went together up the steps of the Art Gallery.

"Maybe not. I appreciate you, though, and I sail, in ten days. When shall you be off duty again?"

She looked down at the throng already streaming up the steps behind them.

"Come and rescue me at half-past nine, Billy, unless you find Miss Swift of Chicago a more potent attraction."

"Trust me!" And he vanished.

For more than an hour, the stream of people flowed past her. Everywhere was the swish of countless gowns, the low murmur of countless voices. Every one was there, not only the seniors and their friends, but the girls of the under classes, with here and there a wide-eyed, wondering sub-freshman. Faculty hobnobbed with sophomores, and the alumnae pervaded all things and were in their glory. It was a pretty picture, backed as it was by the dull-hued walls and fine statuary of the gallery; and Theodora glanced about her in contented pride, to see if any of her friends were near and enjoying this crowning glory of her Alma Mater.

Ten feet away, Mrs. McAlister was discussing football with the brother of one of the seniors, a boy too young to have any real share in the evening's pleasure. Not far off, Dr. McAlister was contentedly ruffling up his hair, while he monopolized the attention of a prominent professor, who appeared altogether unconscious of the passing moments and of the crowd of alumnae waiting for a word. Theodora smiled to herself, as she caught an occasional phrase,--

"All the bromides--Grand antiseptic qualities--Your essay in the last review."

Out on the stairs, Hope was in the midst of a gay crowd; and, quite at the other side of the building, Hubert sat on the pedestal of the Dying Gaul, with one arm thrown across the neck of the statue, while he talked to the pretty young girl perched at his side.

Punctual to the moment, Billy appeared.

"Now let's get out of this," he said abruptly.

"Aren't you having a good time?" she questioned, with a little hurt tone.

"Yes, fine. I struck some Cleveland girls; they're always pretty. But now I want a breath of fresh air and a little sensible conversation. Come along."

"Where?"

"Anywhere, as long as it's quiet."

She laughed, as she handed him her fan.

"I believe you're tired before I am, Billy."

"No; only I do want a little chance to see you. It's not as if I were going to be at home, this summer."

She glanced at him sharply. Then she bit her lip a little, as she followed him through the crowd at the door, and out upon the campus.

"This is pretty, for a fact, Ted," he said, breaking the silence. "Yale can't show anything to beat this."

"That's very generous of you, Billy," she answered; but her tone lacked its usual vivacity, and her step dragged slightly, as they moved away together among the Chinese lanterns which edged the walks in double line.

The crowd was here, too; but Billy steered her through it, past the houses and the old gymnasium, and out to the far end of the campus. At the steps of the observatory, he halted.

"It's quiet here, and we can get some good of the moon," he said. "Let's sit down here, unless you are afraid of taking cold."

"The idea! I'm not an alum; besides, it's a warm night."

"How will you stand two commencements, Ted?" he asked, settling himself at her feet and turning to look up at her.

"Better than my gowns will," she said, showing him a long rent in her skirt.

He laughed.

"You always were hard on your clothes, Teddy. I shall never forget the sound of rending garments which heralded your first approach."

"Out of the apple-tree? I remember. I also remember the lecture Hope gave me."

"Those were good old days," he said contentedly, as he opened and shut her fan.

"These are better," she answered, looking down at him, as he sat there in the moonlight. "I can't make it seem as if you ever lived in a chair."

He looked up, shaking back his hair with a quick motion of his head.

"It's over now, thank Heaven! Still, it brought us together, after all. Teddy, I'm going to miss you. I wish I needn't go."

"But you must," she said hastily, startled at something in his tone. "It isn't everybody who has the double chance to study for his profession and to be treated by Dr. Brunald, at the same time."

"If it only finishes the cure! But two years is such a long time."

"Yes. But I'm going down with your mother to see you off, you know; and then you'll write often."

"Of course. But so much can happen in two years."

"I hope there can. Do you remember my three wishes?"

"No. Yes. Seems to me I do. What were they?"

"It was one day, under the trees in your grounds. I was in a confidential mood, I remember, and I was moved to tell them to you. They included a bicycle, a college course, and a successful career of authorship."

"I remember. You've two of them, Ted; and I believe you'll get the other."

"Wait till you come home. You may find me no nearer the end than I am now."

"I doubt it, Teddy. You've the stuff in you. Write and tell me, when you make your first hit."

"I will. I'm counting on your letters, Billy, for it's going to be very lonely without you." Her lip quivered again, and in the moonlight he saw an odd glitter in her eyes.

He took her hand in his.

"Ted," he said gently; "two years can't make any difference in such a friendship as ours. We've stuck together through thick and thin, and nothing can change us. Two years isn't a very long time to wait, and then, please God, I shall come home to you all, a strong man. After that, I shall never go away again--to leave you, dear."

The last words were almost inaudible. Then the silence and the moonlight closed in about them.

The chapel was filled to overflowing, the next day, as the procession filed up the middle aisle. Led by the white-gowned ushers, they came slowly onward, faculty and trustees, alumnae and seniors, while above and around them, soft and full by turns, rose the sound of the organ under the masterly touch they knew so well. It was an hour when even the most heedless freshman felt the pain, the almost solemn sadness of the coming parting, yet the full meaning of the commencement day can be realized only by those who are leaving their Alma Mater for the last time.

All too soon, the morning sped away and the president rose to confer the degrees, while a hush, slight, but expectant, crept over the place.

"Quae primum gradum accedunt."

At the well-known words, the seniors rose, with Theodora standing at their head. The girl was very pale, and her eyes looked dark and liquid, as she raised them to the president's face. From his seat in the south transept, Billy watched her while she stood there, tall and straight and noble in her young womanhood, a very daughter of to-day; and, as he looked, within him there strengthened the belief which had been slowly forming and guiding his life ever since the day, more than six years before, when Theodora had come down to him from the old apple-tree. In all those tedious, aching years, Theodora had been his best friend; and now with health and with her before him, he could afford to work, and wait, and hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Two years had passed away, and The Savins lay basking in the heat of an August noon. Here and there, a broad calladium leaf swayed majestically to and fro in a passing breeze, and the locusts sang shrilly in the trees overhead. Upstairs in her own room, Theodora rocked lazily, humming to herself while she darned her stockings.

"Prosaic work!" she said aloud, half whimsically. "The sure forerunner of a prosaic spinsterhood! My plans don't seem to materialize rapidly, and I foresee that I shall go on darning stockings till the end of my days. Bah! how I hate it!" She rolled up her stockings into a ball. "Two years ago, and I was saying good-by to Billy in New York, and we were making great plans for what we were to accomplish. Dear old Billy! I hope he's quite strong by this time. It's almost time for another letter from him, seems to me."

She tossed the ball to the table beside her, and, clasping her hands above her ruffled hair, fell to dreaming. Phebe interrupted her.

"A letter for you, Teddy!" she proclaimed, opening the door and casting the envelope across the room towards her sister.

"From Billy?"

"How should I know? I don't read your letters."

It was the same Phebe, older and taller, but otherwise unchanged. Now her tone was slightly toploftical.

"I didn't suppose you did," Theodora answered, while she rose to pick up the letter. "I can't say you are over-ceremonious with it, Babe."

"Don't care." And Phebe vanished as abruptly as she had come.

The letter was not from Billy. The handwriting was strange; and Theodora turned it over and over nervously, before she ventured to open it. Then of a sudden the color came into her cheeks, and her eyes flashed. Seizing the letter, she opened the door and ran down the stairs.

"Hope! Hu! Somebody!" she called, with a glad, exultant note in her voice.

She called again. Then she heard Phebe's voice from the lawn.

"I am here. What do you want?"

"Where is everybody?" Theodora asked, stepping out on the piazza.

"I'm here." Phebe's accent suggested that her feelings were hurt at the question.

"Yes; but papa and mamma?"

"Driving."

"And Hope?"

"Mooning round with Archie somewhere."

"Where's Hu?"

"Gone for a ride."

"Then you'll be the first to hear my great news."

"Needn't tell me, unless you want. I don't care to be taken Jack-at-a-pinch."

"I do want to tell you, Babe. I only thought I would wait till the others were here; but I don't believe I can wait."

"What is it?" Phebe asked, her curiosity overcoming her momentary pique as she looked at Theodora's radiant face.

"It's only that I've written a book and sent it to a publisher, and he says it's good enough to publish."

"Really? Really and truly?" Phebe's face expressed her incredulity. "Will he pay you a lot for it?"

"Something,—not a lot, though," Theodora answered, too much accustomed to Phebe's lack of sympathy to be hurt by

her words. "But that's not the main thing, Babe. Think of the honor of it!"

"Hm!" Phebe said slowly. "It's the money I'd care for, Teddy. Ever so many people have written books before, and some of them younger than you."

Great was the rejoicing of the family, that day, when Theodora met them at the dinner-table with her news. In the clamor of question and congratulation, no word could be distinguished at first. Then Dr. McAlister's voice, clear and quiet, hushed the others.

"Teddy, dear," he said tenderly; "I couldn't love you more than I do; but this makes your old father very proud of you. I wish your own mother could have known it."

And Mrs. McAlister added softly,--

"Perhaps she does, Jack."

The clamor broke out again.

"When did you--?"

"How did you ever--?"

"Why didn't you tell us that--?"

"How long--?"

"What will Billy Farrington say?" Hope asked at length.

"He'll say, 'Didn't I always tell you so?'" Hubert answered, smiling across the table at his twin sister.

Afterwards they lingered on the piazza, talking and laughing, begging to see the manuscript, teasing Theodora about her secretiveness, and congratulating her again and again. It was an attractive group, Theodora in the midst, a tall, handsome girl in the full ripeness of her maidenly beauty, her arm linked in that of her twin brother, while pretty Hope stood facing them, with Archie at her side.

Allyn came up to them as they stood there.

"Take these, Teddy," he said, holding out his hand.

"What are they, Allyn?" she asked, loosing Hubert's arm as she bent down over the child.

"Clovers, four-leaved ones. They will bring you luck," he answered, with childish superstition.

"How many you find, Allyn! I never see any," she said, taking the handful of green leaves.

"Put them in your belt, and the first man you shake hands with, you'll marry," Phebe suggested pertly.

"Not I. I'm doomed to old-maidhood," she said, laughing.

"Give them to Hope, then," Phebe said, careless of Hope's blushes.

"Never. They are mine. You gave them to me, didn't you, Allyn?"

"Yes," the child said gravely. "You'd better keep them and put them in your belt. Hope doesn't need them as much as you do."

In the midst of the laugh that followed, Theodora went away to her room to write the momentous letter which should accept the publisher's offer. It cost her some pains to write it, to attain the proper degree of indifference, equally removed from coldness and from childish eagerness. The clock beside her told that an hour had passed over her task, and a little heap of torn papers lay on the desk before her when the maid came to call her.

"There's some one in the parlor to see you, Miss Theodora."

"Who?"

"He didn't tell me his name."

"Bother take him!" Theodora remarked to herself. Then she added aloud, "Well, I'll be right down."

It was characteristic of Theodora that she delayed to give no glance at the mirror. Just as she was, with her ruffled hair

and in her simple pink morning gown, she ran down the stairway and entered the cool, dark parlor. As she crossed the threshold, the guest rose to greet her,—a guest with a tall, athletic figure, a sunburned face, keen blue eyes, and a mass of reddish golden hair.

"Billy!"

"Ted!"

"Where did you come from?"

"The Ankworke package."

"But really?"

"I landed, yesterday afternoon. I was bound to give you a surprise, and I think I've made it out. Glad to see me?"

"You dear old boy! Have you any doubts about it? How well you're looking, and how--how stunning!"

"Ditto, ma'am. The years have agreed with you, I suspect."

"Yes. And you? You've told so little about yourself. You do write horrid letters, Billy."

"Your old frankness, I observe," he said mischievously.

"I know it; but when I am longing to hear if you're well and all about you, you write reams of student gossip. I forgive you, though, now I see you, for you look better than I ever supposed you could."

"Not much like the flabby chunk of flesh that used to call itself Billy Farrington?" he asked complacently.

"Not a bit, you giant; but you're the same old Billy. Is it polite to say you've grown? Walk off, and let me look at you."

Turning, he made a few quick strides up and down the room, laughing, as he did so, at the perfect satisfaction written on her face. Then he came back and took her hand once more.

"Will it pass, Teddy?" he asked, looking down at the tall girl beside him.

"Yes, in every way. You're sure you are as strong as ever?"

"Sound as a nut. And, by Jove, Ted, after two years of Dutch Gretchens, it is good to see you again."



**Something in the expression of the blue eyes above her
made her own eyes droop.**

Something in the expression of the blue eyes above her made her own eyes droop. Then suddenly she flushed and drew away her hand, which, all this time, had been lying in his two strong brown palms, for, as she looked down, her glance had chanced to fall upon the bunch of withered leaves which still clung in her belt.

THE END

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