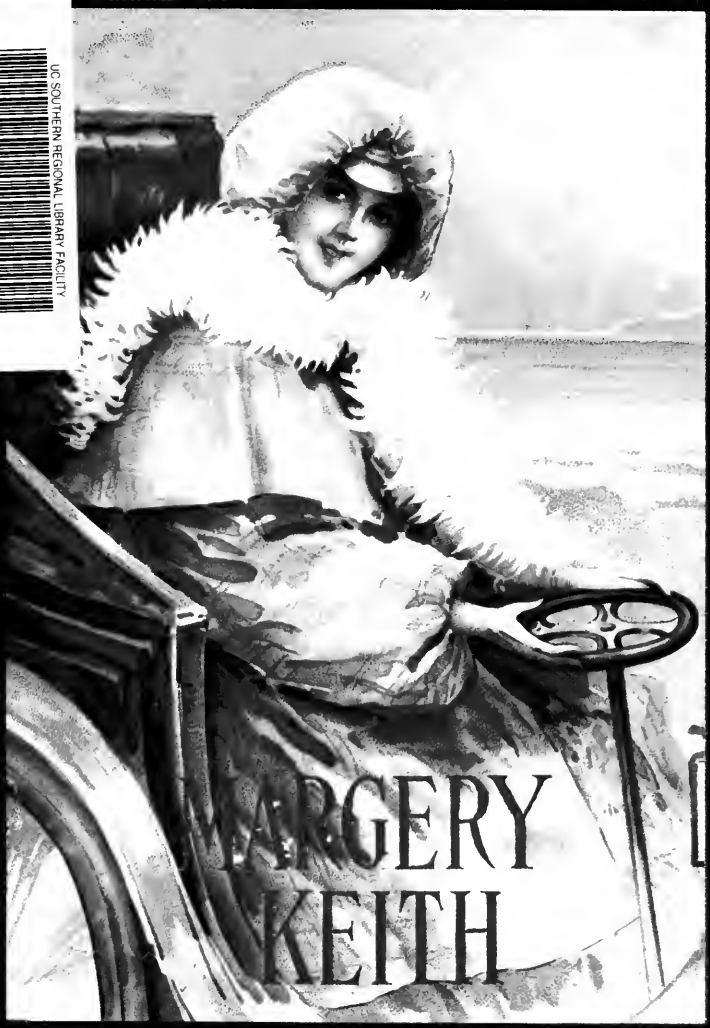

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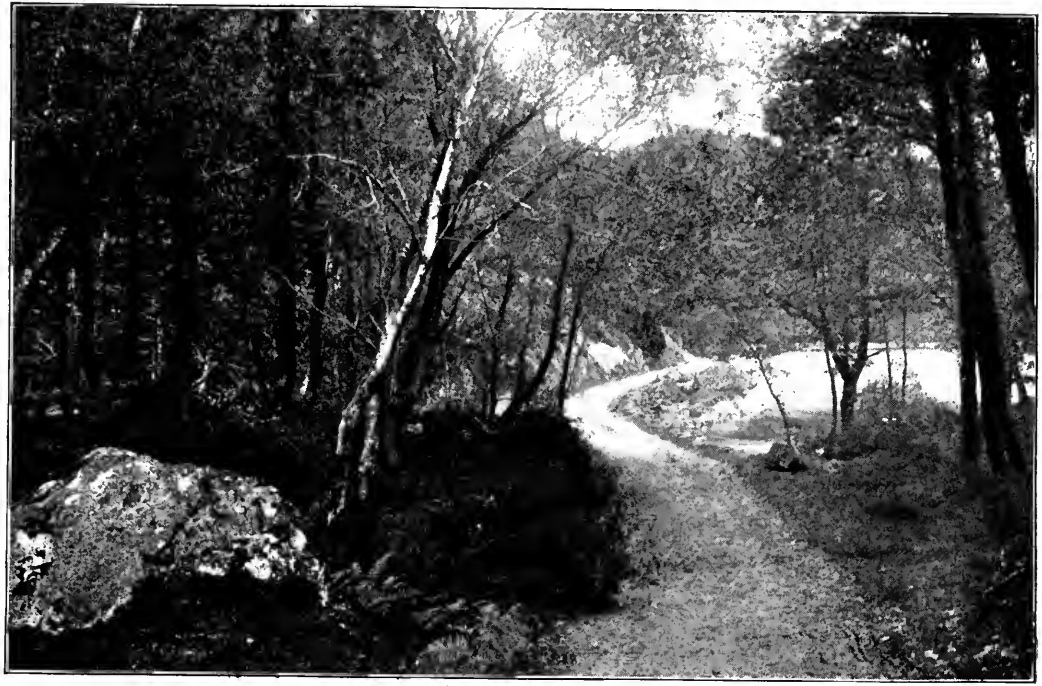

Margery Keith

By

Virginia F. Townsend

Illustrated

New York and Boston

H. M. Caldwell Company

Publishers

MARGERY KEITH.

CHAPTER I.

"Uncle Jed — uncle Jed, what is it to be?" The voice was so clear and fresh — there was such a sparkle of young life and hope all through it, that it must have found its way straight to your heart, like a sweet old tune.

There she stood — the speaker — midway between her eleventh and twelfth birthdays, with a face that suited the voice; that is better than saying it was a handsome one. A fair complexion and a soft glow in it, which reminded you of peach blooms; and eyes of a kind of nut-brown shade, and the dark, glossy hair which belonged to the girl's dozen years; not a face to strike you on the street or in a crowded parlor, it may be, but one whose charm and sweetness would grow on you with every interview.

"But what if, this time, it is to be — nowhere — Margery?"

A man's voice now, with a little pleasant, tender ring through the deep bass, and something sound and hearty in the tones, which would make you trust them, even if you did not see the speaker.

He laid down his paper as he spoke, and settled himself back comfortably in his easy-chair; you would probably have called him, on the first glance, a young man still; though he was, already, inside his forties; he was, on the whole, rather good-looking, with sandy complexion and hair and a thick beard with a reddish tinge; the keen, spirited gray eyes could be stern at times, and they could smile very pleasantly at others: a well-knit, broad-shouldered, stalwart figure, sitting in that easy-chair in the warm June sunshine near the open bay-window, where rose-bushes and geraniums made a green, fragrant thicket, whose blossoms were like tapers, twinkling all over it, in lovely lights and colors.

This girl, whom he has called by that pleasant, old-fashioned name of Margery, which has, to me, always a fresh, tender sweetness clinging to it, like the blossoms of some wild-brier, or the clear, cool scent of mint whose roots are laved by some mountain spring — this girl laughed a fresh, pleasant, rippling laugh, that was like a delightful little air, flowing all around her words.

"As though I did not know better than that, uncle Jed! As though it could be summer in New York and 'nowhere' with us! Do I look as though I could by any possibility be humbugged into swallowing that fiction?" and she stood before him, her whole face in a bright glow of defiant fun.

"No," stroking his beard and looking at her with his gray eyes at their pleasantest, "I see my attempt is quite hopeless. Ah, Margery, what a fearful thing it is to have such wits, keen and bright as a Spanish rapier! This time it is to be —," he stopped there a moment; he enjoyed whetting her eager curiosity; as you have seen a doting parent hold a ripe plum or a glittering toy an instant just above a child's strained, fluttering hands.

"O uncle Jed, don't be cruel — do speak."

"It is to be — Long Branch!"

She burst out into a little cry of delighted astonishment, "It is to be a beautiful, splendid miracle!" she said.

"Oh, no, not quite so much as that, Margery." And this time he laughed a little pleased laugh to himself, thinking she was true to her sex — she came honestly enough by her highly colored adjectives, but he would not say this, even to her. Jeremiah Woolcott was by no means a

perfect man, but he had this fineness and courtesy at the heart of him, that he could never breathe a coarse or disparaging remark of a woman, even in jest.

"But it has been the mountains, 'Saratoga,' in small doses, as you said, the Gap, but never Long Branch. You had foresworn that I thought."

"So I had; so I should now, if it were the hotels with their rush and fashion, and the crowds of fast, vulgar, overdressed men and women. But it is to be nothing of that sort. It is to be a home, quiet and comfortable and independent as the one which this roof covers."

"It is! Have you made terms for it with Aladdin?"

"What a fine thrust of satire that was, you midge! I build no castles out of silver timbers of moonshine."

"No, you do not; only out of stone and oak, solid and well seasoned. Now, uncle Jed, tell me how this house at Long Branch came about. I am so glad — it fairly takes my breath away."

"It came about in the most matter-of-fact way conceivable. You've heard me speak of my old business-partner, Tom Maxwell. He was up here last year to dinner, with Ben, that bright boy whom you beat at croquet!"

Margery had drawn a low chair close to her uncle, and she bowed her head — she would not break the thread of his talk by a word.

"Well, he came into the office in a hurry — said he was off to Europe next week with his wife and daughter; talked the matter over at breakfast, and made up their minds to sail. That's the way they do things nowadays. When I was a boy people didn't rush their lives through at such high-pressure."

"No matter, uncle Jed, what they did in those antediluvian times; I want to hear about Long Branch and the house there now."

"There goes another thrust of that swift little rapier! What a hen-pecked uncle I am, Margery!"

"Are you? If another bright thing comes into my small wits, I will not say it, so you will be good and tell me."

"Well, this is the upshot of the business. Maxwell owns a pretty gray cottage with trellised piazzas and a big sweep of lawn in front, just off Ocean Avenue, at Long Branch. He doesn't like to have it shut up all summer, and when he inquired where I was to pass the dog-days, and found my plans were all nebulous, he just proposed that I would go down with my traps and establish myself in the cottage, sovereign of the whole domain. I was doubtful at first; but Max-

well urged the matter strongly; said it would be just the place for his boy, Ben, who is to be left behind; a fine, generous fellow turning fourteen, who needs a slight rein, of course, like all boys of fourteen.

"The house, too, is furnished from attic to ice-house, and there is nothing for us to do but to bundle in, with trunks and books. 'Tisn't every man will have an offer sprung on him like that; — sole proprietorship, for a summer, of one of the finest places at Long Branch!"

"I should think not. And there is the sea, uncle Jed!"

"Yes, the old miracle, before one in all its solemn splendor! That thought does make the blood leap in one's veins, doesn't it?"

Margery sprang up as though she moved on elastic springs. She executed a little impromptu half whirl, half waltz, before her uncle, her whole movement expressing intense delight in a more fervid fashion than her words could, and the gray eyes, at their pleasantest, watched her.

"When are we to go, uncle?" she asked, coming to a full stop at last.

"The city is crowded and getting hot and dusty every day. The house stands there, wide and cool, silent and waiting. What do you say to our getting off the last of next week?"

There was, of course, no need that he should ask this question; there is none that I should write her answer.

Who this Jeremiah Woolcott and Margery Keith were, and how they came to be together under the pleasant house-roof, whose front windows looked out on a lovely bit of Central Park, I want to tell you now, briefly as possible.

They were not in the least related; indeed, neither the man nor the girl had any near living kindred; but that only made each dearer to the other.

"Uncle Jed" had had a long, rough scramble with the world. He had come out master in the end, as the pleasant home with the handsome appointments and the bit of Central Park view amply witnessed. But he knew the hard grip and grind of poverty. His childhood had been passed in one of those small villages that cluster along the Sound shore. His father had been a small farmer, but shiftless habits and heavy mortgages had consumed the estate before the man's death, and the son inherited nothing but his father's name.

The boy had energy and shrewdness. His young arm kept the wolf at bay during his mother's life, and when in his late teens she died he was quite alone in the world, and soon after left his

native town for the West. It was in the old pioneer times, and Jeremiah Woolcott had his share of the hardship and toil and privation of a miner's life.

In a few years, however, he had made his fortune, and he had a hankering for the old gray beach, and the white gleam and tumbling of the tides which had sung the cradle hymn of his boyhood; and he came back to his native town, and in less than a year married the daughter of the old doctor, who had been kind to his mother, and everything went, for three years, smooth and prosperously as marriage-bells with Jeremiah Woolcott.

Then his wife sickened and died. His loss almost killed her husband. She had been worthy of the strong, tender, chivairic love of the man who had wedded her. The old home grew unutterably distasteful to him, and he went West again, hoping to drown the bitterness of his sorrow in the sweep and rush of the wild, intense life of the Pacific coast.

He succeeded partly; still he was a lonely, sad-hearted man, underneath all his pleasant, hearty manner, when business took him East a second time.

On the journey he met with Margery Keith. This is the way it happened. It was an awful night

out on the plains somewhere in the great valley of Platte River. The rains fell in thick, black torrents, caught and twisted, and smitten and hurled by the mad gales that trampled and thundered over the wide landscape.

The overland stage, with its half-dozen passengers for the east, broke down in a gully, and the driver, turning from the main road, made for an outpost where they were laying the Pacific Railroad track.

In the teeth of the smiting wind and the bellowing rain the stage at last reached the station, which comprised a cluster of sheds and the log-cabin of the overseer.

The passengers alighted to learn that one of the largest sheds was the only accommodation the place afforded; but this was an improvement on the pitiless rain and the howling gales.

It happened that Jeremiah Woolcott was among the stage passengers. One of the laborers informed the strangers that the cabin would have been at their service, only it was at present occupied by the overseer, and he would probably be a dead man before morning.

On hearing this, Woolcott turned at once — to this day he cannot tell what impulse seized him — and walked straight through the rage of the winds and the rush of the rain to the log-cabin. He

opened the door, or the wind did it for him, and went in. There was only a single room, with a log ablaze on the hearth, and a kerosene light on the bit of unplaned shelf above.

The tragedy of the room was all centred in one corner, where a man's lean ghastly face lay, propped up by pillows. The lines were strong and fine, and even now in sharp contrast with the two or three rough, heavily hewn faces of the men who watched around him.

It was evident the end had come, and that Azrael waited in this lonely log-cabin out on the stormy plains, as he waits by gilded couches in splendid palaces.

But the pathos of the scene was in a little face mounted on a high chair close by the dying man's,— a little girl's face, pale and wistful, under a mass of bright hair, and a solemn, bewildered terror shining in the bright, dark eyes.

Jeremiah Woolcott came straight up to the bed, and the men made way for him to pass.

He took the cold, skinny hand in his own. "What is his name?" he asked, turning to the others, and the next moment he wondered at himself for asking.

Then the little girl answered in her soft, clear, childish voice, "It is my papa, and his name is Harry Keith."

That told the whole story! It brought up in an instant the old gray beach, with the damp feel of the wet sands and the happy boy's bare feet amongst the shells and sea-weed, and the snowy gleams of the surf, and the joyous sweep of the incoming tides.

Harry Keith and Jeremiah Woolcott had been school-boys and playfellows together. The former, the squire's son, was a brave, merry-hearted lad as ever you saw, — his future prospects altogether fairer than young Woolcott's; and now he was dying like this — like this!

The stranger put his lips down to the sick man's ear, "Don't you know me, Harry?" he said. "I'm your old friend, Jerry Woolcott, the squire's son!"

A sudden light flashed into the glazing eyes. "Jerry! Jerry!" the sick man muttered, as though the name came up like a beautiful surprise into his dying hour.

Then his face worked with a swift pain. "There's little *Margery*," he said. "She will be all alone, Jerry!"

"No, she won't, so long as I live, Harry." Only a few monosyllables, but no sign or bond could have made them more sacred to him who spoke them. They were the last words Harry Keith heard in this world. That he heard them those could never doubt who saw the flash of joy

in his face before the still, solemn peace settled upon it forever.

The little girl there watched breathlessly with her great, frightened eyes the stillness grow and grow. She had a vague, childish instinct of what it must mean.

Then she turned that little, scared, white face of hers to the stranger and looked at him. She saw in his eyes, the great tears which half hid her from view.

She reached out her little fluttering hands to him. "Did my papa give me to you?" she asked, in her sweet, eager childish treble.

The man took her in his arms, strained her to his heart. "Yes, he and God," he said, solemnly.

She was only six years old at that time.

And this was the way that in six years more Margery Keith and "uncle Jed" came to have that sparkling little talk together one morning by the great bay-window, with its thicket of roses and geraniums, and the blossoming glory of its cactus, and the pleasant June sunshine over all.

CHAPTER II.

It was a wonderful morning in the glowing heart of the summer. There were the deep blues of the sky set against the gleaming silver of the clouds about the horizon; below was the broad, dazzling green of the fields; the long, shining stretch and curve of the beach, and, beyond and greater than all, the sea, in its strength and splendor; the sunlight on it,and on the sails coming and going with their own slow, wonderful grace, as though, in the words of the savages, "the gods had actually come down to visit men."

This was the morning at Long Branch. In the city, a few miles away, it was quite another thing. There were the thick, stifling heats shut in by great stone walls, the loathsome smells, the glare of light, the grind of labor, and over all the strips of hot, dazzling sky.

Margery Keith came out on the upper piazza, and stood there a few moments, drumming with her fingers on the parapet. This side of the house commanded a magnificent view of the sea and all

the glory of it; the joyful movement, the flashing and quivering of the waves for miles and miles were before her that morning. The girl gazed and gazed, and a great happiness, beautiful to see, grew and grew in her face. She wore a white cambric dress, which hung about her like a soft cloud, and against her glossy hair a couple of fuchsias hung their great crimson bells. These were all the color about her, except her own lips and eyes.

The house where she stood was an ample Gothic cottage, of a brownish-gray, enclosed in deep, cool piazzas. There was a wide lawn in front, and a broad drive, and on a mound in the centre of the lawn a beautiful marble group of Neptune, with his tridents and two sea-nymphs.

A month ago Margery and her uncle had come to Long Branch. It seemed to the girl the most wonderful month of her life, "almost as good as heaven," with a little catching of her breath, not just sure but that was going a little too far.

The ocean fascinated her. The mysterious going and coming of the tides; the ships that loomed like vast spectres among its gray mists; the little silver blossoms of the pleasure-boat sails; the great white line of surf, that lay like a fallen "milky way" upon the beach, were every day a fresh wonder to the girl.

She loved the cool softness of the waves about her feet, and the feel of the moist, warm sand, in the long, happy noons, when she took off her shoes and buried her bare toes in it; she spent hours gathering pebbles on the beach, — crystal, and amber and lilac; and she came home with such a glow in her cheeks and such a gladness in her eyes to meet her uncle when he came down on the night-train; and with that little, fluttering, in-drawn breath, which he knew so well, and out of which her words always came in a hurry, seeming to shake and jostle each other to get through her voice.

"O uncle Jed, it is just the most wonderful thing in the world!"

"What, Margery?"

He knew well enough, only he liked to hear her answer.

"That old ocean, that harps and chants to itself, all through the day and the night."

"Lucky it is you are a girl, Margery. If you were a boy, I should have you suddenly flinging yourself into a pea-green jacket and tarpaulin, and shipping before the mast on some whaler, bound for a three years' cruise, hammock and hard tack thrown in."

Her laugh came out now in a sweet, clear, rippling way. "No, uncle Jed, I don't really

think I could do anything quite so bad as that, not even if I were that horrid, unconscionable thing — a boy!"

And with their second week at Long Branch a boy had come, — the Ben Maxwell, under whose father's roof they were passing the summer. Margery had rather vague notions of him, mixed up with memories of a long croquet game, and a pair of bright, merrily-flashing black eyes.

This was about all she knew of him until he came to Long Branch; what he was there, I shall leave him to tell for himself.

While Margery stood leaning over the parapet, the carriage suddenly came around the drive from the stable. Margery did not hear the wheels, she was so intent listening for another sound.

Suddenly her face brightened, and she clapped her hands. "There it comes!" she cried. "I knew it was time."

"What's that?" her uncle asked, coming out from his room on the piazza.

"The tide has turned, uncle Jed. Don't you hear?"

"Is that all? You are making a great fuss, it strikes me, over a very commonplace affair; one that has been happening every day for as many thousand years as the earth and sea are old."

"No matter; it isn't any the less wonderful

because it is commonplace. I have heard you say that about other things that were not so great as the sea and the tides, uncle Jed."

I cannot tell what reply the man would have made, for just then there was a loud, swift ring of boots on the lower piazza, and a voice shouted up, a boy's voice, eager and bright, "Time we were off, uncle Jed; only twenty-five minutes to reach the train!"

Margery leaned over the parapet; she saw Ben Maxwell standing by the carriage steps. He was only half a year ahead of her,— a well-built, broad-shouldered boy, with a thick, dark-brown crop of hair, and merry black eyes, in a squarely-moulded, well-tanned face. It was not a handsome face, but it bore acquaintance well, for it was bright and open, and full of boyish good-nature.

"Where have you been ever since breakfast?" asked the girl, playfully doubling up her fist at the boy down there on the piazza.

"Off on such a grand lark. Been to a gypsy encampment up in the woods, and had my fortune told! It was fun!"

Margery's imagination was at once attracted. She came downstairs after her uncle in bound and leaps.

"What did the fortune-teller look like,— Cleopatra?"

Ben laughed outright, a boy's outringing laugh. "Not much," he said. "She was an old crone, weird and withered, and when she set her fierce, black eyes on me, I thought of Meg Merrilies."

"You did! How I should like to see her, and—"

"Have your fortune told." Uncle Jed finished up the sentence. "I should rather give her the money, and let her keep her humbugging to herself."

"But are you just sure that it is all humbugging?"

"Margery! a sensible little girl like you ask such a question!"

"I know it is," answering her own query, "only I rather like to believe in the humbugging, as I do in dear old Kriss Kringle, and Cinderella, and Aladdin and his lamp, and all the wonderful fairy tales."

"Well, you may believe the fortune-teller as you do the fairies, precisely," answered uncle Jed, getting into the carriage; and Ben followed him.

"What!" cried Margery, aghast; "you are not going to the city too, and the tide just coming in?"

Both the man and boy laughed, for one would have fancied, by the way Margery spoke, that such a thing had never happened before.

"No, Margery, I'm only going to ride down to the depot, and see if the new croquet-balls have come. I'll be back soon, and we'll have a high old time on the beach."

Uncle Jed looked from the girl to the boy with a pleasant smile, just touched with some grave thought.

"Nothing to trouble you," he said, "more than croquet-games, and scampers on the seashore, and raids after gypsy encampments. You small people, do you really suppose life is always to be set to such a merry jig for you?"

"I mean to have a jolly time all through, and send trouble whistling down the wind," answered Ben, with the bright, careless defiance of a boy who did not know what he was talking about.

"Uncle Jed," exclaimed Margery, "don't go to that hot, noisy, dusty city to-day. Stay at home, and have a good time with us."

"Can't do it, my dear. Business won't be shirked in that fashion. Come, Jack, hurry up!"

The coachman seized the reins; the man and the boy lifted their hats to the girl standing there on the front steps; and as they drove off, Ben shouted back, "I'll tell you all about the gypsies when we go down to the shore. It will keep, Margery."

As the girl turned to re-enter the house, she

suddenly caught sight of a figure, curled up like a round ball, on the gravel of the drive. She heard a little, half-suppressed cry, too, like one in pain.

The figure lifted itself up in a moment, and Janet saw a boy, ragged and barefooted, with a mop of stiff, birch-colored hair, and a pinched, freckled face, and thin, dirty claws of fingers.

His appearance was anything but attractive to a little girl of graceful and fastidious tastes like her own, and her first feeling was one of dislike and repugnance.

She understood in an instant what had happened. The boy had been standing behind the carriage where nobody had seen him, and when the wheels turned suddenly, they had knocked him down, and probably grazed his ankle.

The boy looked up and saw the girl standing on the piazza. He had not a good face; the coarse, pinched features were haunted by an expression, half sly, half sullen, which did not promise well for the soul behind.

As for the girl, she must have seemed to him, as she stood there in her snowy cloud of cambric, and the crimson bells in her hair, like a being from another sphere.

Their eyes met. Perhaps the boy felt what was in the girl's thoughts. Children of that kind have keen instincts. Margery went into the house without

speaking a word. "He had no business to be there," she said to herself. "If he gets in people's way, he must expect to be hurt. Beggar, I dare say, or thief." Yet, with her foot on the lowest stair, the girl paused. Uncle Jed's words about the comfortable time she and Ben were having in the world still lingered in her thoughts. Margery had a soft heart when you got down to it, though it was sometimes a heedless one.

She thought of the boy out there, ragged and dirty and friendless! What a different world it was to him from the world which sparkled and smiled on her and Ben! They were all three about the same age, too.

Yet it cost Margery a little struggle. She had a water-color drawing upstairs — a yacht, with a bit of gray-blue sea-front, which she wanted to finish before Ben got back to go down to the beach with her.

If Margery could have peered a little way up her future, and seen how much hung for her and others on the turning of the scale that summer morning! Yet, either way it was the simplest of matters; a mere making up her mind whether she would keep on upstairs or go back and speak a few kindly words to the miserable boy out there on the drive.

Her heart carried it at last. She wheeled about

suddenly, as though half afraid her impulse would fail, and walked straight outdoors and down the front steps, to the boy, who had only limped a few feet from the spot where she had seen him.

"Did the carriage knock you down when it turned round?" asked Margery, going straight to the point, as her words usually did.

"Yes," said the boy in the ragged coat, that was all, — all but the look of amazement in his freckled face — a look which fitly emphasized his monosyllable.

"It hurt you, didn't it? I thought I heard you groan as I went into the house, and I was very sorry for you."

The feeling of repugnance grew fainter as she talked, looking right at the boy with those bright, honest eyes of hers.

He was evidently not used to talk of that kind; something like a blush reddened among the freckles, and he made an awkward effort to place one foot before the other, and then winced with sudden pain.

"Yes, it hurt a good deal," he said.

"That is too bad; will you let me see it?"

He lifted his ankle a little way. It was grimed with dirt, but there was the long red streak that the wheel had made.

Margery was really shocked. "Why, it must

have hurt you dreadfully," she said, and the voice was pitiful as the pitiful words.

This time the boy did not answer, but the tears came into his eyes. The sight decided Margery.

"Come right into the house," she said, quite forgetting the rags and dirt; "I can do something to help you — I'm just sure I can."

The boy glanced at a small basket which lay in the grass, and which Margery had not perceived before. It was heaped with blackberries, great, glistening, jet ovals, which the July sun and sand of Long Branch had ripened to such perfection.

So he was not a beggar, after all; and these were the first blackberries Margery had seen this year.

"What big things they are! Just what we shall want to-night for supper, with sweet cream. Bring them up into the hall."

She led the way, and the boy limped after, leaving his basket in the hall. In her flush of pity and generosity, Margery took him right up to her own room. She made him sit down on the prettily-covered chintz lounge, and brought out of her work-basket a small roll of soft linen.

It did require some courage to touch that bare foot, grimed and stained with mud and sand; but Margery went at it bravely. She was not the kind of a girl to stop when she had made up her mind

to do anything. She bathed the wound with arnica, and then bound the cool, soft folds of linen about it, fastening them together with a few stitches; and all the while the look of awed bewilderment was growing in the boy's eyes; and, as he felt the light touch of the soft fingers about his foot, he would certainly have thought that Queen Titania had borne him off to her castle in fairy-land, only he knew no more about these than the canary did, swinging in his perch by the window.

All the while, too, Margery's heart was growing tender toward the ragged, friendless creature, for whom she was so busily at work.

When all was done she lifted up her face with the smile that would make her beautiful when she grew to be a wrinkled old woman.

"There, it feels better now, doesn't it?" she said.

"Oh, yes, a great deal;" and this time all the sly, sullen look seemed to fade out of the boy's face, and he smiled a little in return, — a pleased, grateful smile.

"You don't look as though you had a very jolly time in life," said Margery, the words coming out before she had thought twice.

"No, I haven't," said the boy; and there was a flash of bitterness or pain in his face.

Margery saw it. It seemed to her for a moment

as though she had no right to all the love and happiness, and luxury that filled her life, when it was brought face to face with such poverty and misery as this.

Yet she could not put her feeling into words, and so it came out in a moment in the most matter-of-fact question, "How much do you ask for your berries?"

"Twelve cents a quart; there's two of 'em."

She went to her purse, and emptied what scrip it held into her small palm. There was so little to buy at Long Branch that she had not recently examined her finances, and now discovered that the sum total amounted to a dollar!

She put it all into the boy's fingers. "Part is to pay for the berries, you see," with her sparkle of a smile, "and part is a kind of salve for that cruel hurt. Money cures a good many aches, you know."

"Yes," answered the boy, pocketing the scrip, a good deal as though some fair Dryad had floated out of an oak, and brought him a precious gift and he turned to go.

"Take care of that foot; I hope it will be well in a little while," called the sweet, hopeful voice.

The boy had reached the door now; the bewildered, half-dazed look suddenly cleared out of his eyes. There was a flash of feeling in them.

He turned to Margery and said, with a kind of awkward earnestness, and another dull, red flush working into his freckles, "I thank you, ma'am. I think you have been real kind to me."

Then he stumped away. Something in the words or the manner actually brought the tears into Margery's eyes.

She went to the window; but this time she did not see the blue glitter of the waves, or the sunlight on the sails, or the wide gladness of the green fields. It was all there, but the girl only saw the small, lowly figure, with the little limp, going down to the gate.

"Poor boy!" murmured Margery. "I wonder where he came from? I wish I had asked him his name. So different! And yet God made him, and must love him just as well as he does us! That's the hardest of all to believe. Seems to me, if I were in his place, I never *should* believe it."

Just then she caught sight of the carriage coming up Ocean Avenue, and Ben Maxwell with his restless head outside looking for her.

"And now comes the beach!" said Margery, with that little glad quiver in her words; and she sprang for her hat, and was down on the piazza awaiting Ben when he rolled up the drive.

But she did not tell him what had happened that morning. It might be because she herself had had so much to do with it.

CHAPTER III.

"THAT man had a bad face," said uncle Jed, leaning on his mallet, and looking after the figure that went up the lane, — a rather round-shouldered, thick-set figure, in a seedy, ill-fitting coat and pants.

"A bad face," he repeated, mostly to himself. "I should not like to trust it in some places where I have been."

He was standing in a corner of a wide pasture-field at the foot of the cottage grounds. A lane ran on one side, and a great wild-cherry tree grew close to the bars, and threw its wide shade over the smooth ground which Ben and Margery had selected as the best stage on which to execute their croquet feats.

A few quince and barberry clumps were the only trees which grew on the cottage grounds, and the young people being liable, even in the noon-heats, to a seizure of "croquet intermittent," as uncle Jed with playful irony called their passion for the game, the great, wide-spreading,

green roof of the wild-cherry tree afforded them just the shelter they needed for these exploits with ball and mallet.

Such times as they had here — such fun and frolics — such long, breathless croquet games! at which sometimes uncle Jed, sauntering down when he was tired of his papers and books, would take a hand, and then the fun and frolic would be redoubled.

For if there was one thing uncle Jed knew how to be perfectly, that was a boy! He could throw himself with such heart and soul into whatever was going on among the young people; he could play and romp and rollic with the merriest of them; indeed, grown man as he was, he could bring a spirit and flavor to the fun which nobody else could; the secret of it all being the core of youth and warmth at the heart of uncle Jed. It would always keep him from growing old, though the frosts were deep in his hair and the wrinkles thick in his face.

Whatever you do, boys and girls reading my story, be sure you keep just such a warm something at the core of you.

It was about midway of the afternoon; you might have heard soft lisps and whispered secrets of the sea as the tide went out, and there were little flickers of wind among the thick leaves of

the cherry-tree. The boy, the girl, and the man, had just finished up the game which had absorbed them for the last hour. Margery was full of the heat and eagerness of the play; she would certainly have shouted out, "Now, let's have another game," if the bulky, round-shouldered figure had not gone by at that moment and occasioned uncle Jed's remark.

They had all looked at the man, strangers not being in the habit of passing through this lane, which led down by a gentle slope to the huckleberry woods half a mile off.

He had looked at them in turn with a pair of bold, dark eyes — something evil in them too, which had struck uncle Jed, who seldom was mistaken in his estimates of men.

"What kinds of places?" asked Ben Maxwell, who had overheard the remark.

"All kinds of lonely, desolate, jumping-off places, my boy: in thick wildernesses, in wide plains, and deep cañons, and mountain gorges, where I have spent so many days and bivouacked so many nights."

"You must have met some very bad people in all those travels, uncle Jed," said Margery, with a grave face and an indrawn breath.

"Not a few of them. That fellow who just went by starts up some of them; strange how

things are always coming back!" this last in an undertone, half to himself.

"O uncle Jed, do tell us about some of them," cried Margery, the prospect of one of his stories putting croquet in the shade, when she was in the full heat of it too!

"Yes, I should like to hear it hugely, sir," added Ben Maxwell, who had had an appetizing taste at Long Branch of some of uncle Jed's stories.

He was not one of those men who are full of moods and crotchets, and whose stories have to be coaxed and wheedled out of them much as you would a gift from a miser.

There was a long, low rustic seat, brought out here for the accommodation of occasional spectators of the games. Uncle Jed sat down, and Ben and Margery actually threw themselves on the short grass; for which imprudent action on their part, I can only say it was midsummer, and there had been a long drought.

He told the first story that came up. You must hear, all through it, the croon of the winds in the leaves, and the soft, low whispers and laughters of the waves on the beach.

"I didn't like the looks of the man when we both got into the stage at Wolf's Head station. This was nothing but a small government post

out on the plains in Colorado. I had seen him pouring down his vile whiskey at the little way cabin which served for a hotel to all the overland passengers on that route.

"A man out on the plains can't afford to be too fastidious about his society. I had had some rough schooling before, but when the light of the stage lamp fell full upon the man's face, and we each turned and took a fair look at the other before entering, I just said to myself, 'If you should make up your mind it would pay to kill me, my life wouldn't be worth a sixpence.'"

"Did you say that and then get into the stage with that man, uncle Jed?" asked Margery with her indrawn breath and great solemn eyes.

"Precisely. There was a strong chance that my fellow-traveller might not think it worth while to murder me; and an even one that if he did think so my own mother-wit might preserve me. As for brute force, he had immeasurably the advantage, being at least six feet high, powerful, muscular; one of those sinewy trappers who had been for two years on the frontiers,—used to bowie-knife, big rows, and vile whiskey.

"But there was no help for it. This man was to be my sole companion for all that long night-ride, and thinking that a man could not always afford to choose his company, and whistling a tune,

— partly to keep my courage up, — I got into the stage. The next station was forty miles off, and we should not reach it until early dawn."

"Forty miles with a man whom you believed was ready to murder you if he found reasons satisfactory to his own mind for doing it!" exclaimed Ben Maxwell.

He was a brave boy, but he looked at uncle Jed as though he would not like to try it for himself.

"Mining, like misery, makes strange bedfellows, Ben. It was not the first time I had eaten and drunk and slept among men with whom my life would not have been worth a moment's purchase if I had stood in their way.

"The trapper was sociable enough, offering me his flask of whiskey, and taking huge draughts every little while himself, waxing coarsely merry over stories of Indian fights and buffalo hunts, and things of that sort.

"I had been out day and night for two weeks on the plains, and was well used up. All the money I had in the world at that time I carried with me in a little canvas bag, snugly stowed away under my ribs. Don't stare, children. It wasn't enough to lift us comfortably over this summer. The question was whether my travelling comrade suspected the amount I carried with me, and if he did, whether he would think it worth while to put an

end to me for so paltry a sum: murder in cold blood being not an altogether pleasant thing even to a rough trapper used to drunken rows and Indian fights."

"But how should he know anything about your money?" put in Margery.

"There was the rub. In the little way cabin I had met an old comrade from the diggings. He was going on to inspect a claim somewhere among the foot-hills of the Sierras. He told me the first comers would have a chance for a fortune. I was younger than I am now, and the prospect was alluring. In the course of our talk I told my friend the extent of my fortune, and that I had it all about me."

"And this fellow in the stage might have overheard — I see," exclaimed Ben.

"Yes, we had imprudently grown interested, and waxed loud in our talk. The trapper might have listened, and then again he might not. There was something furtive in his eyes when they studied me occasionally, which I did not like, while his great hairy hands fumbled at his shaggy brick-red beard. I made up my mind to keep eyes and ears open for that night; but when a man has not had two hours' sleep for a week, it's one thing to make up his mind to keep awake, and quite another to do it."

"Was it very dark outside, uncle Jed?" inquired Margery. She was a little girl still, and relished the surroundings and atmosphere of the picture.

"As a pocket, child. Gusts of rain slapping angrily every few minutes against the stage windows, and sudden howls of wind through the wide, dreary blackness. It was hardly a pleasant position to be shut up there alone with a man who might be weighing the chances for or against murdering you!"

There was a little cry from Margery.

"But there was the stage-driver," put in Ben, stoutly.

"I had taken his measure in the cabin: a fresh hand on the line; a coarse-featured, weak-mouthed young chap from the diggings. That great double-fisted, hulking trapper would find ways to settle with him — buy or frighten him into silence, if nothing worse. Altogether my plight was not a pleasant one; but for all that I dropped off in a sound sleep."

"You did?" Two monosyllables pitched to the same note of amazement from the young voices.

"I did. Lord Russell fell asleep several times, you know, when they were dressing him to be beheaded. I managed to keep awake until about midnight, the evil leer in the trapper's eyes seeming to deepen whenever he watched me over his

whiskey-flask; but, for all that, I succumbed at last, and went off into a dead sleep. I am not sure but a man might do that, under some circumstances, even if a bowie-knife were held at his throat.

"Two hours afterward I woke up of a sudden. There was a stealthy movement of a heavy hand just under my collar-bone. At first a kind of sickening chill went all over me; the next moment I was wide awake, and alert as I am now. In a flash I saw it all. The trapper had cut a deep gash through my coat and vest, and reached the canvas bag beneath. A revolver lay on the seat close to his hand. A movement now might cost me my life: I closed my eyes and reflected. The ruffian's clutch was already on the bag. If he killed me — well, life did seem sweet just then, but it seemed ignoble too, to keep it at the price of silence at that crisis. So, without moving a muscle, I opened my eyes, and, looking straight at the robber, asked very quietly, 'Do you think it is going to pay, after all?' The villain actually started and turned pale under his yellow tan. The evil eyes glared at me with the fierceness of a tiger about to spring. 'What do you mean?' he asked, with an oath.

"'Nothing; only I see what you are about, and I asked the question.'

"The trapper's pistol was in his hand; the bowie-knife with which he had spoiled my coat lay at his feet. If I had so much as lifted my head at that moment, I should have done it for the last time.

"He looked at me with a little startled, curious gleam in his bad eyes. I held him with a calm, steady gaze. Really, I was as cool as I am now. I don't think a pulse quickened.

"'Do you know you are in my power?' half aiming his revolver at me.

"'Oh, perfectly. You can shoot me this minute, and the next you can take my money. It's likely nobody will ever be the wiser.'

"'Then'—there was an oath here—'why shouldn't I do it?'

"'You must decide that; only, as I said, are you sure it will pay to remember all the rest of your life that you murdered a helpless man on his journey, for the paltry sum in that bag?'

"He swore a big oath or two. 'I'd rather have done it in fair fight, but a fellow can't afford to be squeamish where I am. I want your money.'

"'Well, if you must have it, and are bent on shooting me, let me stand up, so that you can take fair aim. You can't refuse that.'

"The trapper stared at me a moment, then his

huge features twisted into a grin, and he broke into a loud guffaw.

"'You have devillish good pluck,' he said, and a new and better look came at last into the evil eyes. I had struck some manhood at the bottom of the trapper's soul.

"'I can't shoot a man who takes it like that! Will you shake hands over it?' and he actually reached his big, hairy paw over to me, and the pistol dropped on the floor, right under the flaring inside light.

"Muscle was all on the man's side, nerve and alertness on mine. In a flash I had whisked up that revolver. You know how I can do those things, Margery. Before he could wink I held it at his head. "Now, my man,' I said, 'the tables are turned, you see!'

"He turned ashen pale — he quivered through his big, hulking frame — he begged for his life.

"'No need of that,' I said; 'I shall not be so long deciding as you were; I don't think it will pay to shoot you; and in proof of it I am going to give you back this,' returning him the revolver.

"After that, of course, I had my man. I had secured his respect for what he called my pluck, and I think I could have made that whole overland journey with him, and not so much as a hair of my head been harmed.

"I reached, too, I believe, some softer place in the rough, hardened soul before we parted in the early dawn at the post-station.

"The trapper gave me bits of his history. He was from Kentucky; had had a year's bad luck on the plains, gambling and drinking, and had lost everything; was going to the diggings to try and repair his fortunes. At the last I gave him a couple of hundred dollars, and said some things to him which brought tears into his eyes. But I had faint hopes for him. I had seen men shed bitter tears before, and they had gone away, and afterward lied, stolen, murdered, perhaps taking with them seven other spirits more wicked than the first."

Wide-mouthed, oyen-eyed, breathless, the boy and girl, lying on the grass under the wild cherry-tree, had listened to uncle Jed's story; at its dramatic climax a little cold shudder had gone over each.

Margery spoke first, in an eager, breathless way: —

"Was that all you ever heard from him?"

"No; less than six months after, I received a letter, written in a coarse, bungling hand, enclosing a check for two hundred dollars, and telling me that the writer had struck a lode in a claim among the mountains, and was 'havin' luck.' It was from

the trapper I am speaking of, and who came so near murdering me."

"O uncle Jed, then there was really some good in him, after all."

"After all, Margery. I like to think we can say as much as that of everybody whom God has made."

"And you never heard anything more of him?' asked Ben.

"Not directly; but I saw a man from the trapper's claim, less than two years after that night-ride. He knew the great, hulking Kentuckian, who drank and gambled and had his share in every brawl and row as before, not without streaks of good nature and careless generosity. He made a good thing of the lode, and left the camp for South America. What became of him afterward I never learned."

"What a wonderful story!" said Margery, with one of her long breaths, which always denoted an exclamation-point. "Uncle Jed, will you have any objection to answering one more question?"

"None, whatever, I presume."

"Just how much money did you have in the canvas bag that night?"

The man's gray eyes twinkled on the girl. "Fifteen hundred dollars, just."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before

there came a message that company was in the house awaiting uncle Jed.

He went his way, and the boy and girl stayed behind to gather up balls and mallets. In the midst of the work Ben suddenly stood still.

"I tell you, Margery," he said enthusiastically, "that was a specimen of grand pluck, —lying there perfectly still, and that fellow just ready to murder him. Wasn't uncle Jed game?"

"Wasn't he? It made my hair stand on end when he was talking, though. What started the story, I wonder?"

"Why, don't you remember? It was that big fellow that loafed down the lane here a while ago."

"So it was, Ben; I had quite forgotten him!"

CHAPTER IV.

"I DON'T know as I was ever so furious in my life —quite" said Ben Maxwell, stumping into the small library where Margery sat, cosily tucked up in her uncle's great easy-chair, cushioned with green rep.

The room was a cool little nest, opening out of the drawing-room, and the pretty writing-cabinet, and the book-shelves on one side, with that great green dell of an easy-chair, fairly filled it up. It was a nice place to dream in, Margery thought, and the long window opened on the piazza, where there was a wide, grassy lot, with golden butterflies flashing about, and a hum of brown-belted bees, and, beyond all, a delicious bit of sea view.

Ben Maxwell had been searching all over the house for Margery. He burst in upon her now, boy-fashion, his eyes aflash and his cheeks ablaze, his voice, in a loud, angry key — yet there was at the bottom of him a sturdy honesty that made him qualify his remark with that last adverb, and shade it with a softer tone, as some old explosions of his

temper loomed up vaguely, the boy having one swift and smiting as a flash. Margery looked up from her book. The girl was actually deep in dear old Robinson Crusoe!

"What has happened, Ben?" she asked, a good deal startled.

The whole came out in a few hurried, energetic sentences, little sparks of anger shooting all through them, though Ben's first heat had a good deal cooled by this time.

The upshot of the boy's story was this: He had been down in the village that morning on some errands, and returned with Sorrel, a slender, handsome colt which his father had given him a few weeks before sailing, and which the boy probably valued a little more than anything else that he possessed.

Ben had lost the day before a pocket-knife which he prized, and, having had a game of base ball with some young friends who were stopping at the hotel, suspected he might have dropped his knife in the midst of the fun.

So he rode Sorrel through the lane, dropped off her back under the wild-cherry tree, and started to search on the scene of yesterday's exploits for his knife, the quest taking him to the middle of the great lot in one corner of which were the play-grounds.

After some time Ben's search was successful, but when he returned to the tree, Sorrel was not there! The boy could hardly believe his eyes. The creature, with all her fire and swiftness, was gentle and docile to her young master as an old shepherd-dog. Ben had left her a great many times as he had done this morning, quietly nibbling the clover-grass. Had she thrown her slender-limbs in the air and darted away? Or had some double-dyed rascal pounced upon his beauty, as she was grazing under the cherry-tree, and ridden off with her?

The young master's heart throbbed with a kind of sick terror as he questioned these possibilities, and he was just starting for the house to raise a hue-and-cry, when he caught the well-known sound of the swift hoofs coming up the lane. Ben had just presence of mind to drop down on the low, rustic bench where uncle Jed had told, a few days ago, the story of his night's stage-ride on the plains.

To his unutterable amazement and rage, Sorrel's master saw an under-sized, ragged, barefooted boy astride the back of the animal. Horse and rider dashed up to the tree. There was a flush of scared excitement in the thin, sallow face of the boy, and his eyes glittered, half with triumph, half with fright, as he dropped to the ground, and

Sorrel, shaking her bright avalanche of mane with some instinct that an indignity had been put on her, returned to her sweet morsels of clover-grass.

The boy who had stolen the ride was moving rapidly away, when Ben, in the full blast of his rage, sprang to his feet.

"You young rascal!" he shouted, "I'd like to know what business you have to meddle with my horse," and he started after the boy, intent on "administering a drubbing," to use the narrator's own word, "which the small scamp would not soon forget."

But the latter had the advantage of several rods; besides, Ben had to swing himself over the lot bars; still it was a race that summer day — in the dead heat and middle of it too — down the long grassy lane, a race which tried the wind of both boys. If they had started even, no doubt Ben would have won, and that ragged, barefooted urchin would have paid in some stiff muscles for his stolen ride, which, at the best, could not have exceeded twenty minutes.

Ben bore down with a steady swiftness on his foe. The latter, small and wiry, seemed almost to glide over the ground, and no doubt fear lent some fresh energy to his movements. When he reached the outer edge of woods, however, Ben

gave over the chase. He knew the boy could run like a deer to covert among the hollows and underbrush. Sorrel's master did not feel any better that he had been distanced in this chase, — he who was the best runner in his class. All this he told to Margery as she sat in the green glade of a chair, with the Robinson Crusoe open in her lap.

Her first remark had little laughters tinkling like silver bells all through it.

"Oh, how funny it must been to see you at full blast up the lane! I just wish I had been there."

Ben hardly saw the joke. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his flushed face. "If that fellow hadn't had the advantage of me at the start," he said, "he would have felt the effects of my fists. Didn't I long to get them at him? He may thank his stars and his little black bullets of feet that he came off scot-free."

"O Ben, I doubt whether your wrath would have been so terrible as you imagine," said the girl.

"He wouldn't have doubted if I'd once got him under me," said Ben, trying to look very valiant. "The small scoundrel!"

"But was it such a frightful crime, after all, Ben?"

"To coolly mount Sorrel and go off with her in that sneaking way, Margery?" Ben's tone showed,

better than his words, his opinion of the flagrancy of the act.

"Oh, I don't mean it was right or proper, Ben, of course. But considering what this boy was, and that probably he had never mounted a colt before in his life, I can make some allowance for him, can't you?"

Ben had not looked at the thing in this light before. Any liberty taken with Sorrel touched his pride and sense of possession to the quick. He was a spoiled boy, arrogant, self-willed, and with a temper, as I have told you, that flashed and blazed like sparks among tinder. But for all that, he had a sound, brave, generous heart.

"I don't know, Margery," doubtfully twisting his handkerchief around his wrist. "If he had asked me, like any honest boy, I might, perhaps, have given him a bit of a ride."

"But he could not know, and the poor are not apt to ask such favors."

"Well, they've no business to take them," persisted Ben, stoutly.

"Of course not, and I'm sorry you had such a dreadful scare, Ben."

"When I thought Sorrel was gone — I shouldn't like to live over those few minutes again, and it was all that young scoundrel's doings."

"Well, Ben, try and forget it. Can't I help you?"

"How? Read me a chapter of jolly old Rob. I wonder if it has lost its ancient flavor? That book tided me smoothly over the measles, Margery."

"I wonder what dear old Robinson Crusoe hasn't tided small people over for the last century and a half!" said Margery. "But I have something which I think will be better just now than he."

She went to the window and opened it. It was just a little surprise which she had been preparing for him that morning.

On the corner of the piazza was a table spread with the daintiest lunch: crisp rolls, and cold chicken, and great golden raspberries, and a pitcher of thick yellow cream.

How Ben's eyes did brighten!

"Why, Margery, what put this into your thoughts? A fellow can't find words to thank you."

"I was sure you would like it. I planned it all myself, to surprise you when you returned."

"What a good little fairy you are, Margery!"

"If I am, sit right down then in my bower and eat. This is my throne, you know," taking her seat with a little royal air which quite became her.

So they sat there, in the noonday, in the cool,

deep piazza, and eat their feast. Nothing could have been pleasanter. Outside in the wide, warm stillness, the golden butterflies flashed, and the brown-belted bee hummed in the soft grasses.

The winds were quite still, and only faint, distant voices came in from the sea. The boy and girl waxed merry enough, and said all manner of bright and witty things to each other, which, no doubt, would lose some of their sparkle if I were to write them down here.

Ben brought a boy's appetite to the feast, and bolted crisp rolls and cold chicken, and saucers of golden berries and sweet cream, "as though," Margery told him, "he had been off on some sea-lark and seen nothing better than salt-junk and hard biscuit for a month!"

Once, however, she looked up at him with an amused glint in her bright eyes. "Ben," she said, "haven't you almost forgiven him?"

Ben's spoon was making bee-line passages from the saucer to his mouth. His hand paused a moment in its rapid journeys to and fro. "Him! who?"

Margery's laugh lurked and quivered along her syllables.

"The boy who stole that ride on Sorrel."

"O—h," said Ben, returning to his fruit, "I'd forgotten. I do feel in a more complacent frame

of mind towards the rascal than I did an hour ago, putting down the lane after him."

"Don't you think now, if he stood right here, Ben, you'd be prevailed on to give him a roll, and a leg of that cold chicken?"

"Likely enough, I should be just such a fool, but — the small ragamuffin! he should ask my forgiveness first."

"Oh, dear!" said Margery, a moment later, "I wish —"

She broke right off there. She had not meant to speak her thoughts.

"Let's have it, Margery, please," asked Ben, who by this time had nearly satiated even his palate.

"I was thinking how I wished every boy and girl in this whole world could sit down to just such a lunch as this!"

"Margery," said Ben, gravely this time, and it might be a little curiously, "how is it you are always thinking of poor people — always feeling sorry for them? I don't know anybody else like you."

A sudden change came over Margery's face. Away down in her memory rose up the lonely night, and the solitary cabin out on the Western plains. The kerosene lamp flared over the sharp, ghastly face propped up on the pillows, over which

she was leaning in breathless wonder and terror. She saw, too, the great red log ablaze in the corner. She heard the swoop and roar of the storm outside. It was a picture that lay far off in Margery's childhood, but it came up once in a great while, and stood over against all the warmth and brightness of the present.

Margery's lips quivered a little, then she looked Ben Maxwell straight in the eyes, and answered, "I suppose, Ben, I think of the poor a little oftener, and pity them more, *because I was once one of them!*"

Less than a week after that lunch on the piazza, Margery rode down one afternoon to the depot to meet her uncle and Ben, who had been to the city, and were to return on the evening train.

She heard the short, sharp screech of the locomotive as she sprang out on the depot platform, and then something brushed hurriedly up close to her, and a thin, dirty hand reached out a limp bouquet of faded wild-flowers. They might have looked pretty in the dew and freshness of a summer morning, and had evidently been gathered and assorted with care. There was a centre of wild white asters, encircled with the tender purple of wood-violets; there were feathery sprays of fern, and the deep vermilion glitter of winter-

green-berries, a golden glow of buttercups and silvery tassels of wild clematis.

"It's for you!" said a hurried, excited voice, rather under its breath.

Margery turned in amazement and confronted the boy whose foot she had bound up a fortnight ago, coarse, dirty, ragged still, but with a pleased light in his eyes instead of the sullen gloom she remembered.

She understood in a moment. "Oh, thank you for the flowers. I shall keep them to remember you." She could not have said it with a sweeter grace, had the giver been the most accomplished of carpet-knights, or the flowers the choicest that ever blossomed in some carefully tended conservatory.

"Has your foot got quite well?"

"Oh, yes'm, that's all right ever so long ago!"

"Did you really gather these flowers for me?"

"Yes'm. In the woods over there," with a dip of his rough little head toward the west.

"I've had 'em all day. I thought you might be round here to-night."

"And now — I want to know your name?" said Margery, in that straightforward fashion of hers.

"Dick Crombly!"

Just then the train came hissing and thundering into the depot. In a moment uncle Jed and

Ben were out on the depot platform. They came toward her. As soon as the boy caught sight of Ben, he gave a little start, turned square about, took to his heels and was gone. Margery had not even seen him disappear. She was greatly vexed when she looked around, for she had several things to say to the giver of that withered bouquet in her hand.

There were cordial greetings from all parties, and then Ben Maxwell exclaimed, "Margery, did that boy have anything to say to you?"

"What boy, Ben?"

"Why, the one who stood so close to you, and took to his heels when I came in sight. I knew the small rascal. He's the very fellow who stole Sorrel the other day."

"Come, young people, bundle in," cried the voice of uncle Jed, for Margery was standing there on the platform quite dazed.

On the way home, though, the girl had the talking most to herself; the man or the boy — I forget which — had playfully asked her, "Where she came across that ancient bouquet?"

Then Margery had told him the story of Dick Crombly, and after that Ben Maxwell never spoke of him again, as "the rascal who had stolen Sorrel."

CHAPTER V.

"DICK!"

"Well, Jake?"

"I've got a chance for a haul!"

The last speaker twirled his little, greasy round cap with his thumb and forefinger as he spoke. There was a greedy gleam in his eyes and a hard set of the under jaw, though that was half covered by a bushy, reddish beard, and the face was the one of which uncle Jed, watching it that day as it went up the lane, had said: "I should not like to trust it."

The two sat or lounged at the foot of a great rock-maple in the very piece of woods where the boy had disappeared that day after his ride on Sorrel, and thus escaped the severe drubbing which the irate owner was prepared to inflict on him.

It was the stillest of summer afternoons, the blue above all hidden away in low, silvery clouds, no sound in the air but a low hum of insects.

Of all this, however, the two — boy and young man — sitting under the big birch-tree were quite

unconscious. They were second or third cousins; they had always known each other, and there was a tie of kindred between them, the stronger perhaps, because neither had any other relative in the world.

Jake Barton had always assumed a kind of elder brother authority over Dick Crombly; whether there was any real feeling for the boy at bottom, I am unable to say. Very bad natures have sometimes a tender streak of human affection. Perhaps this existed in Jake Barton's soul, and he was so very bad that I do not want to give him a prominent place in my story; but he has his part to act there, just as very bad people do act their part in this beautiful world where you and I are living to-day.

Jake Barton was what they call in New York a "water thief;" he haunted the docks, the piers, and wharves, and watched his chances to pilfer from barges, ships, boats, lighters that lie along the great river front of the city.

In such a life all the evil propensities of Jake Barton were sure to develop rapidly. The loose habits, the daily dishonesty, the vile associations had already turned out a scoundrel by the time he was eighteen. He was shrewd and cunning though; he always managed to elude the harbor police, and never yet had been arrested, although some crown-

ing villany would be certain to lodge him, sooner or later, within the walls of a prison.

The picture, dear boys and girls, is a dark one. I want to lighten it a little for Jake, if I can. So much may be said for him, — he had not had father or mother, or home for years; he had been turned out in his early boyhood on the world; he had had a long fight there: hunger and cold and misery had soured, hardened him; and here he was, facing his twentieth birthday, and ripe for almost any villany.

He had turned up at Long Branch, partly out of a vagrant, roving habit, which never let him stay long in one place, and partly because he knew Dick was there; the boy having fallen in, in New York, with a company of English tramps, who lived in the woods summers, sang songs, told fortunes, wove baskets; while the wild, idle life had a wonderful attraction to a boy who was tired of the dusty streets and the stifling brick walls; and who had nothing better than a bit of garret corner to sleep in at night, and who kept soul and body together by selling papers, running errands, blacking boots, and sometimes lending a hand to some of Jake's enterprises on the dock.

For this Jake was the younger boy's evil genius. Dick admired his cousin in a way, and was a little afraid of him. If there was any good in the boy,

it certainly had little chance of development, and there was every reason to suppose that Jake would lend his cousin to the devil.

The people in the "gypsy camp," as the cabin in the clearing was called, drank more or less, swore, gambled and quarrelled; but they were never cruel to Dick; he was welcome to a corner and a crust, on condition that he threw in any chance scrip he happened to pick up into the general fund; and the cool, fresh air, and the wide green woods were better for the boy's body and soul than the hot, stifling streets, and the coarse, vile companions whom he had left behind.

Dick's light eyes glittered with curiosity at Jake's remark. He knew the other was "hard up" just now, and that the tramps scarcely relished the addition of this fresh, stalwart consumer to their circle, though Jake could tell his coarse stories, and drink his vile drink with any of them.

"Tell me all about it, Jake," said the boy, hitching a little nearer his companion.

Jake's voice lowered itself; he ceased to twirl his greasy brown cap round his thumb and finger. "Up the lane, yonder," he said, "there's a big lot that lies at the back of a grand gentleman's grounds. I've been lookin' round there of late, with an eye to business." There was a hard gleam

in his eyes, and the big under jaw worked in an ugly way, as he said these last words.

"What kind of business?" Dick's voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

Jake's dropped too; he leaned forward until his breath came hot on Dick's ear, as he said, "There's a boy and a girl plays croquet every afternoon in a corner of that lot; once in a while a gentleman comes out and takes part, but the chance is, any day, the two will be there alone. There's a big cherry-tree outside the lot, and a fellow might hide behind the big trunk and watch 'em for hours, as I did t'other day."

"You did, Jake? What for?" Dick's dirty fingers were fumbling among the spires of grass.

Jake set his big jaws together. The evil look grew and grew in his face. "There's things on that boy and girl worth makin' a grab for," he said. "The boy has a watch and chain that must have cost a pretty pile, and the girl has a ring and a brooch and a gold necklace. The whole would make a bright little heap, for a single haul."

"And you mean to try for it, Jake?"

He was not more than eleven years old, and yet the boy asked that question with no horror in his face or voice, only with a kind of blank amazement at Jake's cool daring.

"That's it precisely. I've taken a fancy to them

gimcracks on that boy and girl. My fingers have got the itch for them," and he lifted his big freckled hands up to Dick's face with a hard, cruel laugh.

Dick laughed too in a weaker way; but it was not a pleasant laugh to hear and it twisted his thin, sullen face into a most disagreeable expression.

"Jake, you're a cool un!" he said.

The elder took no notice of this compliment. He went on to develop his plan. "It's a lonely place, a long ways from the house, and a scream or two wouldn't be heard any great distance. Of course we'd have to hurry business. A single well-aimed blow would take all the airs out of my fine gentleman and lay him dead as a log on the ground. The girl could be easily managed; we might gag her, or, if that didn't work, have a bottle of chloroform handy. One could ease them of their trinkets in a trice, and clear out on the next train. The whole thing would require a little nerve, and for all it has a kind of dare-devil look, there wouldn't be much risk about it. I've got friends enough round the docks to give me a helpin' hand, if I could only once get to them with my prize. It's only a stroke o' business a little out o' my usual line — that's all."

"You wouldn't want to do the job on anybody *forever*, you know, Jake?" said Dick, still working with those thin, dirty fingers among the grass.

"Oh, no danger of any killin'. I'll look out for that. All it wants is a little nerve. A fellow can't do any smart work in this world without some pluck."

"The boy'd be a tough un to manage. You'd have to look out sharp for him." There was a flash in Dick's eyes, and a hard set of his thin lips as he said these words. He was thinking of the stolen ride on Sorrel, and the hot chase through the lane. He had had a grudge against Ben Maxwell since that time, and the prospect of seeing him brought to grief was like a sweet morsel of revenge to his soul.

Dick, however, had a grudge against all rich boys; thought their fine clothes and jaunty airs an insolent defiance to his own poverty and misery. He could not have put it in any such words, of course; but he nevertheless had a feeling that their very existence was a grievance and an insult to him and his class.

There was a gleam to make one fairly shudder in Jake's eyes. "I'll fix my young man," he said; "take all the nonsense out of him double quick. As for the girl, she won't be more than a good-sized pullet to manage;" with a little coarse sniff of contempt.

This time the dirty fingers ceased their fumbling

in the grasses. "But what if she should get an awful scare — go into fits — you know?"

There was a short sound, between a laugh and a snort. "That's her look out. Can't give up such a likely stroke o' business for a girl's fits. I tell you I'm hard up, and business has been mighty dull all along shore this summer."

Jake evidently felt that this fact disposed of all objections. Dick stood in too much fear of his cousin to think of raising any. Indeed, there was something in this whole vile project which appealed to the worst side of the boy; and while he drew his breath over the bold villany of Jake's purpose, he admired him a little more than ever.

"When shall you try it on, Jake?"

"First chance I have; I'm getting tired o' loafing round here. To-morrow, by two o'clock, I intend to be on watch behind the cherry-tree. If nothin's in the way I shall do up business. If things look squally it can wait until next time. I shall want you round, my man."

These last words were added in a tone which implied that the elder was doing the younger a great favor.

"What's my part to be, Jake?" trying to look very cool as he asked this question, but hardly succeeding.

"There's a little holler place in the pastur' on

the other side of the lane where I want to depend on your bein' after two o'clock. When I whistle for you, up and over the ground in a flash. The heft o' the business will ha' been done by that time; but you can relieve the boy of some of his extra freight. We shall be in a hurry, and want to make swift tracks after the job's over."

The insects hummed on in the summer stillness; sometimes a bird's song wavered and shut down its sweetness among the leaves; the gray velvety clouds hung low in the sky, while this talk went on between the two lying under the rock-maple. They got up at last and went their way. The plan had been most skilfully laid, Dick's share in it appointed, and he had promised Jake to be on hand in time, and there seemed every prospect that the infamous plot would succeed.

One slender possibility alone might prostrate the whole. If the heart or the conscience of the boy, whose foot Margery had bound so tenderly that day, should wake up and come to her rescue — but after all there seemed little hope of this. There was his old fear of Jake, and, at bottom, no doubt, some nerve of tenderness for the relative so ripe in villany; there were all the old habits and associations of Dick's life, and there, too, was the grudge against Ben Maxwell.

It seemed altogether probable that he would follow his cousin's beck meekly wherever it led.

That night, however, the boy could not sleep. He lay awake on his straw pallet in a corner of the gypsy-camp, and his thoughts came and went in a confused, troublesome fashion. The talk that afternoon with Jake came up terribly distinct in the darkness and stillness, except when the latter was broken by the heavy sound of snorers in the next room; the old blackened cabin, half fallen to ruin, containing but four rooms for its large brood.

Dick tumbled from one side to the other, and tried to go to sleep, and wondered if he was going to be sick, and all the while the face of the little girl who had bound up his foot that day when the cruel wheel had grazed it was standing before the boy; he felt the soft, cool touch of the dainty fingers about his ankle; he saw the young head, with its shower of glossy hair, and the sweet face, with the shocked pity in the dark eyes, and heard the girlish voice, as it said so eagerly, "I can do something to help you; I'm sure I can."

In and out of all Jake's talk, as Dick remembered it, the face kept floating and shining, the words kept echoing, and it seemed as though, sometimes, they hurt the boy like a sudden pain. He thought, too, of the terror and the evil that

was coming to that face — the sweetest and kindest he had ever seen in his life. He wished he could tell Jake; but that wish was dismissed in a moment — the big fellow would only laugh at and bully him.

The boy sat up in bed at last, and worked at his big toe, just as his fingers had worked among the spires of grass that afternoon while Jake was talking. He saw the moonlight shining in at the small cabin-window, and still his thoughts worked and worked, and it seems to me there were good spirits, watching eagerly what the end should be, in the corner of that lonely cabin.

At last, because he could not bear the stillness, the boy rolled off on the floor, slipped on his ragged jacket, and went out. The moon was up now, and so were the stars, and they looked down in their still, solemn beauty on the troubled face of the boy, as he gazed up at them.

"I wish I could do something," he kept muttering to himself, as he wandered about in the night. "I don't want any trouble to come to that girl. I don't, I say. If it was only the boy I wouldn't care — no sir'ee. But the girl — I wish I could do something about her."

The boy wandered in and out among the shadows of the trees, in and out of the moonlight, until there was a little cold streak of dawn in the east.

When he came back to the cabin, cold and tired, and flung himself down in the corner, Dick Crombly *had made* up his mind!

"See here now."

Margery Keith was just about to spring into the carriage when she heard an eager voice close to her ear, and, turning, she confronted the boy, ragged and soiled, who had given her the faded bouquet two or three nights before.

She had not a minute to spare; she was expecting to meet some friends at the depot, and it was almost time for the train; but she did pause a breath to ask kindly, "What is it?"

The boy seemed greatly agitated. He drew his face down close to hers. His eyes fairly glittered with some strange excitement. "I came to tell you," he said, in a thick, rapid way, "not to go down to-day or to-morrow and play croquet by the lane, as you always do. Jest keep away from there."

"What for?" inquired Margery, too much amazed to ask anything further.

"Cos! I can't tell you!" looking all about him in a scared way. "Nobody must know I've been here only you. Keep clear of the place. It will be good for you."

"Train will be in, Miss Margery," shouted the

driver, who imagined some beggar was imposing on his young mistress with a miserable lie.

Margery sprang into the carriage, calling back her thanks to the boy, and yet not knowing what to think of it all, and half inclined to believe he had gone mad.

As the carriage swept off Dick turned and walked rapidly away, throwing scared glances around him, as though he was afraid he would be seen.

At the side-gate, however, he came suddenly upon Ben Maxwell, who was passing out in hot haste to join some companions for a "lark on the beach."

Ben recognized the boy who had ridden Sorrel so audaciously; but since the little scene at the depot, and Margery's story on top of that, his feeling toward Dick had undergone a great change.

There was a lovable, generous side to Ben with all his faults. He stopped a moment, despite his haste, and gave the boy a good-natured rap on the shoulders. "You won the race, didn't you?" he said. "Next time you want a trot on my horse, don't take it in that way, but come and ask me squarely, and you shall have it. Can't stop to say more now," and he rushed away.

Dick stood still a moment at the gate, like one thunderstruck; then he hurried off to the woods

again, looking back every little while in a scared way, as though he feared to see somebody behind him, and so he did, — the big, burly figure of his cousin Jake.

The boy reached the woods at last. He trembled like a leaf when he sank down in the damp shade. He was pale through his tan. "I'm glad I did it — I'm glad!" he kept muttering to himself. "I hope it'll save the boy, too, I do. How kind he was just now — so different from what I thought! If Jake knew, he'd say I'd turned traitor; I aint that, though. I give the girl warning, and I'm glad of it."

Suddenly he burst into tears. The excitement had overstrained his nerves. He buried his face in the wet grass, and cried; and some hardness and bitterness, wept out of the heart of Dick Crombly at that time, never got back there again.

CHAPTER VI.

"Oh, I forgot," said Margery, with a kind of start, "the funniest thing that happened yesterday!"

She was in the library, — she and uncle Jed and Ben Maxwell. It was just after breakfast. The guests of the day before had left in order to reach the forenoon boat. The boy and girl had been having the merriest kind of time, going over with all the funny scenes which have happened in the last few hours; and uncle Jed had read his letters, and listened to the bright, absurd talk, and thrown in occasionally a sentence of his own which had a flash like a rapier; and he had just threatened to turn his "unmanageable brace of bipeds" out on the portico so that he could answer his letters in peace, when Margery spoke, as I said, with a start.

"What was it?" asked Ben Maxwell, always on the alert for something new, and Margery's tone had a little sound of mystery in it.

She commenced her story with, "It was just as

I was jumping into the carriage in breathless haste to get to the depot, you know," and she went on describing, in her rapid, vivid way, the singular little scene which had occurred at that precise moment, and the boy listened, and so did the man, too, gathering up his letters and papers on the library table.

"It's funny — the way that fellow turns up," said Ben Maxwell. "I came on him — I remember it now — at the back gate, just as I was rushing sharp down to the beach. I stopped and spoke to him, though, remembering that little scene with you, Margery, at the depot, and I believe I was actually so magnanimous as to tell him he should have a ride on Sorrel!"

"You were!" said Margery, those big nut-brown eyes of hers opening with surprise.

"I was! Provided he'd come and ask me for it like a Christian, instead of taking it like a Bedouin. But I wonder what sort of a maggot has got into the fellow's brain? We'll be sure to go down to croquet this afternoon. So if there's any fun we shan't lose it."

"Yes, we will go," assented Margery, in the eager, thoughtless way of her twelve years.

"You say, Margery, the boy's manner struck you as very singular — that he seemed scared?" asked uncle Jed.

This was the first time he had spoken, though he had listened to every word of Margery's story.

"Oh, yes, he was certainly scared — shaking all over, indeed, with excitement. He was pale, too, between his freckles, and under his tan, and he kept staring all around him while he was speaking, as though he was afraid somebody was at hand ready to pounce on him and carry him off: One of the old women, perhaps, who ride on broomsticks through the air!" with a flash of her native fun. "There was no doubt the fellow was thoroughly in earnest, and had had an awful scare of some sort."

"There's fun behind, I'll bet high," said Ben Maxwell, lounging about the small room.

"What if there should be something else, my boy?" inquired uncle Jed.

It was singular enough that while Margery had been talking, the face which uncle Jed had seen going that day up the lane, and whose hard coarseness, with the bold, bad eyes, had struck him suddenly, rose up in the man's thoughts. He could not connect it with any of their late talk, yet it was the same face, with the same evil stare, uncle Jed had seen as it went up the lane that summer day.

"What else do you mean, uncle Jed?" asked Margery, before Ben could reply.

"I mean that I a little prefer you and Ben should not go down alone to play croquet this afternoon."

"Of course not, sir, if you think there is any danger," answered Ben, trying to keep down a lurking scorn in his voice. "But that boy! Why, I could lay a dozen of his size flat, if they were to attempt to set on me."

"Probably the boy knows that as well as you do, Ben, and had, I imagine, no thought of attacking you. But it seems he did suspect that danger threatened somebody, and was at a good deal of trouble, perhaps risk to himself, to give this warning."

"But in broad daylight, with people all around, sir! Why, the fellow must be a fool or an idiot;" with the scorn growing more positive in his tones.

Uncle Jed was silent a few moments before speaking. He was not at all sure that Ben was not right. Any suspicion of impending mischief might have had its sole origin in the boy's weak or half-crazed brain; yet it was certain some conviction of danger that threatened Margery had existed there, and had prompted the warning to the girl.

Now uncle Jed had had to read men and motives keenly and promptly in his life on the frontiers,

and he had often proved in his own experience the truth of the limping old couplet —

"And we all know security
Is mortal's direst enemy."

The possibility of any danger lying in wait for the boy and girl down there on the croquet ground, in broad daylight, too, did seem at the first glance purely absurd; but, on second thought, uncle Jed saw that this locality was remote from the house; that a cry there for help, in case of need, would not be likely to reach anybody, while the lane would afford every chance of escape to one bent on mischief.

Still he did not like to excite the children's imaginations, and it was probable the whole thing was — moonshine. So he spoke: "I won't spoil your croquet this afternoon, but I want you to promise me you will not go down to the lane without taking me along. If there's any sport brewing, or any mischief on hand, I want to have a share in it; besides, I wish to have another look at Margery's queer protegé if he is prowling around."

Uncle Jed spoke lightly. If his tone covered any apprehension, the children could not discover it that morning.

Of course, they promised, gladly enough, and he could trust them absolutely.

They were briskly ordered to take themselves

out of his room, if they did not wish to find themselves hustled off without ceremony, and they bounded out on the portico in high glee, and uncle Jed was soon buried in his letters.

"Uncle Jed, it's croquet time!" About three o'clock Margery's voice rippled into the library, where uncle Jed had just settled himself to an essay by one of his favorite authors.

The pearl leaf-cutter was still in his hand; he had just glanced at the opening paragraph, when the girl's voice struck into his reading. The summons was quite out of harmony with his mood. He had forgotten his engagement, and was more than half inclined to let the young people go down and have their game together, "despite that ragged little rascal's warning." For a moment it seemed quite too absurd for a sensible man to sacrifice his ease to it. Perhaps the after-thought that he could carry his book down to the cherry-tree and have his reading out there, and be on hand in case anything should happen —"a most unlikely supposition"— was what settled the matter.

Going out with the boy and girl, they found Watch, the huge, black mastiff, sunning himself on the door-step. "Come along, sir," uncle Jed said, pulling the big creature's ears, and he thought,

"In case of need, Watch will be a host in himself;" but the bright, still, summer afternoon seemed to mock any possibility of danger.

About two-thirds of the distance from the house to the lane was a cluster of hardy evergreens. This had been ingeniously trained into a kind of thicket, which made a cool, delicious shade, in which somebody had recently placed a bit of rustic bench.

The sight caught uncle Jed's eye. "I'll stop here," he said, "and have my article out. Then, if there's time, I'll come over and help you youngsters with your croquet. Here, Watch, old fellow, if you've instinct enough to know where you are wanted, you will stay with me."

"Good luck to you and your book, uncle Jed," laughed Margery. "If my mysterious ragamuffin turns up, I shall send for you."

"That's right; and whatever turns up, Margery, don't be frightened, child. Give one big war-whoop for me, and Watch and I will be at your side in a twinkling."

He said this mostly in jest, and the two went down in the soft afternoon sunshine to their croquet; and uncle Jed settled himself among the cool shadows to his book, and Watch stretched his huge bulk at the man's feet and snapped lazily at the flies.

It came in an instant — that shriek of wild panic-terror, through the still afternoon. Uncle Jed, buried for the last half hour in his essay, sprang to his feet like a man suddenly shot, for he knew the shriek was Margery's, and that, in some shape, the evil against which she had been warned had come upon her.

"To the rescue, Watch!" shouted the man, as he bent himself for the breathless race to the croquet-ground.

An instant or two brought the spot full in sight, but what a scene it was which met uncle Jed's eyes! Ben Maxwell lay stretched upon the ground like one suddenly struck dead, and a little way off, a big, brawny-limped fellow had seized Margery's arm, and made a dive at the chain around her neck. The poor girl, well-nigh paralyzed with terror, was making weak efforts to tear herself away. At the sight, Watch gave a howl of rage. Then the ruffian turned, and uncle Jed saw the face; but before he had seen the man, he knew the face was the one he had watched going, hard and evil, up the lane.

Jake Barton saw in a twinkling that the game was up — that his evil plot had miscarried. His desperation was wonderful. With an oath he shoved Margery aside so fiercely that she dropped on the ground, while he took to his heels.

He leaped the bars, and tore along the lane, and a small figure which had been standing near him darted after, while Watch followed in hot pursuit. The mastiff soon overtook the smaller figure, which could not keep pace with the larger one: and this was all that saved Jake Barton; for after the creature had thrown the boy on the ground, and worried him a little, snapping at him savagely with his huge jaws, he started in pursuit of the other, seeming to comprehend that the larger man was the real villain.

But the brief respite had saved him. Despite his large frame he could run like a deer, and terror on this occasion lent speed to his wings. By the time Watch bent once more to the race the man was out of sight. He had darted into the woods, and had his own coverts there.

But before this uncle Jed was in the croquet-grounds. His first thought was for Margery.

"O uncle Jed!" That was all the white, quivering lips could say, as she fell against him. He took the trembling figure in his arms, as though it had been a baby's. "My poor, scared little girl!" he said, in his steady, soothing voice. "There! there!" as she quivered and gasped. "Don't be frightened, dear; it's all over now; and the villain can't harm you. I've come as I promised. Be a woman, my little Margery."

She clung to him with convulsive clutches, but her first question was not for herself, it was for Ben. "Has he killed him, do you think?"

"Oh, no. Probably only stunned him a moment, and if you can be calm, Margery, we will go to him at once."

She loosened her grasp then with a shudder; but the best thing he could do was to draw her out of herself.

He led her over to Ben Maxwell. The boy had a long bruise on one side of his forehead, where the blow had fallen. When Margery saw that she gave a little suppressed cry. Uncle Jed lifted the boy's head and found it was as he suspected, — Ben was only stunned.

"If I had a little water to dash in his face I think he would revive at once," said uncle Jed.

Margery caught the hint. There was a little cool stream among the grass close to the bars. She looked about her for some vessel in which to bring the water, and found it in an old tin can which somebody had left under the cherry-tree.

"There, Watch, don't worry the boy, but keep guard and bring him here," shouted uncle Jed to Watch, who had returned to Dick Crombly, and was showing his teeth and growling savagely at the boy lying on the ground, not daring to stir,

knowing that at the first movement the dog would spring on and tear him.

But Watch understood his master; he dropped off a little way when uncle Jed shouted to the boy to get up and come to him, assuring Dick that so long as he made no attempt to run away the dog should not harm him.

So he had at last taken courage and got on his feet, and was making slow approaches toward uncle Jed, with Watch following close and suspicious at the bare heels.

Margery meanwhile was trying to fill the tin vessel with water, her hand shaking so that the task proved a long and difficult one; but it was at last accomplished, and she returned to uncle Jed.

With the dash of cold water about his temples Ben Maxwell revived. It took him some time to comprehend where he was, or what had happened, but at last he was able to stand on his feet, and then uncle Jed gave him one arm and Margery the other, and, ordering Dick Crombly and Watch to follow, they all proceeded toward the house.

Through the pleasant sunshine and the soft afternoon air they went, as an hour before they had gone to the croquet-ground; but now there were no bright laughters, and young, merry voices rippling along the golden stillness — only a white,

faint boy and girl leaning on uncle Jed, and a boy following behind with a scared, guilty face, and the big dog snuffing at his heels and ready to spring on him if he veered an inch from the straight path.

"Oh, thank God!" said uncle Jed once, speaking out loud; he had not meant to.

"For what?" asked Margery, drawing closer to him.

"That I was there at that moment," remembering how near he had come to staying behind in the library.

"Oh, yes, thank God!" said Margery, with pale, quivering lips, while poor Ben was still too weak and bewildered to say anything.

Once in the house, however, uncle Jed did his work well; calming and soothing the strained, excited children, who, as soon as their tongues were loose, went over and over with the short, dreadful scene. Ben refused to lie down; but uncle Jed soon discovered there was no reason for serious fears on his behalf. A cordial and an easy-chair soon brought the boy back to his old self.

There was very little to tell, however. The ruffian had rushed from behind the cherry-tree and vaulted over the bars and dealt Ben the blow that stunned him, in a flash. Margery's shriek had rung

out before the man had seized her. The struggle and the dive at her chain had hardly commenced before uncle Jed was in sight, and Watch's bark had ended the tragedy.

As soon as it was quite safe to leave the boy and girl alone, who, shocked with the fright they had undergone, clung to him desperately, uncle Jed went out on the porch, where Dick Crombly sat ruefully enough, guarded by the mastiff, and not daring to stir.

His connection with the villanous plot was apparent enough now to all concerned, and its failure at the last moment was owing to the warning he had given Margery.

The poor boy was half paralyzed with his terror of these people and of his cousin Jake, and had not the faintest suspicion he had given occasion for gratitude to anybody.

The look of imploring anguish in the small, homely face touched uncle Jed when he approached the boy. He spoke to him very kindly; he soothed his fears; he took Dick to his own room, and there, all alone, and very slowly, the truth came out at last.

But it took hours for uncle Jed to learn it. The boy's abject fear of his cousin was pitiful. He sobbed, and sometimes fairly howled, and insisted that Jake would kill him if he turned traitor.

But uncle Jed never lost patience. He promised to protect Dick from every harm, and gave his word that if he would tell the whole truth his cousin should not suffer for it. And at last, just as the sun went down in the sea, there was no more to tell, — Dick Crombly had made a clean breast of it!

Is there any more that I should tell? You know that uncle Jed, being the man he was, would keep his word.

But Jake Barton saved him any further trouble. The villain fled from Long Branch that very afternoon in terror at the discovery of his crime, and the next day shipped on board a whaler.

As for Dick Crombly, a thorough bath and a suit of new clothes quite transformed the poor gypsy waif.

It seemed to him that he had suddenly entered Paradise. He had a room in the attic, he was feasted and praised, and had rides on Sorrel, and Ben and Margery in their gratitude made quite as much of the boy as he deserved. Still he had fairly proved, by one act of his life, that there was some courage and fidelity and generosity at bottom of him.

He always insisted that he had no intention of robbing Ben Maxwell. Fear of Jake had alone brought him on the scene, and he had confidently

relied on the effect of his warning, and believed that neither the boy nor girl would present themselves on the croquet-ground.

His dismay on seeing them enter it had quite unnerved him, and his only safety appeared to him in flying with his cousin.

"The poor little ragamuffin shall have a chance now that big ruffian is out of the way. We will let him stay among us at Long Branch, and take him back when we return to the city, and I will find him a berth as errand-boy in my office."

It was uncle Jed said this to Ben and Margery one day when they were talking the whole affair over together.

CHAPTER VII.

It was a young face, beaming with life and gladness which sat that winter morning at the breakfast-table. Had it not been there, the meal would have been quite another thing, "a dull, solitary affair enough," uncle Jed thought; though the steak was of the choicest, and the golden brown of the omelette and the rich flavor of the Mocha would have gone far to console an epicure for the absence of human companionship.

In the centre of the table was a small vase of flowers, — scarlet geraniums, like quivers of red flame; and purple bells of fuchsia among green leaves, and, at the heart of all, two or three great, cool, cream-colored roses.

The brightest of winter mornings looked in at the pleasant breakfast-room where Jeremiah Woolcott and Margery Keith were having their meal together. The man had a notion that these breakfasts were on the whole the pleasantest times of the day; at least, when business took him out of town occasionally, his thoughts

recurred oftenest to the breakfast hour, and the glimmer of that bright, sweet face behind the coffee-urn followed him everywhere.

Margery Keith had a knack of preparing her uncle's cup of coffee which none of the domestics had ever acquired.

She knew the number of lumps of sugar and the precise amount of cream which suited his palate.

Then he liked to hear her young, fresh voice; the foolish, girlish talk slipping along it, with the sudden laughters and indrawn breaths; and the quaint, grave speeches which would crop out here and there, and were to the man like the first shoots and blossoms of the spring,— a sign and promise of that summer of womanhood which was to be.

It would have been very bright and amusing to a stranger, even, this talk of Margery Keith's. It was full of life; it had the freshness and sparkle of her thirteen years all through it.

She confided everything to uncle Jed which could be of the slightest interest to either. He knew the names and characters of all her young friends, and, in a general way, all that was going on at the school which Margery attended three hours every day for recitations.

She used to assure him that he saved her the

trouble of keeping a journal, and it was a great deal nicer to talk to somebody who could listen and have things to say in turn.

But Margery's breakfast talks were doomed to frequent interruptions. Uncle Jed was the soul of hospitality and always kept "open house."

He had friends and acquaintances in all parts of the world, and he was a man, once known, not likely to be forgotten. I suppose that was owing to the magnetism of his great, warm, sympathetic heart, which drew people to him and held him in their memories.

His old friends were always hunting him up, and the roof of the large, elegant house near Central Park had guests beneath it most of the time.

But this morning the two were alone, and the winter sunshine came in triumphantly and shone and sparkled about the table, where the man in his prime and the girl on the frontier of her teens sat at breakfast.

"There! Do you hear them, uncle Jed?" asked Margery, suddenly, face and voice full of rapture.

"Hear what, child?" setting down his cup of coffee.

"Why, those delightful old sleigh-bells! The first time we have had them this year! How splendid it will be in Central Park to-day! Uncle

Jed is there anything so lovely as a winter's morning full of sunshine and the sparkle of snow?"

"Oh, yes; there are other mornings in every year, which to my fancy are far lovelier; but this one is perfect of its kind."

"But those other mornings, though they are alive with leaves and flowers and singing-birds. don't have the sleigh-bells, you know. They say so many things." As she caught the flashes of sound, the merry jingles and laughter of the bells, "Don't you hear them?"

"An old muff like myself couldn't be expected to hear all your young ears and fancies do. When I was a boy, the sleigh-bells said things to me too, which they have not done of late years. What are they saying to you now, Margery?"

"Oh, so much!" with the red in her cheeks, and the lights in her nut-brown eyes. "They make me think of flutes ringing among mountain solitudes, of horns blowing in the heart of still, shady valleys; but, above all, the bells call for me to come, uncle Jed."

"Precisely! I knew it was coming to that," with a twinkle of fun in his eyes. "In short, setting aside all that pretty nonsense about melodious horns and flutes, and getting down to the plain prose of the matter, what the sleigh-bells really say, amounts to this, 'Don't you give uncle Jed a

moment's peace, Margery, until you have wheedled a sleigh-ride out of him.'" Margery's laugh broke out now, a sweeter sound than all the tunes which the bells were singing outside.

"That is precisely what they say, uncle Jed! How glad I am you have interpreted it for me!"

"And how you hope I will act on it before noon, you saucebox!"

"Oh, no, I don't hope that in the least, uncle Jed; I just *know* you will."

"I suppose that I shall. You have led me by the nose so long that it is safe now to count on my obeying any slight hints and suggestions. Ah Margery, what a terrible little tyrant you are!"

"Who has made me so, uncle Jed?" her lips pursed up in a sudden gravity which all the rest of her face belied. It was evident they were used to each other's rallying.

"There it goes again! I have been so long under your thumb and finger that I can only stand by meekly, like a donkey, while you pack me with your burden of faults."

"And it is so nice and easy to slip them off on your shoulders, you know. And you can afford to carry them."

"Why can I?"

"Because you have such a very small pack of your own faults, uncle Jed!"

"My dear, you have the happiest faculty of tickling an old fellow into good humor with a compliment. Won't that gift of yours work mischief enough some day, with younger brains and hearts than your tough old uncle's! But I must have another cup of coffee on that."

"And uncle Jed," counting her lumps of sugar, "you will go with me, of course, on this sleigh ride?"

"My dear, you ask of me an impossibility. Business will not let me off to-day, until almost dark, but I will send up a sleigh for you right after lunch."

A little shadow fell into the brightness of her face, a cloud so light, indeed, that the next thought would send it flying. "It would be so much nicer to have you with me, uncle Jed. I think business is a great bother. It is always pushing itself into the way of one's comfort and pleasure."

"Ah, but it lies at the bottom of all one's comfort and pleasure, too, in more ways than you can comprehend."

"Perhaps I can comprehend more than you suppose, uncle Jed," she answered, significantly.

The cloud was already gone, but her expression was grave and earnest, and seemed to belong to an older face than Margery Keith's.

"Well?"

"I mean about business and the great and terrible differences it makes in human lots."

"Ah, that is a problem, dear, that will trouble and vex you at times all your life through. It does everybody who has a brain to think and a heart to feel."

"It seems as though there was something wrong at the heart of things. I think and think about it, uncle Jed, until my thoughts come plump up against a stone wall; and I don't know what it all means, only it almost seems as though I hadn't a right to all my own ease and comfort and good things, generally, — to even such a breakfast as this, when there are so many shivering limbs, so many hungry mouths within a half mile of us."

"I would not have you without just such thoughts, Margery. You could not be the woman I hope to see you some day, if they did not come up at times to sadden and perplex you. The noblest souls have been harassed and goaded by these knotty questions; and some have tried one way and some another of solving them, and many have failed pitifully."

"But I think, uncle Jed, there was something grand, even in a failure of that kind, — trying to find some way to lighten the burdens, and lessen the sorrows of human lives. I think I should rather fail in an attempt of that sort than have

some successes which the world would call glorious.

Uncle Jed's eyes shone on the girl with a light in their gray depths which was kindled at his soul.

"That is right, Margery," he said. "Generous, courageous work for one's kind can never, in the long run, be a failure. But, my child, your breakfast will get cold. You mustn't let the thoughts of the hungry mouths you cannot help quite spoil that, you know. We can't carry God's world on our shoulders — at least only a very little piece of it."

"I wonder if I shall carry my little piece?" said Margery, with a flash of her quick humor.

At that moment the servant-girl entered with the morning papers and the waffles.

She was the same Margery Keith, you see, whom we met and learned to love a year and a half ago, down on the sands at Long Branch, bright, impetuous, warm-hearted as ever, only the year and a half has made her a little older and wiser.

After breakfast was over and her uncle was seated in his easy-chair, she went up to him and said, "So I am a terrible little tyrant, am I?"

He drew her to him. "You are all that, my dear!" But his tone and his look said something so very different.

"But, bad as I am, you wouldn't know how to get along without me, uncle Jed?"

"Of course I shouldn't, I've got so used to the teasing that I heartily enjoy it. Men have been known to grow into a liking for worse torments than yours, Margery."

This light, half-badgering talk was their habit, you see, but Margery was liable to swift changes of mood; she was gay or grave in a moment, as the thoughts and feelings came and went in that rapid little heart and brain of hers.

"What should I do without you, uncle Jed?" she exclaimed, and then, in a moment, she buried her face on his shoulder, with a cry, "Oh, what should I have done without you *once?*"

He knew in an instant to what she alluded. He had hoped she had quite forgotten that scene — the old cabin on the stormy western plains, and the ghastly face of the dying man between them. She had not spoken of it for years; but he saw now that the meaning had not faded, and that it was one of those things she would carry to her grave.

He remembered what a sad, lonely man he was at that time; how his aching heart seemed to him only a sepulchre for the beautiful, dead face of the wife of his youth, and how the little orphan-girl in the western cabin had dropped from her father's dying hands to his own strong, sheltering ones, bringing light and comfort and gladness

with herself, and he said, very solemnly, "Look in my eyes, Margery!"

She lifted her head and opened her great brown orbs upon him. "You have repaid me a thousand times for anything I have done or may do for you. You came to me like a messenger from God, when my soul was heaviest and sorest. My little girl has been to me, all these years, the light of my home, and the joy of my heart. She may well ask what I would do without her." This time the glossy head went down without any words upon uncle Jed's shoulder.

There were some last ones, however, before he left the house.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, uncle Jed, that Stacie Garrett's brother Tom has just returned from abroad. You know he has been studying a year in Dresden. Stacie is just wild with delight. It must be a glorious thing to have a brother come home after a whole year in Europe. She said she should bring him around the very first chance to show him and her best friend to each other. I wouldn't wonder if they came this very day."

Stacie Garrett only lived a few blocks from uncle Jed's. She and Margery were in the same classes. They had known each other for the last year, and an intimate friendship had grown betwixt them.

CHAPTER VIII.

During the forenoon, Stacie Garrett, followed by her brother Tom, burst in on Margery Keith. Such a merry greeting and such a clatter of tongues as followed! Stacie was not in the least like Margery; she was a little dumpling of a girl, with a complexion like a snow-drop and cheeks like the pink of the first May rose, and a mass of soft, light hair about a sweet face, with eyes which seemed a bit of the summer's loveliest sky.

She was an affectionate little puss, and she was in a seventh heaven of delight, now Tom had got home, full a head taller than he went away the year before.

Stacie couldn't talk fast enough, telling how it all happened, and what a splendid surprise Tom had given them the previous morning, when they were hardly seated at breakfast before the front-door bell rang, and a minute after, Tom walked in as cool as a grenadier, and was brown as an East Indian, and asked in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable, "Is there anybody here who would

like to see me?" And Stacie knew the voice quicker than she did the face, and with a scream and a bound she had her arms around her brother's neck; and it was all very funny, but the next thing she knew she was sobbing like a baby, when she never was so glad in her whole life before.

Tom Garrett was a couple of years older than Stacie, a fine, manly looking fellow, with an honest face, and big, merry black eyes, and there was not a trace of family likeness between him and his sister.

He had been abroad a year with some friends of his father's. A fever in the first place had brought the boy to the brink of the grave, and the doctors had prescribed a sea-voyage and a change of climate; so he had gone off in a hurry in charge of a party setting out on a continental tour.

The pale-faced, sickly boy, who had left his native shores the year before, had come back to them, plump, brown and hardy as a Swiss mountaineer.

Stacie had been eager enough to bring about this interview between her brother and her best friend; for she had confided to Tom that she loved Margery Keith better than she did any other girl in the world, and that it would be an unutterable grief to her if they two did not like each other immensely. But it was a good while before she gave them a chance for the conversa-

tion which she had been at such pains to bring about; at last, however, she awoke to a consciousness that she was having the talk mostly to herself, and that about all Tom and Margery could do was to slide in exclamations and laughs between her sentences.

Tom was also apt to be a little reserved and bashful on first acquaintance, and Margery was used to declaring very sagely that there were "folks she could talk to and folks she couldn't;" in which experience, I suspect, she did not differ from the most of us.

"I'm talking all the time and not giving you or Tom a chance for a word!" said Stacie, with a laugh that made you think of a robin's chirrup. "I suppose I am very rude; but, dear me, it isn't every day, you know, that Tom comes home from Europe to upset my wits."

"I'm just certain, Stacie, if I had a brother come home from Europe, after a whole year away from me, I shouldn't behave half as well as you do."

"And you are to call each other Tom and Margery, just as though you had known each other all your lives. Anything else would be stiff and horrid. It will become easy and natural enough, after you have said it the first time."

The boy and girl looked at each other, and broke into a peal of laughter. After this the ice

of first acquaintance, which, under ordinary circumstances, it might have taken a dozen interviews to melt, was broken.

"I have promised Stacie that I would do everything that she asks for the next week," said Tom. "I shall break my word if I don't call you Margery."

"You may call me that always, because you are such a good brother Tom," Margery promptly answered.

Stacie clapped her hands in high glee. "That was done superbly," she said. "Now, you see, it is just as though you had known each other all your lives."

"But, really, I have known you a good deal longer than you suspect," said Tom to Margery.

She laughed and glanced knowingly at Stacie. It was evident that she had not the slightest difficulty in divining the source of all Tom's knowledge of herself. "I suppose Stacie had a line or a postscript for me in nearly every letter," she said.

"A line or a postscript!" echoed the girl, in an almost aggrieved tone. "It was never less than one or two pages, and oftener, half my letter."

"Oh, you girls are wholly off-soundings," said Tom, who already felt himself quite at home. "I knew a great deal about you, Margery Keith, before I had ever heard of you through my sister."

This statement was an immense surprise to both girls.

"Who in the world could have told you, Tom?" asked Stacie.

"Who in the world?" echoed Margery, looking into the bright, merry eyes of the boy, who was enjoying the double amazement hugely.

"Try and guess."

Both girls gave it up as hopeless, and the boy yielded to Stacie's imploring. "O Tom, you won't be at your old tricks of teasing now, the very day after your return home, too?"

"Well, then, it was Ben Maxwell who first told me about Margery Keith."

She was off her feet in a moment; the summer days at Long Branch, the long, gleaming gray of the beach, the vast, shining sea, and the swing and leap of the white surf along the sands, all rose up before Margery Keith. "Oh, do you know Ben Maxwell?" she cried.

"I should rather think I did. He and I footed it last year half over Switzerland, and he is a jolly fellow for a climb or a tramp. We were in Dresden together too, for a couple of months, last winter."

"How glad I am that you know him!" said Margery, her face quite radiant. "And how

oddly it has all come about! Ben is a splendid fellow."

"Grand stuff in him," said Tom, fervently.

"We met first at a hotel in Edinburgh, where both our parties were staying for a couple of days. After that we were perpetually running against each other on the continent. He told me all about his summer at Long Branch, and one night, when we were both lying awake on the top of St Bernard, he told me something else."

"What was that?" asked two voices in one breath.

"It was about the awful scare you had one afternoon, on the croquet-ground; and how he was lying there senseless, in a flash, and that scoundrel was pulling at your chain when uncle Jed came to the rescue; and the part that barefooted little ragamuffin, Dick Crombly, had in the business; you see how well I remember it all. There's no place like a night on St. Bernard for a story. The world seems so far away, and you are shut up there with the silence and the snows."

"Ah, it must be grand!" chimed in Margery. "But to think Ben Maxwell should have carried that story over the ocean, and up the Alps to you. How very funny it all is!"

"And that I should have brought it down the Alps and over the ocean to you again," said Tom.

Stacie broke right in here with her chirrup, which had been silent for an astonishing period. "It only all goes to prove what Dickens says, you know."

"No, we don't know unless you tell us," said Tom.

"Why, that the world isn't nearly so large as it seems, and that is the reason why people who have once known each other are always coming together again, turning up in the oddest, most unexpected ways."

"I believe that is true," said Margery, with what uncle Jed called her "owl's face," it was so grave and solemn, while she was hunting about for some facts in her experience which should help to establish Dickens's theory.

"I could tell you a good many other things Ben Maxwell said about you," said Tom to Margery.

"I wonder with all Europe around him that he found time to talk so much about me — only we did have grand times at Long Branch."

"So he said, and he thought the best thing of all there was — " Tom stopped a moment, and seemed waiting for Margery to conclude.

"Uncle Jed, I am sure it must have been he," she answered promptly, and Tom, looking in her face, saw that she meant just what she said.

"She isn't like other girls. They would have known I meant to pay her a compliment," Tom

Garrett thought to himself, but he only said, "Oh, no, Ben Maxwell always declared the very best thing at Long Branch was Margery Keith!"

Margery's laugh rang out pleased and gleeful. She liked praises and compliments; she was a girl, and thirteen; but she was quite honest, a moment later, when she said, "That is really the least sensible thing I ever knew Ben Maxwell say. To place *me* first where uncle Jed was."

"Well, how do you like her, Tom?" asked Stacie, breathlessly, as soon as they were outside the door, after a call which had doubled the time she had intended to devote to it.

"Brightest girl I ever saw," said the boy. "A little odd, and keeps a fellow on his mettle, you know, but that only makes her the more interesting. Brave as a heroine and honest as sunlight, Maxwell was right."

"I knew you'd like her," said Stacie, delighted.

"And, Tom, you are such a dear fellow, that I would give you a big hug, if we were not out on the street."

Tom Garrett had a heart, and it had been learning through these months of absence how dear this little blue-eyed, silvery-voiced sister was to

him; but, like most boys, he felt a great shyness at putting his best self into words; so he answered with a laugh, "That's just like a girl, Stacie. I've not the slightest doubt that before the week is over we shall be at our old bouts!"

In the evenings when they two happened to be alone together, Margery had a habit of going over with uncle Jed, all the principal events of the day, or, what was oftener of more interest to the man, she would relate what had been uppermost in her thoughts and feelings during the time.

This was one of the nights when they two sat alone together in the cosiest little room at the back of the house. The walls from floor to ceiling were lined with bookcases, and there were bronzes and marble busts on brackets, and a great library-table in the centre of the room; and some lounging chairs, and a glowing fire in the grate, and its light fell like a tender, half-sad caress on the wide cases where the mighty souls of the books lay dumb between their covers, as the hands that wrote most of them had long ago lain still in their graves. This place uncle Jed called his "den." It was in reality the heart of his home; the dearest, cosiest spot beneath the

ample roof, to him. From time to time old friends came and sat here by the table, in the glow of the cannel coal fire, and told their stories of the great world around which they had roamed and in which they had done their work more or less bravely and thoroughly; but the cannel coal fire never shone on a head so fair and dear to uncle Jed as the little girl with her nut-brown eyes, and the lights in her glossy hair.

Margery had a great deal to tell her uncle to-night. There was Stacie's visit with her brother Tom, and the surprise about Ben Maxwell, and the ride in the park with a couple of girls younger than herself, for whom uncle Jed had ordered the driver to call, their dead father having been an old friend of his, who had left his widow and children in circumstances that made sleigh-rides rare luxuries to them.

Uncle Jed had a good many questions to ask about Ben Maxwell, for that summer at Long Branch had given him a warm interest in the boy.

"And you liked this brother of Stacie's?" he inquired at last. He had more respect for the girl's native acuteness in getting at the real stuff in people than he ever told her.

"Oh, yes," in her prompt, decided way. "He is a real fine fellow, a little quiet at first, but keen

and jolly as possible when he lets his real self out. I think Stacie may be proud of her brother. If I had one I should want him to be like Ben Maxwell or Tom Garrett."

"And in the place of some handsome, brave young brother, my little girl has to take up with her graybeard of an uncle."

"She wouldn't exchange him, anyhow, for all the brave, gallant young brothers in the world."

Soon after this speech, which she delivered with heart-felt fervor, Margery settled in a brown study, and she had not come out of it when, a good while afterward, uncle Jed, looking up from his papers, saw her with her eyes on the fire.

"Are you building air-castles out of the coals, my dear?"

"Not this time, uncle Jed; I was thinking of something I read to-day about George Washington. You know you brought me up on him and the star-spangled banner."

"Just so; on what else should a sound-hearted little American girl be brought up?"

"And I thought I knew his history pretty thoroughly, from the small hatchet and the apple-tree, and the lie he couldn't tell. But I read something about him to-day which I never did before; something which seems to me grand, sublime."

"What was it?"

"It happened after the war was over. Washington had won his laurels; he had earned his great name in history as the Father of his country; he was President of the new Republic, and was living in Philadelphia; he was taken very ill one day, and they feared he would die. When the doctor came, his patient said to him as calmly as I am saying it to you now, uncle Jed, 'Tell me the truth. I do not fear to die. It makes no difference whether death comes to-day or twenty years later.'

"Weren't those brave, noble words, uncle Jed? Wasn't that a grand way of meeting death?"

"Yes, my child! I presume George Washington felt that way every time he rode into one of those old battle-fields. He believed in God, and in striking the hour."

"Long before his day, Hamlet, too, beloved of men, had set the same truth in the crystal of his felicitous old English: 'If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.'"

"But, uncle Jed, if death should come for me to-night, I couldn't say any such thing. Heaven, no doubt, is the best, but I *know* this world, and it is good enough for me. You are here, and all the people whom I love; and so are the robins and the roses, and all the beautiful things which make this world such a dear, delightful old place. If death

should come for me, *I* should want him to wait twenty years."

"Probably George Washington would have at your age; life lay all before him then, as it does before you now. Do you think, Brownie," — one of his pet names which had its origin in the color of her eyes, — "that the cry of your youth would not be natural and right; that there could be any harm in your liking to stay in the world which God has made so pleasant for you?"

"Not while you are talking, uncle Jed. It seems all to grow clear to me."

"And you see that George Washington was getting to be an old man when he made that speech; at least he had got over the meridian line of a century. He had done his work as he found it to do; he had always struck his hour."

The little fine, sensitive face brightened out of its gravity. "If I can only strike mine as they come round through the years!" she said.

"You will, dear, a good many of them, if you *try*."

Just then the clock on the mantel struck ten. It was Margery's bedtime. But circumstances occurred not long afterward which brought this evening talk back very forcibly to Margery Keith.

CHAPTER IX.

A FIERCE, bitter north-easter was holding a high revel on the little island where the mightiest city of a continent lies locked in and densely packed between its two rivers.

The gale blew its trumpet through the cross-streets, and went tearing and thundering up the wide avenues, and at times a strong man would find he had enough to do to hold his way against some wild onset of that fierce north-easter.

In the lower part of the city, in one of the crowded business streets, an errand-boy on the way to the bank had a race for his cap. The wind whirled it off his head and tossed it into the middle of the street, and when the boy made a dive there, the wind was before him again, and sent the thing gyrating down the gutter. In a lull of the gale, however, the boy, after a good many trials, succeeded in capturing his cap and setting it on his head with a laugh of triumph and a glow in his cheeks that came of his fight with the wind. If you had seen him, as a sudden winter sunbeam

struck his face, you might have recognized him as the boy whose torn foot Margery Keith had bound up two summers ago at Long Branch.

The change, however, in the boy would have struck you with a great surprise. It was not altogether in the comfortable gray overcoat, the neat trowsers and shoes, although these must have had their share in the general improvement, but it was in the boy's whole look and bearing.

The cowed, sneaking expression was gone; while wholesome diet and regular habits had rounded the starved cheeks, and cleared up the sallow skin. Dick's daily work, too, which took him to the office and kept him busy until twilight, had given him a new sense of responsibility and self-respect. It would have done your heart good to see the change which a year and a half had wrought in the boy whom Margery Keith had found, that summer morning, as he lay on the drive in front of the cottage at Long Branch; and the best of it was that the change had been wrought from within, outward, which is the only change worth anything.

Yet this year and a half had not been altogether smooth sailing for Dick Crombly. Nobody ever yet found it easy to change the whole habits and purposes of a lifetime.

When he came back to New York in the autumn,

and entered on his new career of office-boy at the great warehouse, and had to lead a life of steady industry from sunrise to sunset, without an hour that he could call his own, Dick Crombly found the novelty and gloss of his new life were pretty much gone.

The old vagabond days, the lounging about the wharves, the laying about the streets, the mingling with the crowds, the fun and excitement of days when he could not see where his next meal was coming from, and he was well off if he had a dark corner and a dirty pallet to crawl into at night, looked wonderfully alluring to the boy through the mists of distance.

A fierce hunger and thirst for the old freedom, if it did come with rags and dirt and every conceivable hardship, beset Dick Crombly. Every drop of his blood was stung with a mad longing to return to the old life. Many a morning, when he went down in the bright, early sunrise, and the great city was slowly waking up to the life of a new day, Dick found it was all that he could do to turn his back on the piers where the shipping lay, amid which he longed to dive and bound once more with one of his old savage whoops of joy. He felt, those days, a good deal like a prisoner, bound and chained to a dreary treadmill of toil; and there was nobody to whom he could confide what devils

were tempting his soul, and perhaps nothing gave him strength to resist them, but a smile, or a kind word or two from uncle Jed when he came into the office in the morning, or sent the boy off on some errand.

But uncle Jed had a great many people to see, a great many things to absorb his thoughts in business hours, and Dick Crombly, like all the rest of us, had to work out his own salvation; and the forces of good and evil held many a battle, whose prize was the soul of this boy hankering for the slums and dark alley-ways and rotting, noisome old piers, amid which his first dozen years of life had been passed.

Uncle Jed, however, had done what he could. If he meddled with a human soul, he was pretty certain to leave it a little wiser, better, happier than he found it. He had seen that Dick was provided with a humble but very comfortable home, in a family whose mistress was the widow of a former porter of the warehouse.

Dick had a neat little chamber, under the roof. It was a palace in comparison with those to which he had been used all his life, but it had the look of a very clean and very dreary prison-cell to the boy in moments when his whole being was hankering for the old, vagabond, devil-may-care times.

But these hankerings had grown fainter and

farther between of late, and his life, with its steady work and order, and the evening school, were all growing easier and pleasanter to Dick Crombly.

There was a shrill, sharp cry the moment after he had set the cap on his head. The voice came from just around the corner, and was that of one in sudden distress or terror.

Dick hurried to the crossing and looked up the street. In a flash the whole scene was before him.

On the edge of the sidewalk, and half within the shelter of an old stone arch, which broke the force of the wind, was a low stand, with a jar of candy and a pile of oranges, and another of apples, the whole set within a border of very carefully laid and rather ancient-looking ginger-cakes.

On one side of this stand was the oddest-looking mite of a girl, of nine or ten birthdays. The child had a pinched, white face under a mass of loose, flaxen hair; and her dress was so altogether out of keeping with her size and years that she made an inexpressibly comical appearance. Her bonnet, with its two great red and yellow bows, had evidently been intended for a much larger and older person than herself. She wore a shawl, in bright scarlet stripes, and over that a faded green flannel sack. A very shabby calico dress, and shoes so worn and patched that the little, half

frozen feet ought never to have gone inside of them, completed a toilet so singular that it struck one at a glance, and must have awakened a laugh, if pity for the small, pinched creature within that motley dress had not been quick enough to check the mirth.

But the child's face was white now, and convulsed with tears, while her little blue, skinny fingers were frantically striving to push away a huge black dog, who was mouthing and growling at her, and tearing her dress with his great teeth.

The brute evidently meant mischief, and he was set on to this by three or four big, bullying boys, who were loafing about the streets, and who had gathered together in a small crowd to watch the fun, and get all the sport they could out of the terror and misery of the child, whose odd dress made her in their eyes a legitimate subject for cruel sport.

Numbers gave them fresh courage in their barbarous work. They shouted and clapped their hands, and excited the fierce animal against the trembling creature he was worrying; he left the girl for a moment, fastened his paws upon the apple-stand, brought all his huge weight against it; the next instant it toppled over, and its whole contents rolled on the sidewalk and tumbled into the gutter.

The boys set up a tremendous howl of triumph. The child burst out in a wail, which was pitiful to hear; and the dog, fiercer than ever, showed his teeth and commenced tearing her shawl with his great paws.

The sight made Dick Crombly's blood boil. It seemed as though the strength of a dozen men had suddenly entered into him. He forgot that he was only one rather under-sized boy, against half a dozen who had the advantage of him in wind and muscle; he darted forward and confronted the gaping, shouting crowd.

"You miserable hounds!" he cried. "You mean, dastardly, sneaking cowards, to set on a poor, helpless, frightened girl like that! You deserve to be horsewhipped, every soul of you, and you should be, if I was only a man!"

The words came out strong and swift, as words are apt to, when we are at a white heat. Dick did not know what he was saying; he only knew the wrath and pity at the core of him were pouring from his lips.

The crowd stood still, looking in amazement at the small boy who had dared defy its rage. Any member of it could easily have laid Dick prostrate with a blow; but nobody attempted it. There is something in moral courage which speaks to every human soul. The crowd tried to set up a

derisive laugh, it is true, but each felt that it was a failure.

"Hadn't we better turn in, boys, and give the impident rascal a bruisin'?" asked one of the number, a big, bull-headed fellow, with hair of brick-red.

But the general voice did not encourage this proposal. The boys looked from Dick to the broken jar of candies, to the apples and cakes which strewed the sidewalks,— poor wrecks of one more hard fortune. Conscience-stricken and ashamed, they slunk off to their business of boot-blacking and paper-hawking; only the boy with the bull-head and the brick-colored hair turned back with an ugly look, and with a heavy stick which he carried he gave Dick a terrible blow on his left arm, which made the boy turn faint and stagger back several paces. When he came to himself he found somebody had called the dog off, and he and the girl to whose help he had rushed so gallantly were left alone.

She stood there quite still, the hopeless tears rolling down her thin cheeks and dropping on her half-frozen hands as she surveyed the loss of all her capital in life; for whatever the contents of the apple-stand seemed to the rest of the world, they meant to her food, and warmth, and shelter. But she made no attempt to rescue anything.

The terrible fright and strain had unnerved and exhausted her.

"They were a villanous set of rascals!" exclaimed Dick, glowing from his recent triumph, and pressing his left arm tightly to his side; "You're well rid of 'em now, though."

"Yes, you was very good to me," said a broken voice and a quivering lip, but a grateful glance shot up through the tears of the blue, sorrowful eyes.

The look went to Dick's heart again. "It won't do any good to try to gather 'em up. Nobody would want them now," looking at the broken apple-stand and its lost wares. "What can you do, little girl?"

"I must go home to grandma;" her voice choked here again at the thought of the sad tale she would have to carry to the miserable home, and all the time she had not ceased to shiver with the terrible fright she had so lately undergone.

"Come, don't mind, cheer up," said Dick, his whole soul stirred with pity at the sight of that small, scared face. "I know of a good man, who, if I tell him, would hand over money enough to set you up in business again. You don't carry it on for yourself, though?" looking over the mite of figure in the odd motley.

"Oh, no;" and then, in a few broken sentences,

the pitiful story came out, the story of poverty, sickness and misery, as old as the world, as fresh and real as the latest sufferer.

The money was all gone, and, in order to raise a pittance for pressing necessities, the child had taken the place, at the apple-stand, of the old grandmother, who had been ill and unable to attend to her business for several days.

Just as the last syllables of the family history had been confided to Dick, a hand touched his shoulder, and, turning around, he confronted a boy a head taller than himself, with great black eyes, which gazed on him admiringly; the whole manner and dress of the stranger showed that he had been nursed in the lap of kindly fortune. "I was in the building over there," with a wave of his hand across the street. "I saw all that happened just now. You are a plucky fellow, and I honor you; if I could have got out in time I should have had a hand in the business. It was glorious, I say — the way a small boy like you talked to those big bullies and sent them sneaking off like the cowards they were. I heard every word you said."

Dick was fumbling with his right hand at his buttons, and actually blushing red to his temples at this praise; and the little girl listened with her big, sorrowful eyes, and the great tears on cheeks pale and peaked with hardship and hunger.

"She's lost everything," said Dick, turning suddenly to the child, and glad in his shyness to find something to say. "Her grandmother is sick, and she'd taken her place, you see."

"I wish I could get among those rascals with a cat-o'-nine-tails!" growled the strange boy as he looked at the strewn pavement.

He took out his purse. There were only a couple of dollars and some loose change lying inside. He had laid out his money, that morning, to procure reserved seats for his sister, a friend of hers, and himself, at Ristori's next matinée; which fact accounted for the low state of his finances.

The contents of the apple-stand would, however, have been high at two dollars. "You have done your part," he said to Dick, with his frank smile, that took your heart by storm, and his merry eyes; "now I am going to do mine. Here, little girl; you hold out both hands, please."

The bewildered child held out her thin, cold fingers, and the boy emptied the contents of his Russia leather purse into them. "Now go straight home to your sick grandmother," he said. "Such a mite of a girl as you are has no business to be out in the streets, where high winds can blow her away, and bad boys can set big dogs on her."

At that moment somebody from the wholesale house opposite shouted to the boy. "I must

rush," he said. "Not an instant to spare. Give me your hand, boy. You've got the true grit in you. You're a grand, plucky little fellow."

He wrung Dick's hand, and was gone in a flash; and the two — the boy and girl — were standing on the sidewalk together, and the wind, after its long lull, was rising fiercely again.

"There! you won't have so bad a story to tell grandma, after all," said Dick, in a protecting, great-uncle kind of fashion. "She will think you have made a splendid thing of it when you show her all that money."

A sudden light shone in the sorrowful eyes, and a smile steadied the quivering lips. "Won't you come with me, and help me tell her what you did? She'll want to thank you," said the voice, broken by no sobs this time.

Dick's arm gave an awful twinge then. He lifted it very carefully, and supported it with his right hand.

"I will come to-morrow," he said. "Where do you live?"

She named the place. It was not very far off. Dick followed her to the corner of the narrow, dark alley-way, full of miserable, tumble-down tenements; and in the fifth story of one of the oldest and shabbiest of which the child and her grandmother had what they called a home.

After she had made the dwelling clear to him, Dick started at once for his own home. The pain in his arm had grown almost insupportable by this time.

As soon as he reached it, he attempted to show the hurt to his landlady, of whose help and sympathy he was certain. But when she tried to take off his coat, the boy gave a yell of pain, and his arm dropped down.

Then the woman lifted up both hands. "Dick Crombly," she said, "you've just gone and broke your poor arm!" which was the truth, if the sentence was not grammatical.

They went for a surgeon, and, before the next hour was over, Dick's arm was set, and he took his supper that night in Mrs. Carter's rocking-chair by the pleasant kitchen stove fire, which was the place he liked best of all in the house.

CHAPTER X.

DESPITE his impatience, Dick Crombly's arm did not allow him to leave the house until the third day after it had been set.

At the best, he could only make his way at a snail's pace, for any sudden movement was certain to send those dreadful pains quivering up to his shoulder.

He found the dark, slippery alley to which the girl had led him, as well as the old house, settling alarmingly on one side, in the centre of the tall, gloomy row.

At last he reached the fifth landing, and, fumbling around there in the dim light, he struck upon a latch and knocked.

The door was at once opened by the little girl with the pale, meagre face and flaxen hair, which had been floating about the boy's dreams and thoughts for the last three days.

Her eyes brightened wonderfully at seeing him. "It has been so many days and you did not come

I was afraid you had forgotten," she said, standing aside to let him pass in.

"I've had a broken arm, you see, and I couldn't get here before," pointing to the carefully bandaged limb.

"Did they break your arm?" she asked, with such a look of fright and horror that he hastened to reassure her.

"They did; but it will be as good as new the doctor says, in a little while, only it kept me at home all this time, you see."

He looked around the room. It was a low, bare chamber, with a bit of rag-carpet, a few chairs, a small table, and a bed in one corner. Everything about it bore witness to the miserable poverty of its inmates.

There was a very old, rusty stove, in which a coal fire was burning, and for the last three days, thanks to the strange boy's gift, the occupants of the chamber had not suffered from cold or hunger.

An old woman lay on the bed, with a wrinkled, yellow, ghastly face, which made Dick shudder, and yet drew him toward it with a kind of terrible fascination.

She lay very still. The pillow had been carefully arranged, and the blue, coarse coverlet drawn smoothly around her throat by loving hands.

"I can't make out what ails her," looking grieved

and anxious at the ghastly face. "She sleeps most of the time, and only wakes up and talks a few minutes. Sometimes she mumbles and mutters to herself in the strangest way. I wish she'd wake up."

"Maybe she's sicker than you think," said Dick, and it seemed to him that while he gazed, the yellow wrinkles grew deeper and the ashen shadow gathered heavier over them.

The old woman suddenly stirred and opened her eyes. The child darted forward eagerly, and exclaimed, "Grandma, the boy's come!"

"What boy?" asked the slow, feeble voice, which strangely reminded Dick of last falling drops of water, the words flowed so faintly out of the pallid lips.

"Why, the one I told you about, who sent off the dreadful boys and the big dog that was goin' to eat me up!"

There was a flash of intelligence in the glazing eyes. The old woman lifted her hand and her fingers groped and fumbled for the pale, small face which bent over her. "Little Esther! Little Esther!" she said, with a world of human tenderness and yearning in the tones, "what will become of you when grandma's gone?"

"Where are you going, grandma?"

'Home, child! It will all be made right, there."

Esther did not understand, but Dick did, although he did not know that the great tears were thick on his eyelashes.

"Little Esther will be all alone. Who will take care of the child?" cried the old woman, and the dim, staring eyes looked straight at Dick Crombly, although he was not certain that they saw him.

He stepped up to the bedside; he forgot now that he was an errand-boy, with a salary that did little more than pay for his board and clothes.

"I will do what I can for her, ma'am," he said.

A faint smile stole across the gray lips, the last peace gathered into the old, wrinkled face.

"You hear what he says. I shan't forget it when I wake up there. Good-by, little Esther. Don't cry for grandma."

The last words died down in a faint whisper. The calm deepened upon that old face with which life had dealt so hardly. There were two or three swift breaths, but no struggle, and then the old woman had gone out of the long dark of her years in this world, to the light and comfort which awaited her somewhere.

"What is it?" said the child, turning with a frightened, perplexed look to Dick.

It was best to tell her at once. "She's gone; she's dead!" he said.

Then a dreadful cry rung in his ears. It

wandered out into the entries and floated among the noisome atmospheres of the dark old halls; and it brought, in a little while, the faces of three or four curious, startled women to the door.

They were having the merriest conceivable time, that morning, at uncle Jed's. Margery Keith had been, a few days before, accompanied by Tom Garrett and his sister, to see Ristori. Since that time her wise little head had been quite turned by the drama; uncle Jed usually allowed all fevers of that sort to have their run, and left the girl and her glowing visions of private theatricals to take their own way.

It is true he had been off the best part of a week on business; but he felt as secure of Margery as he did of the sun's rising; as for doing a thing in uncle Jed's absence which she would have hesitated to do in his presence, and with his entire knowledge — well, I should not envy the fate of that person who would have dared suggest such a thing to Margery Keith.

This morning she was in a perfect whirl of fun, excitement and enthusiasm. She had, with infinite pains, made up a little programme of Shakesperian recitations; and she had talked it all over

with Tom Garrett and Stacie, who went into the matter, heart and soul. Indeed, without their sympathy and aid, Margery had already discovered that she would never have been able to carry out her programme, which really was a most creditable piece of brain-work for so young a girl. The recitations were not to come off until the following week, and the back parlor was to be devoted to the actors, as the front one was to the audience. Half a dozen of Margery's schoolmates were to take part in the entertainment, and already had their rolês assigned them.

Meanwhile there was an endless amount of rehearsing to be gone through with, and it was Margery Keith's nature to put her whole soul into whatever she did.

Uncle Jed had a secret conviction that the girl possessed real dramatic ability. Sometimes when she was going over to him with some event which she had witnessed, she would throw herself so completely into its spirit, repeating every tone and gesture with such unconscious, but perfect rendering, that the thought would flash through the man's mind, "If I hadn't come across the child she might have found her way at last to the stage, and enjoyed the footlights, the crowds, the storms of applause; but what a rough road she must have travelled first, all alone in the world as she

was! God be thanked I found my darling in time!"

But Margery never suspected that any of these thoughts went on in the heart or brain of uncle Jed.

But this morning, as I said, she was in a full tide of rehearsals with Tom and Stacie Garrett.

A part of the evening's programme was to consist of the last scene in Shakespeare's great historical drama of Henry V. Margery was to act the rôle of the Princess Katharine. Stacie was to be her favorite maid of honor, the Lady Alice; who taught her mistress the pretty broken English she lisped to her royal lover.

Tom Garrett made what his sister and Margery thought "a splendid Henry V."

Margery's enthusiasm, and the power and life of the old play, stirred the boy, and he went through his part with real appreciation and feeling for the character, while his sister did Lady Alice to perfection.

But Margery was no longer in Uncle Jed's parlor in the upper part of the vast, noisy, modern city. She was far away in that dim, old century, which had never opened its eyes wide enough to see the mighty world that lay sleeping in its primeval wildernesses far across the seas. She was in France, the daughter of kings, standing in the old

palace of her fathers, face to face, for the first time, with her royal lover.

He was no less than the king of England; the handsome, young Lancastrian monarch, who had been the terrible foe of her race; who had filled all the homes of France with woe and mourning, from the palaces of its nobles to the huts of its peasants; and who had come now across the Channel to woo her with his broken French, and his brave, gallant presence, to be his bride; and she knew that her father's crown, the safety and honor of her country, were all at hazard now; all hanging on the magic power which her fair, young face and her woman's art should gain over the soul of the English monarch.

She was to conquer, where her father's bravest warriors and his gray-haired statesmen had failed.

Margery's instinct had seized the situation. The little Republican girl was now the royal daughter of France. Tom Garrett, standing before her with his merry, admiring, black eyes, was now the great, dreaded English monarch, who, transformed from the most terrible of enemies by the witchcraft of her eyes and smile, was asking her to share his crown and his island home.

"Your majesty shall mock at me. I cannot speak your England."

Margery's sweet, clear voice had caught the

prettiest foreign lisp, as she repeated these words, and before Tom could strike in with King Henry's reply, she burst out with her face all alive: "And to think that the young girl who said these words that day was to be the mother of the Tudors; the great-great-grandmother of Queen Elizabeth!"

"How wonderfully you are up in English history!" exclaimed Tom. "You just appal me, Miss Margery. I feel as ignorant as a long-eared donkey. As soon as I get fairly settled down under the dear old star-spangled, you know, I'm going to plunge in and read up savagely."

At that moment the door opened, and a servant ushered in a small boy, with a gray overcoat, his arm in a sling.

It was contrary to orders to admit, that morning, any person to the library; but the servant knew the boy's face, he having been occasionally up to the house on some errand for uncle Jed..

"Why, Dick Crombly!" cried Margery, springing up, as she caught sight of the sling, and going toward the boy, whom she had not seen for months, but who always had some pleasant, lingering associations, in her mind, with the summer at Long Branch.

Before Margery had reached the boy, however, Tom Garrett had sprung forward eagerly, and to the girls' amazement cried out, with quite the air

of an old acquaintance, "How in the world did you get up here?"

Dick, surprised and confused by the sight of Tom Garrett, and two questions to reply to at once, made bungling work of his answer.

"I've come from the girl's grandma. She is dead," he said.

Of course this was entirely Greek to Margery "Who is dead?" staring at Dick's face and sling

Before he could reply, Tom Garrett struck in again with, "Did those rascals break your arm?"

"Yes; but it's been set, and it's getting on well, the doctor says."

"The savages! I saw the blow; but I had no idea it was as bad as that," growled Tom.

Margery looked aghast at mention of the broken arm, while she and Stacie, crowding close to the boys, listened in blank bewilderment to their talk.

At last, Margery, trying in vain to find some clue out of this hopeless labyrinth, broke out with, "What do you two mean? It's altogether the oddest affair! Where have you ever met?"

"Give me a chance and I'll explain," cried Tom.

Margery got Dick into a chair, for the boy looked pale and worn, and then Tom Garrett told the story of his first and only meeting with Dick Crombly, three days before.

The life and power of the scene on the street-corner did not lose anything under the narrator's handling. He made Dick Crombly just the hero he had seemed that day. Perhaps his description was a little more highly touched because his thoughts were vibrating still to the movement and grandeur of the immortal old play; although they had all made a sudden plunge across the long, wide abyss which separates the fifteenth from the nineteenth century, and instead of an English king for hero, they had now a New York errand-boy.

Tom concluded his animated recital with, "I wouldn't have missed seeing the whole thing for a thousand dollars. I tell you it was heroic — the way he went for that shivering mite of an apple-girl before the big dog and those bigger brutes of boys who were setting him on her."

Margery Keith could not have been the girl she was, and have listened, unmoved to this story.

After she had taken in every word, she turned to Dick, her eyes full of light, her voice hardly steady. "Dick," she said, "I honor you from my heart. How proud uncle Jed will be of you, when he comes to hear what a hero you have been!"

"And to think he should have to pay with a broken arm for his generous courage!" came in, at the right place, Stacie's pitying chime.

Dick blushed up to his light hair at all this praise. Margery was as full of sympathy for his broken arm, as she was of honest admiration at his bravery. She considered Dick Crombly too, as, in some sense, her protegé, although in her busy city life she had almost lost sight of him.

"Does your arm ache now?" she asked, anxiously.

"Not much; only nights."

"Poor boy! Ah, wouldn't I like to have five minutes' talk with those wretches!" eyes and cheeks aflame while she spoke. "But, Dick," recollecting herself, "I think you said somebody was dead?"

It was Dick's turn now. For a few minutes he had the talking to himself. He had come directly from the garret of the old apple-woman. He described the miserable chamber, the strange death-scene which had just taken place in it, and the solitary, heart-broken child he had left there, sobbing over the dead.

Here was a tragedy in the commonplace light of to-day; on no splendid stage, with no mighty and picturesque actors, it is true, such as filled those old dramas which had stirred all their young souls that morning.

But Dick's story of the lonely garret, and the dying old apple-woman, and her friendless grandchild, went to all their hearts, and brought tears to

all their eyes, even to Tom Garret's, who was a boy, however, and mortally ashamed of himself for crying before girls.

He, too, had his turn at astonishment on learning that his hero of the street-corner was the identical Dick Crombly of Long Branch.

Margery's pity took at once a helpful form. She promised to send down an old serving-woman, a kind of factotum in the household, and one on whom she could rely to render any needed service, and to bring little Esther home with her; while Stacie volunteered that "mamma would furnish everything necessary to give the old woman a decent burial."

It was finally decided among them that Tom should accompany Dick to the alley, and return with the servant and the child.

So the rehearsals were over for that morning. The hard, stern face of the Present had thrust itself into the soft, picturesque twilight of the Past.

Margery would not let Dick Crombly go out of her sight until he had been well toasted by the fire, and treated to a lunch which might have tempted a far more delicate appetite than that of a hungry, growing boy's, even if he did have a broken arm. But the red sling in which that broken arm lay was a badge of honor in the girl's eyes; and she

treated Dick now with a deference she had never shown him in the days when she and Ben Maxwell together made a point of pampering the poor little waif at Long Branch.

The evening of that very day Esther Deems sat, with her watchful eyes and her small, sorrowful face, in the cosiest corner of uncle Jed's library.

She wore a dress of soft wool, and morocco shoes which Margery had long outgrown.

They had had no easy time to get the child away from the garret where the dead woman slept peacefully as in a palace. It had taken all Dick's entreaties and arguments, reinforced by Tom Garrett's, to leave the chamber which was her only home, and the dead who was her only relative.

She had a feeling that her grandmother would awake in a little while and call for her, and grieve that her little girl was gone.

But Tom and Dick prevailed at last, after a woman who occupied the room beneath had been hired to sit by the dead all night.

No wonder the child was bewildered by the new world into which she had come. It was such a contrast to the dark, old garret and the wretched life there.

At first she was quite dazed by all the splendor

and beauty, but she soon settled it in her own mind that it could only belong to heaven, and that the lovely young lady who smiled on her so sweetly, and said such kind words, must be one of the angels.

Every time the door opened she actually started, expecting her grandmother to walk in, with great wings and a beautiful crown, and that she would say, with a bright smile, "We've got here, you see, Esther. The trouble's all gone forever! Aint it as beautiful as I told you, child?"

But her grandmother did not come, and the little girl was worn out with the grief and sobbing of that day. She could not cry any more. The pain had slipped off from her little heart. She would have been content to sit there forever by the warm fire, in the beautiful room, and watch the lovely lady; and she did not suspect how the curious, intent gaze of her sorrowful eyes was going to Margery's heart.

But at last the lids dropped softly over them, and they carried Esther Deems, fast asleep, to her warm, soft bed under uncle Jed's roof.

No; it certainly was not heaven, and yet, under God's shining roof of stars that night, there were perhaps fewer places nearer it than the home of Jeremiah Woolcott.

CHAPTER XI.

Once more uncle Jed and Margery Keith sat alone, late in the evening, in the library. That very morning he had returned home, having been away twice as long as he had anticipated.

Of course Margery had volumes to relate; for the "private theatricals" were to come off the next evening, and the programme had hardly been developed when he went away.

He knew, too, that some tide of events had, during his absence, cast up at his door a little, strange waif of a girl. One look at her curious, half-scared, little face, as Margery brought her up for an introduction, told the man that the small life had taken its roots away down in soils of poverty and misery; but the frightened, appealing look went to his soft heart, and his thoughts, as he looked on her, were somewhat on this fashion: "Well, you poor little morsel of humanity, you've had a hard time of it thus far, I see. Born to no silver spoon, and no soft cradle, were you? It must seem to you now as though you'd got among the clover and daisies. Make the most of them."

But uncle Jed said nothing of all this to Esther Deems, as she stood before him in the plaid dress and the snowy, embroidered apron which Margery had worn so long ago; and which effected such a thorough transformation in her appearance, that the boys would never have recognized her for the girl in the ridiculous bonnet and the scarlet and yellow striped shawl, whom they had so shamefully bullied.

But when uncle Jed saluted the child in his kindly, humorous way, with the pleasant twinkle of a smile in his gray eyes, the shy, little heart warmed toward him at once, and Esther's secret thought was, "Oh, what a beautiful man!"

But she could not have said this, though, to save her life.

Esther Deems had, after a good deal of reflection, made up her mind that she had not got to heaven, after all.

But she was quite satisfied to remain where she was, now there was such a beautiful, undreamt-of side to this world. The dreadful ache for the dead grandmother went out of the little heart forever. She felt very sure that the old woman, in her new, beautiful home, knew all about the good fortunes into which her darling had fallen; and heaven seemed a great deal nearer to Esther than her new home did to the dark, old garret, and yet they had

come from one to the other in little more than an hour.

Uncle Jed had been quite too busy on the day of his return to learn anything but the merest fragment of Esther Deems' story. Margery reserved it for the evening and the library, when they two should be alone together.

And here they two were, as I said, and it was late, and Margery had told the tale, and the part Dick Crombly had borne in it.

Uncle Jed had listened silently. It was not his habit to interrupt her, when she was launched on a full tide of talk; but she was sure that the life and pathos of the story could not fail to move him.

"I knew, uncle Jed, the only thing to do was to have that forlorn little midget brought up here. I gave the order, sure of your approval when you heard it."

"You did the very best thing, my dear."

"But you cannot imagine what an absurd-looking little Guy she was when I first saw her in that coal-scuttle of a bonnet, and that fiery shawl. I forgot all about them, though, when I caught a glimpse of the scared, sorrowful face. It has grown so much happier these days."

"That is one good thing. Now what do you propose doing with this small protegée of yours, Margery?"

"If you had only waited half a minute more, uncle Jed, I should have asked you that very question."

"Well, we will let her stay on for the present; happily, there's room enough and to spare, under this wide roof, for her small head. If she has any special aptitude we can find it out, and give it a chance. One of these days you will be a fine young lady, and want a small maid, I suppose. We can put her in training for that, perhaps."

"Uncle Jed, you do have the brightest ideas and the nicest wishes for people. The servants have taken a fancy to the child, and she will be sufficiently petted and spoiled in the kitchen."

"A little cosseting will do her no harm. What a rough wind has blown through her years thus far! She will find, I trust, that the gale which brought her to our gate was a friendly one. If we meddle with people's lives, it must be to make them a little happier, a little better. I think that rule, fairly acted upon, would carry one smoothly and bravely through the world."

"But, uncle Jed, what is to be said for all the poor little waifs, like this one, out in the dark and cold of the world, whom no friendly wind blows to any gate that will open and take them in?"

"This is to be said, my child: that the world is God's, and that he does not ask us to carry its

huge weight on our slight human shoulders, only to do the best we can with our one little corner."

She was silent a little while, over that; thinking the more.

Then she burst out again: "How things do run into one another! If it had not been for Dick Crombly and that day at Long Branch, when I took pity on his torn foot, that midget would never have showed her little, sorrowful face under our roof."

"Precisely. Things do run into and open out of one another. Dick did a brave deed the other day. I shall let the boy know what I think of it, and that I don't believe he will be sorry for it when he is a grown-up man, though it has cost him a broken arm now."

"He says he shall get back to the office next week. I have had him up here a good deal since you were away. He gets on swimmingly with Esther, who, shy as she is with everybody else, chatters away to him by the hour. I have invited him up to-morrow evening."

Her closing remark suggested the rehearsals once more to Margery. She gave uncle Jed a detailed and very animated account of these as they had occurred each day.

When she was through, her uncle remarked "To-morrow will be an exciting time for you,

Margery. If I had had my wits about me I should have sent you to bed an hour ago."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't have; for in that case, uncle Jed, I should only have lain wide awake, tormenting myself with the things I wanted to say to you and couldn't, so nobody would have gained anything. To think you and I are sitting here alone to-night, talking together, and to-morrow evening how changed it will all be! — the crowds, the lights, the hum of voices, the rustle of dresses — "

"There, — that's enough for to-night. I shall repent being wheedled into all this nonsense, unless you kiss me, and march straight to bed, without another word, Miss Margery Keith."

When he spoke in that tone she knew it was useless to say anything further.

Dick Crombly, hurrying along the street that afternoon, heard his name suddenly called by somebody behind him.

The boy was just on the point of signalling a Fourth Avenue car. He was on his way up town, for he had had an invitation, not only to the private theatricals, but to take tea at uncle Jed's.

Better than all, he had had a private interview,

that day with Mr. Woolcott, and the man had said some things to the boy which would make the interview memorable through all Dick Crombly's future life. Praise from the lips of uncle Jed was always a very delightful thing, because the man himself took such thorough delight in bestowing it, and every word had the ring of honest truth.

His approval was a thing worth having, because it must be fairly earned first, with such a man mere flattery being impossible. Dick had gone down to the office that afternoon, for the first time since his accident; somebody else having taken his place for a week. To his surprise he found uncle Jed there, who called him to his side, and saluted him with great cordiality.

"I know all about it, Dick," he said. "I heard it from Miss Margery's own lips, last evening. I am proud of you, and proud of that broken arm, too! It does you as much honor as though you had received it on a battle-field. You know the knights and heroes of old always made it their highest glory to defend the wronged and helpless. Yours was a noble deed, my boy."

Dick went out of uncle Jed's office prouder and happier than he had ever been in his life. It was two hours afterward, when, making his way to the

street-car, he heard his name called by a voice just behind him.

He turned and saw a young man with very red whiskers, in a shaggy green jacket and tarpaulin hat, and that roll in his gait that showed at once that he had followed the seas from his boyhood.

"Don't know me, eh?" said the young sailor, putting out his hand and evidently enjoying the stare of perplexed curiosity with which Dick regarded him.

"I can't say I do," replied the boy, giving his hand, however, in turn, and it was seized with a hearty grip.

The sailor mentioned a name which had been familiar enough to Dick in those old days when he haunted the docks and swam off to the lighters, and had his own reasons for keeping in the shadows of the great hulks of vessels riding at anchor by the piers. The sailor had been employed on one of the lighters, and was an old crony of Jake Barton's.

"I al'ays remember a face when I've seen it once, though you've been pretty thoroughly hauled over and new rigged," with a glance which took Dick in from caps to boots. "If you've fe'l into good luck I'm glad on't."

"I have, Jack. I've got a good bunk as office

boy now. You've been off on a long cruise, I take it?"

The two walked along the street, continuing their talk. The sailor had shipped on board a merchant-vessel, bound first for California and afterward for Calcutta. He had only reached New York on the return voyage the day before.

Dick's heart gave a great thump when the sailor went on to say that Jake Barton had shipped on the same vessel with him.

There was a little pause there; the sailor looked doubtfully at Dick. "You haven't heard anything about him of late, I reckon?" he asked.

"Not since I saw him at Long Branch two years ago next summer. Did he come back with you?"

And as Dick asked the question, the heart which had thumped so, a moment before, sank like lead.

In a little while it was all out. The sailor had a kindly heart, for he bungled at first telling the story, remembering that Dick was the cousin of his old crony. When he had done talking, however, Dick knew that Jake Barton had taken the ship-fever during the voyage out, and died while the vessel was rounding Cape Horn.

The news shocked Dick at first. There was a time when Jake Barton, despite the coarse villain that he was, had shown Dick a good deal of

kindness, and probably been nearer the boy's heart than anything on earth. He wiped some tears away with his coat-sleeve, and asked a number of questions about the last illness of Jake. The sailor gave him all the information he possessed, and when they reached an eating-saloon, where he expected to meet some of his crew, he cordially invited Dick to enter. But the boy thanked him and declined, and the two parted, the sailor promising to call on Dick before he left port.

Going up town that afternoon, in the horse-cars, Dick drew a long breath of relief. Despite his first shock on learning of Jake Barton's death, the thought of him had been a kind of nightmare hanging over Dick ever since the days at Long Branch. He felt that some time Jake Barton would be certain to turn up again. How would they two meet, between whom such a gulf had been widening all these months? Yet old memories and old habits and a tough tie of gratitude still held Dick to Jake Barton. The boy was afraid of his cousin, afraid of himself, lest, when they two met, some devil which he had long been trying to keep down and strangle should spring up suddenly and overmaster him, and drag him back, reluctant, shuddering, yet longing for the old life with its freedom, and excitement, and perils. Dick knew

where, down in all its squalor and misery, its bad charm and fascination lay, as only those can who have tried it.

Then it seemed mean to the boy, because his own fortunes were bettered, to turn the cold shoulder on the relative who had shared many a meal and many a pallet with him. Far from quarrelling with Dick Crombly for this feeling, I think it did him honor.

But all doubts and fears on that score were now set at rest forever, and, though he wiped his eyes more than once on that long car-ride, it cannot be denied that the news of his cousin's death had been a great relief, as though some incubus that weighed down his soul had suddenly slipped off.

A human life may go out from this world without being a real loss or grief to any other.

Jake Barton had gone to his own place.

The morning after the Shakespearian recitations, there was a lively scene going on in uncle Jed's library. Margery Keith was there, with Tom and Stacie Garrett, who had come directly after breakfast to talk over the triumphs of the previous evening; and Dick Crombly, having remained over night, was there also, and Margery had little Esther up, to keep him company.

It was quite as good as the play, — hearing those young people talk about it. They were all of one mind regarding the evening, — that it had been a great success. They went over with every detail, and told how they had felt, and there was a vast amount of fun and merriment mixed up with the whole; all manner of ludicrous mistakes had just escaped occurring, each one of which brought out peals of laughter and pages of talk.

"Everybody said you made the most splendid princess," said Stacie, her blue eyes glowing with girlish delight and admiration on her friend. "I never saw you look so lovely, did you, Tom?"

"Never!" answered the boy, fervently.

"Stacie, darling, you are too bad to put him to the cruel test of the question," laughed Margery. "How was he to answer you without paying me a compliment?"

"I should have contrived to get out of it somehow, Miss Margery, without telling what was not true," replied the boy, with sudden gravity.

Margery liked him better than she had ever done before, after he made that answer.

In a corner of the room, on a small lounge, Dick Crombly sat with Esther Deems and listened to the talk. They enjoyed the spirit and fun of it thoroughly, although they did not understand all that was said. The child always warmed out of

her shyness and silence when she was with Dick. She was at ease, in a homely way, with him, as she was not with any of the grand people about her. She chatted with the boy, and it was a pleasant thing to see the pale little face brighten and the merry light of childhood break up the shadows in those sorrowful eyes.

In some pause of the talk, Margery came over and stood by the boy and girl. She patted Esther's soft hair, and said, "I hope, Dick, your arm is no worse for your dissipation last night."

"Oh, no, the pain has almost gone, Miss Margery." In an instant he added, "I heard something yesterday which I think you and your uncle ought to know."

"Well, suppose you tell me then."

Dick related the story which he had heard yesterday of Jake Barton.

Margery listened intently. Stacie, seeing how earnestly the two were talking, made a little sign to her brother not to interrupt them; and the two went to examining some lovely Rhine views in water-colors which lay on the library-table.

The mention of Jake Barton's name carried Margery back to that afternoon at Long Branch, when the sudden, awful fright had rushed upon her.

It all came up in a moment fresh with life and

horror, as though it had happened yesterday. A shudder went over the glowing young frame just as a cold east wind will sometimes come shivering into the warm heart of a June day. Yet she never thought of that time without a glow of gratitude toward the boy whose mysterious warning had brought uncle Jed at once to the rescue. She could hear the man's voice ringing like a trumpet over the field, and sending a thrill of courage to her heart, while that villain's deadly eyes were glaring on her, and his hands gripping her chain. It turned her sick to think of it.

Dick saw the change in the girl's face, and half-divined what was in her thoughts. "I shouldn't have spoken Jake's name to you," he said, half apologetically, "only I thought you and Mr. Woolcott ought to know."

"Yes; you did quite right, Dick; I shall tell uncle Jed."

Then her eyes went to the sling, in which his arm was lying. "A broken arm is a bad thing, Dick," she said very kindly. "But you got yours in a good cause."

The boy's face brightened, and a spirit shone in it which Margery had never seen there before.

"I aint sorry that my arm was broke," he said decidedly.

"You're not?"

"No;" drawing himself up proudly. "Because I've felt sure ever since, that I'm going to make a man."

"I *know* you will, Dick," said Margery; and her eyes shone into his, and almost dazzled him, as she continued: "Now I'm going to tell you one thing that grand old Thomas Jefferson wrote to his nephew, Peter Carr. Uncle Jed says it is a piece of advice that will make a man of any boy who lays it up in his soul and lives it. '*Give up money, give up fame; give the earth itself, and all that it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose that, in any possible situation, or any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing.*' There! don't you like that?"

Tom Garrett answered her question with a clapping of hands, and a "Bravo!" In her earnestness, Margery had spoken so loud that everybody in the room heard.

A little while afterward, Dick and Esther left the library, uncle Jed having given orders, before he went down town that morning, that the boy was not to leave the house that day.

Then Margery repeated her conversation with Dick, to Tom and Stacie Garrett.

"I'm going to write to Ben Maxwell to-night," said Tom, when Margery had concluded. "I shall

have a long story to tell; all about Dick Crombly and last evening."

"A letter, Tom," chirruped Stacie. "I should think, if you go over all that ground, it would have to be a book."

Just then the lunch-bell rang.

THE END.