

NATHALIE'S SISTER



IRMA CHEIN RAY



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NATHALIE'S SISTER

ANNA CHAPIN RAY'S
WRITINGS

TEDDY, HER BOOK.

PHEBE, HER PROFESSION.

TEDDY, HER DAUGHTER.

NATHALIE'S CHUM.

URSULA'S FRESHMAN.

NATHALIE'S SISTER.

EACH LIFE UNFULFILLED.

THE DOMINANT STRAIN.

BY THE GOOD SAINTE ANNE.



NATHALIE'S SISTER

The Last of the *McAlister* Records

BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

AUTHOR OF "TEDDY, HER BOOK," "PHEBE, HER PROFESSION,"
"NATHALIE'S CHUM," "URSULA'S FRESHMAN," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

ALICE BARBER STEPHENS

BOSTON

LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1907

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Published September, 1904.

Printers

S. J. PARKHILL & Co., BOSTON, U. S. A.

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NATHALIE'S SISTER

CHAPTER ONE

“**T**HAT may be; but it's no reason for sending her to be butchered.”

“It is n't butchery; it's chloroform, Nathalie,” Mrs. Barrett corrected blandly.

But impatiently Nathalie brushed her yellow hair off from her heated forehead, and swept on with her arraignment.

“Yes, it is butchery. It does n't make any difference whether you do it with a guillotine or a ten-ounce bottle of chloroform. If you could have seen the corners of her mouth when I met her!”

“I can imagine. She has in her the making of an ideal undertaker.”

“What did you get her for, in the first place?” Nathalie demanded.

“Ornament. I thought she would be so impressive, stalking along beside me when I went to market.”

"She will, if you give her the chance."

Bending over, Mrs. Barrett tightened a pin in the yellow hair beside her knee.

"Unfortunately, she has begun going to market on her own account."

"What do you mean?"

"That, in the last four days, she has killed thirty-seven of Mrs. Babcock's chickens. Mrs. Babcock loves her chickens. She boils corn-meal mush for them, and then she stands and watches them eat it." Mrs. Barrett's shoulders finished the paragraph and registered her impression of Mrs. Babcock.

Nathalie moved to the other end of the step, where she could sit facing Mrs. Barrett.

"And so do you love Sophia," she remonstrated.

"Sophia Smith, if you please. Ted named her in the spasm of loyalty that followed her class reunion. Well?"

"Then why did n't you protect her?"

"How could I? Mrs. Babcock descended upon me, yesterday, with eighteen downy corpses spread out in an accusing row on a board, and Sophia stood on her hind legs to greet her, with the nineteenth dangling out of the corners of her mouth. I was penitent enough to answer for

us both; but Mrs. Babcock refused to be appeased. All I could do was to beg for one more trial. It came off this morning: a race between Sophia and Mrs. Babcock, with a chicken for the prize. I grieve to say that Sophia won."

"And you are going to have Dr. Allen kill her?"

"Yes. Giff seemed to think he could n't do it, right in the middle of the love-song he is writing for Monterro."

Nathalie spoke slowly, her chin resting on her fists, —

"Aunt Babe, give Sophia to me."

"What would you do with her?"

"Save her life, and then train her."

"And the chickens?"

"I'll keep her tied."

"What will Mac say?"

Nathalie raised her brows and cocked her eyes up at Mrs. Barrett.

"Our honeymoon won't be over till next Wednesday," she observed demurely.

"Hm! Well, I suppose that settles it. Talk it over with father, and, if he is willing, telephone to Dr. Allen to send her back. I doubt if the expressman will bring her, though. He said she not only filled up his whole wagon, but

she was so 'tiddley on her pins,' as he phrased it, that he had to walk his horses for fear she would capsize. Giff is calling me, Nathalie, and I must go. I wish you joy of your pet, and all the chicken stew your appetite can desire."

With a swift but leisurely step, Nathalie went up the shady street, crossed the broad lawn at The Savins, and threw herself down at the feet of the old man on the veranda.

"Grandpa McAlister?"

He looked up from his paper with a gay smile which belied his more than fourscore years. Nathalie smiled back at him in perfect understanding. Few more precious gifts had her wedding brought her than the kinship with Dr. John McAlister.

"Yes, my lady."

"I want something, — want it very badly."

His laugh still held its mellow ring. Even in his great age, Dr. McAlister was young at heart, and Nature, always just, was repaying him for a well-spent life with an old age of rare vigor and sweetness.

"Last night in the twilight," he suggested; "I am sure I heard you confiding to Mac that you had nothing left to wish for."

"I had n't then; I have, to-day. Mac is

away, gone for this whole blessed afternoon, and I need a companion."

"So soon?"

"Yes, for he will be sure to go again. Next time, it will be even worse. Grandpa McAlister, I want —" She paused, as if to add weight to her words.

"What?"

"Aunt Babe's Sophia. She is on her way to be killed, unless I save her life."

"Then I should advise you to go in search of a telephone," Dr. McAlister suggested.

"But you don't understand. It is n't as if Mac and I were in our own home. If I take her, she will howl in your ears, all night; she will dig holes in your lawn, all day, and gnaw up your door-mats, and chase the cat between whiles."

As she halted for breath, Dr. McAlister bent over her for a moment.

"My dear little lady, I have had a puppy or two in my time. Moreover, when I begged you and Mac to keep house for me, this summer, I expressly stated that The Savins was to be as much home to you as to me. It is a good deal for me, you know, to have you and the boy with me, all summer long. For the sake of that alone,

I would be willing to have a dozen Sophias wailing in unison."

With a swift gesture, Nathalie caught the snow-white head in her firm, brown hands.

"Don't spoil me," she begged. "And besides, what about the two extra Arterburns who are coming?"

"I have scarcely seen your sister. Harry would be welcome at The Savins at any time."

Her answering smile was half mocking, half tender.

"You've learned the way to my heart, Grandpa McAlister. Mac and Harry make up a large share of my solar system, and it is very good to have you care for them, too." She rose as if to go to the telephone. Then she turned back again impulsively. "It is so good to be here with you all, and to have Hal coming, to-day. I wish you could know how happy I am."

Two hours later, she appeared in the doorway with her hat on.

"I am going in town to see Dr. Allen," she announced. "I can't extract any satisfactory information out of the telephone, and I am afraid of what the chloroform bottle may do, unless I bestir myself. I'll be out on the five o'clock train."



ALICE BARBER TO ME



She found Sophia Smith lashed to one of the posts in the stable of the veterinary hospital. The corners of Sophia's mouth drooped more disconsolately than ever, and all the curl had gone out of the tail, which wagged a forlorn welcome as Nathalie appeared. A thoroughbred staghound whose pedigree was coextensive with those of half the belted earls of the British Isles, Sophia's lank frame, nevertheless, was covered with a coat of the texture of a frayed door-mat, of the color of a much-washed linen duster. One ear lopped forward over her brow, and her flanks met in the gaps between her ribs.

"Sophia," Nathalie said softly.

Slowly Sophia rose on her haunches. From her haunches she rose on her hind legs, and her fore paws met in an embrace which lost somewhat of its fervor by reason of its occurring in mid-air, three feet above the head of its object.

"You came to take her home?" the attendant suggested affably.

"No. At least, where is the expressman?"

"He would n't answer the telephone."

"Why don't you try again?"

"Because I got him, the first time. He answered till he found out who was talking to him.

Then he hung up, and I could n't get him again."

"Then send for another."

"There is n't any other that goes your way."

A silence followed. Nathalie stared anxiously at Sophia Smith, who gazed gloomily back at her.

"How can I ever get her home?" she asked blankly at length.

"You'd better lead her right along with you now," the man advised.

"Yes — but —" Nathalie's eyes turned again to Sophia, who was making lunges at a passing cat until the post creaked with the strain.

"I'll lend you a lead," the man volunteered. "She'll go quietly enough, once she gets started. Bless your heart, she's nothing but a little puppy."

With a sigh and a glance at her trim walking-gown, Nathalie yielded to the inevitable. Sophia, meanwhile, appeared to have taken root beside the post, and bent her neck patiently this way and that, in answer to Nathalie's tuggings at the lead which the attendant had snapped on her collar. At length, however, Sophia, too, yielded to the inevitable. Converted into a

wheelbarrow by two firm hands upon her rear ankles, she allowed herself to be trundled out into the street and headed towards The Savins. Then of a sudden her pride of birth reasserted itself, and, as beseemed a staghound of sorts, she assumed full control of the situation.

More than an hour later, she was still holding control of the situation. It was four miles from town to The Savins. Nathalie, who would have thought nothing of a four-mile course on the golf links, wondered vaguely how many barley-corns there were in four miles; but her thoughts were not sufficiently consecutive to allow her to perform the needful multiplications. Once she progressed as far as yards. Then a cat loomed up upon the horizon, and she lost count. Her physical progress was as unsteady as her mental one. Sometimes she bounced; sometimes she broke into a canter, then quickened her pace to a gallop, and went pounding forward at a speed which strewed her path with hair-pins. Then of a sudden Sophia went back for another look at something she had passed, and, quite as a matter of course, Nathalie went too. Worst of all, Sophia was so long and elastic, and the lead so very, very short.

For reasons connected solely with human

vanity, Nathalie had forsaken the direct road towards home. It was shorter; but it was one of the favorite drives out of town, and at that hour of the afternoon it was sure to be crowded with carriages. All in all, it seemed better to her to follow another route, one which led through a succession of undesirable neighborhoods. Nathalie's sense of direction was a keen one. Twice she had driven over the road, and she was sure of its every turn. For so much she was thankful; but it soon became her solitary cause of thankfulness.

In the first place, there was a superabundance of dog along the roadside. With each successive dog Sophia paused to have a romp, dragging Nathalie through a species of Virginia reel which occupied the street from curb to curb. The romp usually ended in Sophia's tumbling over and lying prostrate in the dust until her new mistress, with infinite toil, succeeded in prying her up and setting her on her long legs again. By that time, the first dog had vanished and a new one had arisen to take his place. According to Nathalie's exhausted computation, there were about seventy-seven dogs to the mile. Then Sophia grew thirsty, and, in her search for a drink, she made her way into

the first open door she could find. The open door chanced to be that of a saloon, and Sophia and Nathalie had a prolonged difference of opinion at the foot of the steps. From the doorway, the man eyed her thoughtfully.

"Did you buy it to ride, missus?" he queried, when Sophia, exhausted with her efforts, sat down to rest with an abruptness which caused Nathalie to seat herself upon the shaggy back.

Sophia rose abruptly. For the once she was powerless to stand against the strain on her lead; and Nathalie, her chin in the air, stalked away down the street. Ten feet from the door, however, Sophia saw a cat on the other side of a wide puddle, and Nathalie's dignity suddenly vanished. A young staghound can jump farther than a young woman, and Nathalie's crisp piqué skirt drank up the water greedily.

"Sophia, no! Come back!" she ordered.

The tone was commanding. Sophia came. This time, in her eagerness to make peace, she came through, not over, the puddle. Her thick paws landed on the points of Nathalie's shoulders, and her peaked muzzle and straggling mustache were pressed against the girl's cheek. Then, light of heart, she dropped back to the ground, with a single sweep of her paw knocked

over a fox terrier and rolled over on top of him.

Just as Nathalie had succeeded in extricating her charge from the attacks of the terrier, a group of three people were standing in the door of the railway station. Of the two men, one was tall, yellow-haired, and full of the alertness which comes from superb health; the other was more slender, more delicate, yet quite as attractive as his companion. Both men were of thoroughbred stock; both bore the marks of refined and earnest living. The third member of the party was a girl of fifteen, not especially pretty, but comely with health, and with an aggressive poise of her head that spoke volumes for her character. In one hand she carried a caddy bag, and a bow and a bundle of arrows; in the other was a heavy suit-case.

"Thank you, no. I always carry my own things," she said, as the taller of the men tried to relieve her of a part of her burden.

"But I have nothing but my umbrella," he objected, with a smile.

"I can't help that. If I am going to have things, it is my place to look out for them," she returned uncompromisingly. "You are n't likely to wear my gowns or to shoot with my

arrows, so there is no especial reason you should carry them."

"Only my own satisfaction." Then he turned to his other companion. "The five o'clock is gone, Hal, and there's not another train till seven, so we shall have to drive. I'm sorry; but it is the best we can do. It was disgusting of the train to be so late."

He signalled to a driver and gave his orders.

"To The Savins. By the back road, I think. It will be less crowded, and we can make better time, that way. Now, Peggy, can I help you in?"

"Yes," he said, as they were rolling swiftly along; "I am perfectly happy. Nathalie is all, and even more than I imagined her, and it seems to me that she grows more beautiful, every —"

The horses shied with a violence that broke his speech in two; and he leaned out of the carriage to discover the cause of the driver's sudden profanity. A heavy wagon just ahead of them was raising a cloud of dust which thickened the air and blinded him with the sunlight that streamed across it. In the thickest of the dust, a dust-colored beast as large as a

calf was plunging madly about, dragging behind it a woman with sodden skirts, and frowsy hair lopping sidewise under her loosened hat. On the curbstone, a knot of urchins uttered dispassionate comments upon the scene.

“What is it?” Peggy demanded.

“I can’t make out. It’s some sort of a street show; possibly a dancing bear. Horses always shy at them.”

But Peggy shook her head.

“It’s too light for a bear. Maybe it’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. They generally have a street parade.”

The carriage passed on for a few yards. Suddenly an arm waved wildly, and the air was cleft with a cry, —

“Mac! Mac! Wait for me! Mac!”

“By Jove, it’s Nathalie!” And he was out of the carriage with a bound.

Side by side, and breathless with mutual explanation, they came up to the carriage, with Sophia Smith trudging demurely along under Mac’s strong hand. Peggy turned upon her sister the stony eye of disfavor.

“Nathalie Arterburn!”

“Holden,” Mac corrected her.

“Well, Holden, then. Of course I knew you

were married, else you would n't be here. But do you know how you look?"

"I—I rather think I do," Nathalie said wearily, as Mac handed her into the carriage.

Peggy drew her skirt aside and made a protecting barrier of caddy bag.

"I hope there's a bath-tub at The Savins," she said tartly. "I begin to think we all may need it. Mac Holden, you are n't going to stuff that creature in here?"

He laughed at her accent of despair.

"Unless you would like to lead her home," he suggested.

Peggy dropped back into her corner.

"Well, of all the performances!" she said slowly. "Next time, I'll plan to travel by myself."

CHAPTER TWO

“HARRY ARTERBURN.”

Harry came out of a brown study and turned to face his young sister.

“Peggy Arterburn?” he responded interrogatively.

She frowned.

“I do wish you could remember that my name is Margaret,” she observed.

“What’s the use of remembering a name that does n’t fit?”

“But it does fit me; that is, in my better moments,” she replied pensively.

In spite of himself, her brother laughed. Then he controlled his merriment. It was one of Peggy’s idiosyncrasies never to allow herself to be laughed at.

“You need n’t sit and smirk at me,” she complained. “It’s not the way you would treat Nathalie. Now it’s my turn. She is all married off, and I’m grown up. If I have to

be here, all this summer, I do wish you 'd treat me with a little respect."

At her words, his face changed.

"Have to be here, Peggy! Don't you love to be here?"

"That's just what I wanted to talk to you about," she said flatly. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't fit in anywhere. I'm like a stray cat in a dog show: everybody larger than I am, and nobody quite of my kind," she returned shrewdly.

Tossing aside the magazine which the deepening twilight had rendered useless, Harry Arterburn rose, crossed the veranda, and paused beside his young sister. For a moment, he studied her wilful, spirited, discontented face, while it slowly dawned upon him that, without his having at all realized it, little Peggy had changed from a simple, fractious child into a maidenhood of endless and contradictory possibilities.

"Let's go for a little walk, Peggy," he suggested, when the moment was ended.

His accent was respectfully grave, and, moreover, exercise was always welcome to Peggy. Side by side, the brother and sister sauntered

across the lawn and down the street, among the shadows that lay heavy under the elm trees. At the gate, Harry turned to look back.

“What an ideal home it is!” he said slowly.

His sister's eyes rested upon the two figures dimly visible in the darkest corner of the veranda, and there came a ring of mockery into her tone.

“If I had anything to do with it, though, I'd change the name and call it The Spoonholder,” she responded.

He laughed.

“Perhaps. But what can you expect, only four weeks from their wedding day?”

“Oh, it's not just them; it's the whole establishment,” she answered, with a hostile sniff. “Of course I expected they would be intolerable. But, just across the fence, Mrs. Farrington and her husband are as bad as Mac and Nathalie. One would think that, with a grown-up daughter and all the love-stories she has written, she might know better. And Mrs. Barrett is only four houses away, going to spend the summer there; and now honestly, Hal,” she dropped her voice to an accusing murmur; “I saw her and Mr. Barrett holding hands on their front veranda, last night.”

"You don't say so!" His tone echoed her own. "Well, let's us hold hands now."

Defiantly she stuck her hands into the side pockets of her short blue jacket.

"I don't do that sort of thing. I'm going to be an old maid."

"So glad. Then you can be the companion of my declining years, Peggy."

She eyed him distrustfully; then she edged a trifle nearer to his side. Nevertheless, she said shortly, —

"I thought you'd live with Nathalie."

"She has Mac."

"But she can have you, too."

"Better not," he said, with sudden gravity.

"Then what are you doing here?" she queried.

He made no answer, but walked on, with his steady blue eyes fixed on the stripe of concrete ahead of him. Out of the corners of her own eyes, Peggy watched him furtively. Then, suddenly repenting of her late strictures, she took her hand out of her pocket and stuck it into the curve of his elbow.

"Hal, 'fess up," she said quickly. "Don't you feel lonesome here? I know you do; I know you miss feeling that Nathalie is yours. I've

some sense, even if I am nobody but Peggy; and I know she has made up your life, the last three or four years. Now she belongs to Mac, and you 've come here just to have the satisfaction of seeing him take possession. It is n't fun to you, not the least bit."

"No," he assented; "it is n't. But how did you know?"

"Common sense, I suppose," she replied shortly. "But it's an awful place here for a lone orphan, Hal. Everybody else belongs to somebody in particular, and they all belong to that dear old Dr. McAlister. He is a dear; but I am just as afraid of him as if he were Gabriel, horn and halo and all. Angelic people always terrify me."

"Afraid of Dr. McAlister?"

"Yes. You are n't, though, of course. You've a taint of the angelic in you, too, from all accounts. But they all adore him and each other. What's more, they have a little adoration left over for you. I'm the odd one, like a person left on the outside in a ring play. I believe I'll drop the handkerchief to that nice Mr. Hubert. He probably would say, 'Go away, bad little girl. You are n't playing in my game.'" She paused for breath; then she

asked abruptly, "Hal, do you truly miss Nathalie so much?"

"Yes," he said, after a pause. "More than I had any idea I could do. But I am going to stop it."

"How?"

"Shutting my teeth and taking the dose like a man. Nathalie belongs to Mac Holden now. He ought to stand first, and I'm glad he does. Only —"

"Only it leaves you without a chum. You'll have to take a new one."

"There will never be another Nathalie," he said slowly.

She put her hand in her pocket again and laughed. Her voice was a bit clearer, as she answered, —

"Then you'll have to take up with an inferior quality; that's all. As for me, I'm going to weigh the merits of Sophia Smith and Mr. Hubert. He is more restful; but she has a better sense of fun. What is the reason he never married, Harry?"

"Years ago, Mac told me, he was engaged, and the girl died. Since then he has been —" He hesitated for the right word.

Peggy supplied it.

“A confirmed old bachelor. Well, I wish there were more like him. He’s neat without being finicky, and set without being cranky. If I were twice as old, I would set my cap at him. It would n’t do a bit of good, though. He has just two ideas, his father and Mrs. Farrington. I don’t believe it has dawned on him yet that the world holds an Arterburn. He’s as dear as can be, when he meets me at the table, and always looks out that I get a crusty muffin; but if you came on him suddenly and asked the name of the girl with the big nose and the blue clo’es, he could n’t tell you for the life of him.”

She lapsed into a silence which her brother was too absorbed in himself to break. Then she began again.

“Hal, it is great fun to kick against the pricks now and then.”

“Yes.”

She frowned, and withdrew to the other edge of the walk.

“You have n’t heard a word I’ve been saying,” she protested.

He roused himself guiltily.

“Yes, truly I have, Peggy.”

“What was the last thing I said?”

“That I’d have to take a new chum.”

"Oh, Harry! You are n't any use at all. Why can't you listen, when I'm half desperate?"

This time, he came completely out of his reverie and stared at her in surprise.

"Desperate, Peggy? What's the matter?"

"I tell you I'm kicking against the pricks."

"What pricks?"

"Everything. You, and The Savins, and the whole McAlister tribe."

"What have we all done?"

"Nothing."

"Then what's the matter?"

"That's the matter. You're all so perfect that you exasperate me. It's a heavenly place, and you're heavenly people; but I'm no angel, and now and then I'd like another sinner to play with."

"But you have n't been used to sinners, as a rule."

"Yes, I have," she persisted. "Cousin Eudora was a righteous woman and a Christian Scientist; but she was a sinner by comparison with this community. She used to say 'pesky' and slap the cat. There's always some comfort to be gained, when old people get vicious. You feel as if you weren't quite so hopeless, yourself."

But here! Fancy Mr. Hubert slapping Sophia Smith!"

She laughed, but her voice was not quite steady. As they passed a street light, her brother looked down at her face, and he was surprised at its flush and at the trouble in her gray eyes.

"Peggy," he said, as he took her arm and drew it through his own, just as he had so often done with Nathalie; "I was feeling blue, tonight, but I believe you're bluer. Let's match up the dye. In a sense I've lost Nathalie, and not all The Savinses in the world can make up for it. Now, what's your grievance?"

"That I never had anybody to lose."

"Well, try me," he suggested.

She eyed him a little defiantly.

"Are you taking me Jack-at-a-pinch?" she demanded.

"No."

"Do you want me for a chum?"

"Yes."

"Then why did n't you say so sooner?"

"Because — because I never really knew you, Peggy."

"You might have done, you had plenty of chance. Besides, are you sure you know me now?"

"No."

Something in the answer pleased her. She followed it up with another question, —

"Have you any idea that I'll ever take Nathalie's place with you?"

He hesitated.

"No; I have n't," he said honestly, at last. She nodded to herself.

"No; you have n't. Harry Arterburn, I never would have forgiven you, if you had fibbed then. Most people would. As it is, if you want to patch up some kind of an intimacy, I'm willing. You probably won't like me; I'm not a bit like Nathalie. But honestly, Hal, I'm not half as bad as I seem."

Under cover of an arching birch tree, he put his arm around her and drew her to his side. She wriggled out of his grasp.

"No; I'm not ready for that. You don't mean it yet, and I'd rather you saved it up till it counts for a little more. I'll fight for you, Hal, fight with my fists; but —" her voice dropped a little sadly; "but I'm afraid I'm not one of the hug-gy kind. I'm not Nathalie, you know."

That same night, as Harry Arterburn sat by the open window of his bedroom, he went over

the talk in detail. At the end of it all, he echoed Peggy's own words. She was not Nathalie; no, nor ever would be. Nevertheless, he found himself wondering whether, in wayward, independent Peggy, Peggy who described herself as not being of "the hug-gy kind," he might not in time find a comrade who in a measure would atone for the loss of Nathalie.

The intimacy between Harry and Nathalie Arterburn had been a peculiar one. Parted by Harry's student life and by the inevitable breaking-up of their home which had followed the death of their parents, they had come together again when Nathalie was fifteen and Harry eleven years her senior. For the next four years, they had been inseparable. Side by side, they had gone through the wear and tear of housekeeping on a tiny income, through illness and anxiety, each one the stronger from being able to rely upon the complete understanding and sympathy of the other.

Then the clouds had thickened. But, just as Harry Arterburn was bravely facing a future of weakened health, facing the double anxiety for himself and his sister, that sister had become the promised bride of Dr. McAlister Holden, his own most intimate friend. No

nobler type of man could have been sought. Nathalie Holden would have all the love, all the luxury that a girl could desire, and it had seemed to Harry Arterburn that, one twilight in early June, he had given up his sister without a regret. Later he learned his mistake.

Peggy, meanwhile, had been more a matter of theory than of fact, in so far as his life was concerned. Two years old when he started for college, she had passed her tenth birthday before he had once more come in contact with her. Then, for a year, he had tried to keep the little family together in New York. The one year had proved the futility of the attempt. Peggy and her two brothers had been sent to the care of an old cousin in the country, and, since that time, he had seen her but rarely. To his mind, she was still the fretful, fractious child who had resisted his discipline and rebelled at his needful economies. For the rest, he had paid her bills, seen her at least once a year, and worried about her without ceasing.

It had been decided, almost as a matter of course, that Harry was to spend his summer at The Savins. Only upon condition that his home should be with them, had Mac and Nathalie been married, that June. The wedding

had been the occasion for the gathering of the entire McAlister clan, and Mrs. Barrett's house had swarmed with Mac's adoring relatives, who one and all took Nathalie, and then Harry, into the family embrace. Then Mrs. Holden had gone back to her Rocky Mountain home, and had carried off Mrs. McAlister in triumph with her. Such an opportunity was not to be lost. Dr. McAlister was too old to undertake so long a journey; but Mac and Nathalie would spend an ideal honeymoon summer with him in the old family home, and Mrs. McAlister wisely felt that a honeymoon should have the fewest possible feminine eyes turned upon it.

She reckoned entirely without Peggy, whom Mac, in the fulness of his joy, had bidden to spend the summer with them.

CHAPTER THREE

“**M**AC, dear!”
Instantly Mac rose and stood, hat in hand, under his lady's window.

“Yes, dearest.”

“Sh!” This time the voice was even more faint. “Do be careful. Peggy may hear us.”

“What if she does?” Mac asked, in a defiant whisper.

“She laughs at us so. But, Mac, we can't help it; can we?”

“I don't want to help it.” On Mac's forehead the veins stood out distressfully, in his efforts to make his stealthy whisper carry up to the closed blinds above.

From inside the blinds, there came a laugh softer even than the whisper. Then the voice came again.

“Then you are n't sorry?”

“Sorry, dearest! Come down and let me show you how sorry I am.”

"I can't; I'm busy. But I heard you down there, and I did just want to speak to you."

"That's a dear girl. Come down as soon as you can."

"What for?"

"To keep me company." Mac's accent belied his robust dimensions; but much must be forgiven to a man just coming through his honeymoon.

"By and by. Meanwhile, you might throw me a kiss."

With a look of ineffable content, Mac obeyed. From inside the blind there was an answering sound.

"We are happy; aren't we, Mac?"

"Very, dearest."

"But I wish you would tell me just one thing; tell it truly as truly can be."

"What now?"

"Don't you ever feel, Mac, as if you had married the whole Arterburn family?"

"Never."

°In its fervor the whisper became unduly loud, and it was promptly rebuked.

"Sh! Sh, Mac! But I was so afraid you would think so."

He shook his head, while the glaring sun

above him turned his hair to the likeness of burnished gold. Tall, strong, manly, he looked a veritable Viking as he stood there.

“No, dearest; I have married only one Arterburn.”

“And she?” The window blind stirred slightly.

“And she is the girl above me now.” Mac’s tone was almost reverential.

With a flap the blind flew open, and Peggy responded composedly, —

“I am glad to know it. I had n’t suspected it before.”

“Peggy, you wretch! Where is Nathalie?”

“Down there.”

She pointed across an open stretch of lawn to the spot where Nathalie, with Harry at her side, was strolling towards the house, her hands full of late daisies. With an indignant glance up at the window, Mac turned away and went striding off in search of his wife. Peggy, meanwhile, picked up her bow and arrows, remarking sagely, as she did so, —

“There’s nothing so idiotic as a man in love. I wonder what Dr. Holden’s patients would have said, if they’d heard him cooing ‘Dearest’ in a stage whisper. Next time, maybe he will

find out whom he's talking to, before he gets quite so loving. Oh, but did n't he look handsome when he finally lost his temper! It's becoming to big men to rage; little men are always funny when they get in a tantrum."

She paused on the back veranda long enough to unchain Sophia Smith who lay snoozing on the old couch which Mac had provided for her benefit. Then, with her bow in one hand and the end of Sophia's chain in the other, she crossed the lawn and went up the hill beyond. Sophia, her eyes still heavy with the sleepiness of puppyhood, trudged solemnly at her heels.

The Savins measured itself by acres, and, save for the hill on which the house stood, it was left largely to the hand of nature. Wintergreen and checkerberries thrived on rocky ledges and in mossy hollows, and daisies yellow and white, scarlet columbines, white anemones, and the dainty blue quaker-ladies, each in its season, spotted the broad stretches of grassland. Above it all, and the glory of it all, were the trees, huge oaks and huger chestnuts, slender birches and sturdy hickories, their branches a breeding ground for all the birds of the region. On one side, the town had edged close to its skirts; on the other, far to the westward, the eye rested .



pleasantly upon distant hills whose open fields were dotted here and there with an occasional farmhouse.

Peaceful and quiet under the dappling sunbeams lay the western slope of The Savins. Peaceful and quiet on the hillside lay a tall man, his brown, gray-sprinkled hair resting on a grass mat, and a volume of George Meredith held in the air, above his eyes. Peace and quiet vanished speedily, however. With a yelp of recognition, Sophia Smith came plunging towards him, stumbled in the tall grass, and, unable to check her momentum, finished her rush on her haunches, with her tongue lolling out foolishly from her seven-inch jaws. At the end of the chain there also came Peggy, her hat awry, one sleeve ripped from its arm-hole, and her long bow tripping her up at every step.

"Well, Diana?" The man sat up hastily, and rescued a corner of *The Egoist* from Sophia's teeth.

"Diana had a stag; this is a staghound," she said, as, yielding to a jerk in the reverse direction, she rolled over backwards on the grass.

"Let me take her."

"Careful! She'll get away from you," she cautioned.

He smiled.

"I was stroke of my crew, Miss Peggy."

"Yes; but that was a good while ago," she reminded him, with unflattering directness.

"Alas, yes! Still, I think I can hold Sophia. Better yet, suppose I moor her to a tree?" He suited the action to the word. Then he came back to Peggy's side. "Wherefore the bow?" he asked.

"To shoot with."

His eyes twinkled.

"Is your appetite for venison or bear?"

"Neither," she said shortly. "I shoot at a target."

"And where is the target? Or did you mean to use Sophia?"

"I have n't any target yet. I've only just bought my bow." The accent was still more curt.

He saw that his bantering tone displeased her, and he spoke gravely.

"Is this the latest fad?"

"Not yet. It's going to be."

"Are you a prophet?"

"No, not exactly," she said, thawing a little

in response to his more respectful tone. "I read in one of the New York Sunday papers that archery was to be the coming sport. I was too little to play golf when it began, so I would n't learn. I do hate to come in on the tail of things, Mr. McAlister. This time, I thought I would ride on the cow-catcher."

In spite of himself, Hubert McAlister laughed at the mixture of her metaphors.

"A successful journey to you. And can you shoot?"

"Oh, yes; anybody can."

"I'm afraid I could n't."

"Yes, you could. Shooting is easy enough. It is the hitting something that is the hard part."

"Yes, I should — Did you drop an arrow? Sophia is eating something suspiciously like one."

Peggy scrambled to her feet; but she was too late. With a crunching snap, the two ends of the arrow fell apart, and Sophia turned her attention to a tuft of grass.

"Oh, Sophia! How could you? That was my very best arrow of the whole lot," Peggy admonished her.

With the heads of the long grass resting in

her stomach and the earthy roots mingling with her stiff beard, Sophia surveyed them mournfully. Then, with a gulp, the roots vanished.

“She’s worse than a goat,” Peggy said vengefully, as she jerked herself down again at Mr. McAlister’s side. “She has swallowed half the netting of a screen door since lunch. At least it’s gone, and we can’t find it without an autopsy. This having a thoroughbred dog that you can’t whip —”

“Why can’t you?”

“Mrs. Barrett told Nathalie so. It might break her spirit. Nathalie believes it; she just pat-a-cakes her and calls her ‘oo naughty dirl.’ I’ll risk her spirit. She has n’t any, anyway; but, if she were mine, I’d run the risk of cracking it.”

There was silence, for a minute. Then Peggy spoke again.

“And now we are spoiling your reading. I did n’t know you were at home.”

“Saturday afternoon,” he reminded her.

“Why is a lawyer like a schoolboy?” she propounded gravely. “Well, I’ll leave you to your book.”

“But you were going to shoot.”

“No matter. Sophia has wrecked my best arrow and my good temper. But I never supposed I'd find you here. Nathalie made me solemnly promise I would n't shoot nearer the house than the top of the hill up here, and that I would always aim out over the fence. Nathalie is so dreadfully fussy. Still, I suppose she didn't want me shooting any of you; though, with two doctors in the house, it might not be so very serious.”

Her tone was so dispassionate that again Mr. McAlister laughed.

“Did Mrs. Barrett come over after lunch?” he asked.

“Yes, just for a minute. She hurried back again, to make sure that Rex's room was in order. To hear her talk, you would think he was the King of Siam at the very least.”

“Well?”

“Well, he is n't. He's nothing but a sophomore,” she said uncompromisingly.

“That's where you're dead wrong, Peggy Ann,” remarked a cheerful voice from the rear. “Howdy, Uncle Hubert? Peggy, behold the junior!”

With an assumption of grown-up indifference, she rose and held out her hand.

“How do you do, Kingsley?” she said decorously.

Kingsley Barrett's gray eyes lighted mirthfully.

“Well, by Jove, is this little Peggy Arterburn? How you've grown, my dear!” he returned.

Her spine stiffened, and her chin rose in the air.

“Yes, I am Miss Arterburn,” she assented haughtily.

“Worse luck! I shall never forgive Mac for gobbling up Nathalie. Is Hal here?”

“Yes.”

“How is the dear fellow?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“No more collapses?” In his eagerness, Kingsley quite forgot his intention of teasing the tall girl before him.

“I have n't heard of any.”

Kingsley's eyes narrowed.

“Well, you'd have been rather likely to,” he observed. Then, dropping down on the grass, he turned to his uncle. “Everything all right at The Savins?”

“Yes, righter for your coming.”

“You can just bet I'm glad to be here. A

fine scheme, the mater's spending the summer up here! Quantuck is worn thin and thread-bare, and as long as the pater could n't go to Europe, this year, The Savins is the spot for me. What do you think of it, Peggy Ann?"

There was no answer. Kingsley's lips twitched, as he saw the studiously averted face. Pulling up a handful of grass, he flung it into her lap, while he repeated his question. She gave a well-feigned start of surprise.

"Oh, were you speaking to me?"

"I did myself the honor to mention your name."

She saw the look of amusement that passed between uncle and nephew, and the blood rushed into her cheeks.

"You did not," she contradicted explosively. "You called me Peggy Ann. My name is Margaret."

With perfect deliberation, Kingsley turned himself about until he faced her.

"Who 'd 'a' thunk it?" he remarked composedly at length.

Peggy's dignity was crushing, as she rose and freed Sophia Smith who had long been casting covetous glances upon the scarlet-coated *Egoist*.

“ I think it is time I went back to the house,” she said, with as much calmness as was compatible with the antics of Sophia, already playing tag with herself in the tall grass.

“ Sorry. I'd advise you to unwind yourself a little before you start,” Kingsley suggested.

But Mr. McAlister had risen, released Peggy from the coils of the chain and put her bow into her outstretched hand.

“ Thank you,” she said, with a gratitude which was not altogether unmixed with spite. “ It is always a comfort to meet a gentleman.”

Gravely he raised his cap, just as Kingsley observed, with equal gravity, —

“ I knew you'd be glad to see me, Peggy Ann.”

She nodded to Hubert McAlister. Then, without a glance at Kingsley, still prostrate in the grass, she moved slowly away. Now and then she stopped short and bent her weight backward upon the chain; once she made a swift detour to one side, and then met with some difficulty in untangling herself from a barberry bush. Nevertheless, her pace was comparatively steady until Sophia, some feet in advance, reached the crest of the hill. Then, inspired by the sight beyond, Sophia went

plunging away down the slope, dragging Peggy, bow and all, at her heels.

"But, after all, Rex," his uncle said, when they had found their voices again; "it is too bad for you to tease her so."

"Good for her," Kingsley replied, with unruffled good temper.

"I'm not so sure of that."

Kingsley hurled a stone at a distant tree trunk.

"You have n't known Peggy Ann as long as I have, Uncle Hubert."

"Perhaps not. I've known her long enough to discover that she is like a nettle, and stings at a rough touch."

"That's why I'm gripping her. If I go at her hard enough, she'll stop stinging."

"I don't think so."

Kingsley dropped his chin on his clenched fists.

"Uncle Hubert, I've known Peggy Arterburn off and on for four years. She is smart as a steel trap, and just about as tender-hearted. Ralph is well enough; but all the real, positive good in that family went into Nathalie and Hal. They've got enough for a dozen, and, at that rate, it could n't be expected to go round. If

Peggy Arterburn ever gets to where she is worthy to brush the dust out of Nathalie's skirt, she will astonish me."

Hubert McAlister rose and tucked *The Egoist* under his arm.

"Then you are going to be astonished, Rex," he said quietly. "Now come and find your grandfather."

CHAPTER FOUR

“**D**O you know, Billy,” Mrs. Farrington said to her husband, one night; “I think Babe is foredoomed to a high seat in heaven, after all.”

“Yes, I think in time she may work up far enough to be in sight of us,” Mr. Farrington responded amicably. “What now?”

“Keeping open house to the rising generation, this summer.”

Mr. Farrington nodded.

“It is a good deed. Still, Babe owes the world a few good deeds to atone for her own childhood. She was a terror, Ted.”

“But she has outgrown it,” his wife returned, with sisterly loyalty. “Babe is a fine woman.”

“I know it; and yet, curiously enough, she’s the very same old Babe that brandished your pigtail before my eyes on this same hearthstone. Ted, does it ever seem as if I had spent the best part of two years on my back?”

She crossed the room to his side, and stood looking down, with her hand on his shoulder. Mrs. Theodora Farrington was an impressive woman; nevertheless, for the moment her impressiveness was lost in an infinite gentleness.

"Yes, Billy, it does. I love to remember those days, too. They prepared the way for all our happy years together."

Without an answering word, he stretched up his hands to her face.

"That Peggy is a character," he remarked at length, with a complete change of subject. "What do you think of the girl, Ted?"

"Hubert says she has good stuff in her; but Babe abhors her," Mrs. Farrington answered evasively.

"Set a thief to catch a thief. I'll trust Babe's judgment."

"They are a good deal alike. Peggy's perversities remind me of Babe at her age. Still, I suspect Peggy is more affectionate than Babe used to be."

"I fail to see it."

"That's because you are a man. I've been there, myself, and I know. When Peggy is most cantankerous is just the time when she is most wishing that somebody loved her to distraction."

Mr. Farrington laughed.

"How she must love Rex, then!"

"Poor Peggy! Rex torments the life out of her. I really don't blame her for resenting it."

"He would stop, if she took it a little more calmly."

"That's just what she won't do. They are like flint and steel. Perhaps, when Ursula comes, he may give Peggy a little peace."

"In other words, you'd sacrifice Ursula to save Peggy. When do they get here?"

"To-morrow."

Mr. Farrington drummed idly on the arm of his chair.

"How did Babe happen to ask them?"

Mrs. Farrington offered the explanation which had been in active service for the past forty years.

"Sheer Babe-ishness. Because there was no real reason she should do it. Haven't you learned that Babe's blessings fall without rhyme or reason, according to her own sweet will? It's a good thing that Giff has an enormous income."

"Where did she pick them up, in the first place?"

"Via Nathalie."

"Nathalie?"

“ Yes. Babe accumulated the Arterburns for the sake of Rex, and fell in love with them on her own account. Then these new-rich Myerses imported a niece, and meanwhile proved to be some sort of a connection of Harry Arterburn. He was named for Mr. Myers, I think; and Mr. Myers benevolently hired him as tutor for Ursula. It's a regular House That Jack Built. John Myers had a cousin, Ursula Thain. Ursula had a tutor, Harry Arterburn. Harry had a sister, Nathalie, and Nathalie had a friend, Babe Barrett.”

“ Therefore John Myers also had a friend, Babe Barrett.” Mr. Farrington summed up the situation for her.

“ Yes, Babe was wonderfully good to them, after Mr. Myers failed. I must say they deserved it, for they took the crash superbly. Ursula refused to go home; she has stayed with Mrs. Myers, all winter long, and I suspect that she has done a good share of the housework. Rex has been helping John all he could, and the boy has supported himself and made a good record for his freshman work.”

Her husband nodded approvingly.

“ That is the kind that counts.”

“ It is. And it has been good for Rex to be

thrown with some one who can show him the grinding side of life. From all accounts, John has changed from an impossible little prig to a fellow with a spine of his own. Then Babe came here to be near us, this summer. She declares that the house is quite too large for three people; and, the day after she was settled, she wrote to Mrs. Myers, demanding John and Ursula for the entire vacation."

Mr. Farrington rose, and stood with his back to the andirons.

"How exactly like Babe!" he commented deliberately.

John and Ursula came, the next afternoon. Kingsley met them at the station.

"By Jove, I thought you 'd never get here!" he exclaimed, as he seized Ursula's suit-case, and gave his other hand to the boy at her side. "The mater would have come, too; but she stopped at home to brew a pudding for dinner, some especial kind of a mess that nobody else can do to suit her. How goes it, Ursula? I must say you look blooming."

"So I am. I hope Jack will bloom, too. He needs a treat after his long grind, and your mother was an angel to ask us. How is Nathalie?"

"Pretty as a peach, and of no earthly use to anybody but Mac."

Ursula laughed.

"She has it hard?"

"You bet she has! Even poor old Hal is side-tracked, and the joints of my nose have missed connection entirely. Pettijack, with your help, I'll put Mac out of commission, before the fall of twilight."

"But she behaved so well through the engagement," Ursula said thoughtfully.

"And now she is making up for it. She and Mac are a mixture of sugar and gum arabic, sweet and sticky. Pettijack, how is your lady mother?"

"Well, and superb."

"I can answer for the last. Next to the mater and Aunt Ted, she is the strongest woman I know. And your father?"

"Well, and working like a dog."

"Will they get out of town, this summer?"

He shook his head.

"I'm afraid not. I feel it's rather beastly for me to leave them; but they insisted —"

"That's where you are wise," Kingsley interrupted. "You look horridly done up, and you must have a rest. As for Ursula, they

could n't endure her, so the mater took her off their hands. Now, Pettijack, as a man and a sophomore, heed my advice."

"What now?"

"Cast your conscience to the winds, forget your family, and put in a frivolous summer. You may as well. We've got you, and we intend to keep you; so you'd better settle down and make the best of it."

"That's asking a good deal of us, Rex," Ursula said merrily.

Kingsley shrugged his shoulders.

"There's always Peggy," he answered concisely.

"What has she turned into?" Ursula questioned.

This time, Kingsley's answer was still more concise.

"A Tartar."

Hubert McAlister sat alone on the veranda, that night, when Kingsley with his two companions came sauntering across the lawn. Over the top of his paper, he eyed the new-comers curiously. His glimpse of them at Mac's wedding, a month before, had been too hasty and too impersonal to have left much impression upon his mind. Now that they were to be the

guests of his sister and his own neighbors, all summer long, he found himself more interested in them. Moreover, Hubert McAlister had a fashion of regaining his own long-gone boyhood by association with the boy and girl acquaintances of his later years.

Something in the appearance of John Myers and Ursula Thain pleased him. It was not altogether John's blond face, too delicately handsome for a boy who must cut his own way through the world; it was not entirely the vigor and grace of Ursula who, brown as a gypsy, was of a type that leaves far prettier girls lurking in unseen corners. If only by way of contrast, both in coloring and vitality, the two cousins were good to watch. But Hubert McAlister, middle-aged bachelor that he was, looked deeper than that. He took swift note of the steadiness of John's eyes, of his close-shut lips, of the poise of his head. He studied Ursula, as she met him fearlessly, yet with a girlish modesty that he had found too rare in the girls he had known of late years.

"Where is Nathalie?" Kingsley asked abruptly, breaking in upon the last syllable of his uncle's words of welcome.

"Over the hill. She and Harry and Mac

went out there, not ten minutes ago. Nathalie told me that you were to be sent after them, if you came."

"If we came! I like that," Kingsley protested. "We only waited for the mater to ask half a thousand questions, and to make sure that Pettijack had n't taken off his flannels. She has a mistaken notion that he's a tender plant; but he is n't. It's just a mere matter of complexion. Over the hill? All right. Come along, Ursula."

"Where is Peggy?" Ursula inquired.

"Where is she, Uncle Hu?"

"Out on the back lawn, teaching Sophia Smith to retrieve."

"Well, I'd leave her there. She's out of mischief, and Sophia is her boon companion."

"But —" John remonstrated.

"Oh, she'll keep. It's Nathalie we want now, Nathalie and the eternal Mac."

But Ursula objected.

"I want to see Mr. Arterburn, myself."

Kingsley stooped to break off a heavy rose, and handed it to her with an exaggerated bow and smile.

"Oh, do you?" he said gravely. "Much better for you to see me."

She shook her head.

"As you said of Peggy, you'll keep. Mr. Arterburn is more of a novelty."

Half an hour later, the twilight lay thick over the oak trees, and above them the blue was changing to a purplish black.

"I suppose it really is time we were going back to the house," Nathalie said regretfully.

"Oh, don't," Kingsley objected. "This is so like a reunion of the crowd that used to make merry in your apartment, why can't you leave us in peace, Nathalie? One is willing to concoct a cold in the head for old sake's sake."

"Wait till you begin to sneeze," she cautioned him. "What do you think, Mac?"

"We want your advice as medical man, not as tender husband," John Myers added hastily. "We are going to spend the evening with you anyway, Dr. Holden, so you won't gain anything by starting us towards the house."

Deliberately Mac stretched himself out again at Nathalie's feet.

"In that case we may as well stay here," he said resignedly. "Nathalie, if you are cold, Rex will run down to the house for a rug."

"Not if he knows himself. I'm fagging for

Ursula, these days. Miss Thain, are your royal shoulders aware of any chill?"

"No, I'm perfectly warm and perfectly content," she said languidly.

"Then what makes you talk so much?"

"I'm listening to the wind in those trees, and trying to imagine the roar of Broadway. It's going on now, the everlasting rumble and rush. Can you make it seem real?"

Kingsley held up a warning hand.

"Speaking of rumble and rush," he observed; "here come Peggy and her puppy."

A gaunt, pale form shot past them in the dim light. The next moment, Peggy descended into the midst of the group.

"Well, if this is n't a pretty trick!" she said hotly. "If Mr. Hubert had n't told me where you were, I never should have found you."

"One more nick in my score against Uncle Hu," Kingsley growled in an aside to Ursula, while Nathalie said apologetically, —

"But we asked you to come with us, you know, Peggy."

"Oh, yes, you," she returned with unflattering emphasis. "I was busy then. But you might have known I'd want to see John and Ursula."

Kingsley felt in a succession of pockets, discovered a match, scratched it on his heel, and held it up in the air.

“Well, look at them now,” he bade her.

“Whoo!” Bending forward, she blew out the match. “You know very well that’s not what I meant, Rex. I’m awfully glad you’ve come, John. I want you to help me make a new target.”

“Peggy!” Nathalie warned her.

Peggy turned to her wearily.

“Oh, Nathalie, do keep still for once. You’re so used to being waited on that you don’t know what it is to have to ask a favor. I might wait forever. My target was left out in the rain, a week ago, and the stuffing swelled up and busted.”

This time, Harry admonished her, though with a laugh which took much of the sting from the rebuke.

“Busted, Peggy?”

“Yes, busted,” she persisted. “It did n’t break, nor even split; it just busted all over itself. It was n’t worn any; I had n’t hit it once. I know Jack will help me; he’s so good-natured and accommodating,” she added, with a vindictive glance at Kingsley.

"Delighted, I'm sure," John returned gallantly.

Peggy hitched a few inches nearer to her brother.

"No; you are n't, either."

"What makes you think so?"

"If you were, you would n't say it in that sirupy tone."

"I beg your pardon," John said, with a meekness which was only half feigned.

"Oh, it's no account. I'll ask Mr. Hubert. He offered; but I hated to trouble him, when there were so many younger men sitting around and doing nothing."

Kingsley rolled over on his back and turned to face her.

"What's r'iled you, Peggy Ann?" he queried.

"Nothing," she said shortly. "How do you do, Ursula? I'm so glad you are going to be here, this summer. I do hope you like dogs, for Nathalie has one that I am training for her. Here she comes now."

As she spoke, the ghostly form bounded past them again and vanished in the direction of the house. The next moment, there came a voice, —

“Down, Sophia! Is Peggy over here?”

“Here she is, Uncle Hu,” Dr. Holden called back to him.

“Crazy child!” Mr. McAlister said, as he came up behind her and dropped her jacket over the thin embroidery of her gown. “Do you know that you romped for half an hour with Sophia, before you came out here to sit on the grass?”

With sudden gentleness, she rose and stood beside him.

“It’s very good to have somebody coddle me,” she said, with an odd little quaver in her voice. “I’ve never been much used to that kind of thing, somehow or other.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“**D**ESERTED, Peggy?”

At the question, she glanced up alertly.
“Don’t I look it?”

Hubert McAlister came out of the house and took the veranda chair at her side.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

“Gone for a drive.”

“All of them?”

“Yes. Not in procession, though. Mrs. Barrett took Jack and Harry and went to the east; the others went west with Mac and Nathalie.”

“How does it happen you did n’t go?”

“Did n’t want to.”

He saw that something was amiss, and he pursued his investigations. He had not been slow to learn that, in some unaccountable fashion, he had won Peggy’s liking and, what was more, her trust. He was also learning that Peggy Arterburn bestowed neither liking nor trust at random.

“How does it happen you didn't want to go?”

She pointed to the hat on the floor beside her, and her face flushed a little.

“I was all ready to go. Then Kingsley said something that — something disrespectful, and I changed my mind,” she answered, with some dignity.

Most men would have smiled at the obvious euphemism; but Hubert McAlister knew better.

“I am afraid Rex is n't always respectful,” he said gravely.

Peggy's heels struck the floor sharply.

“Well, I should rather say he was n't.”

“But what is the use of caring?”

“Any girl likes to be treated politely.”

“He only does it to tease.”

“Then he'd better stop.”

“He will, when he sees you don't care.”

“But I do care.”

“What's the use?” he asked, patiently beginning on his second round of the circle.

She faced him squarely.

“Mr. Hubert, I did think you would understand,” she said, with an accent of rebuke.

“I am sorry, Margaret. I wish I did.”

She relented, as she always did when he called her Margaret. Heretofore, the use of the name had been confined solely to the record in the family Bible.

"I don't know how you could. I suppose it's more wonder that you understand as often as you do; but I've come to count on it. You are n't a girl, either. But it's this way. Rex can be adorable, when he chooses. He does choose, when it's a case of Nathalie and Ursula. I'm the only other girl here, and I don't see why he should n't treat me in the same way," she explained elaborately.

He meditated for a minute or two.

"Peggy, do you know anything about fencing?" he asked then.

"No. Do you?" she answered a little blankly.

"Something. Enough to know it is good sport, if the adversaries are well matched. Some day, perhaps, we will get out my old foils. Meanwhile, I am going to give you the first lesson. Be sure you keep your temper. Be sure the buttons are on your foils. Then strike home."

She looked puzzled.

"You mean — ?"

"That, when Rex teases you, you'll return the compliment with interest."

"He'll get mad."

"Not if you don't. Rex isn't ugly. He torments you, just as Sophia torments the cat, for the sake of seeing her put up her back at him."

"But you scold Sophia," she retorted.

"How do you know that I don't scold Rex?" he asked, laughing. Then, of a sudden, he rose. "Peggy, did you know I had a horse of my own?"

"No."

"Well, I have."

"The little black one you were riding, one night?" she questioned eagerly.

"Yes, that is my especial property. Don't you want to go for a drive with me?"

She started up enthusiastically. Then her eyes clouded.

"But I would n't go with Mrs. Barrett."

He liked her admission.

"I will explain it all to Mrs. Barrett, and she won't care. There is time for a long drive before dark, and we can finish up our talk on the way." He smiled down at her invitingly; then the smile broadened into a laugh, as he

added, "And you know you'd like to drive Mark."

She echoed his laugh.

"How did you know I love, just love dearly, to drive?"

"Lawyers know things without being told. I have watched you with Sophia. Get a warm coat, then, and I will be ready in ten minutes," he said over his shoulder, as he started towards the barn.

"But why Mark?" she asked, when they were scudding along the country road to the west of The Savins.

"Marcus Aurelius, if you please, because he is given to long meditations."

"He does n't suggest it now."

For his only answer, he passed her the reins. Mark dropped into a leisurely shamble.

"Why won't he go?" she demanded, after an interval of urging.

"He knows his master. I bought him, name and all, with the reputation of being the sleepest horse in town. I proceeded to wake him up."

"How?"

"By showing him that I understood all his tricks, and that I proposed to have him drop them."

She looked up at him sharply.

"Is that the method you are trying with me?" she queried.

Her question was unexpected; nevertheless, he answered coolly, —

"Yes. How do you think it is going to work in your case?"

She raised her brows and shook her head.

"I don't know. It's too soon yet to judge. I'm sorry, though, that I found out your game."

"Because — ?"

"Because now I shall keep studying how to beat you at it." Then she looked back over her shoulder. "I thought I heard something behind us," she explained.

He glanced backward.

"It is an open road, and nothing is in sight. Are you tired of driving?"

"No; but I do like to go a little faster," she said, as she returned the reins to his hands. "Besides, I want to see how your method works on Mark."

"This way." The reins tightened with a steady pull, and Mark went flying away towards a distant hill. Mr. McAlister pointed to it with his whip. "Peggy, did you ever hear how Mrs.

Barrett upset her husband, the first time she met him?"

"The time she and the skeleton ran into his bicycle?"

"Yes. That hill is the scene of the disaster. It is the one historic event I am sorry to have missed. Washington crossing the Delaware would have been nothing in comparison."

"Where did she get her skeleton?" Peggy asked, as once more she glanced backwards over her shoulder.

"Bought it second-hand."

"What on earth did she want of it?"

Mr. McAlister loosed the reins as they drew near the foot of the hill.

"Oh, that was when she had the medical bee in her bonnet."

"The what?"

"The medical bee. Didn't you know she started out to be a doctor?"

"No, never."

"Yes, she studied for a year or two. Mr. Barrett was her first and only patient."

"And she would have cut up people?" Peggy's accent betrayed her disgust.

"Yes."

"How very messy!"

“That was what Mr. Barrett thought, and he persuaded her to give it up.”

“I should hope so!” she responded fervently. He laughed.

“But you don’t think Dr. Holden is messy.”

“No; but he does n’t have to wear fancy sleeves and long skirts. It’s different for a man. I don’t think women ought to do such things,” she said loftily.

“What should they do? Housekeep?”

“Yes, if they must; only they ought to have somebody to do dishes and clean the stove,” she said, with a glance down at her carefully-kept hands which were large, but comely. “And then they can write books, and paint pictures, and teach school, and — and —”

“What about law?” he asked, laughing again.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, we all like to talk. What do you think I’m going to be?”

“What?”

“An actress; or else somebody that plans gowns for famous people. I don’t mean I shall sew them. I hate sewing; but I think I’d like to plan wonderful things out of silk and lace and ribbons, and tell them when to wear their

good clothes, and not to go shopping with all their diamonds on."

"I am afraid you might have hard work with some of your clients, Peggy. But what is the matter?"

Once more she was bending far out at the side of the carriage, her nose in dangerous proximity to the rear wheel. At his words, she straightened up abruptly.

"It's Sophia Smith," she said. "I was sure I heard something. She has been following us all the way."

Mr. McAlister reined in Mark, then he leaned out of the carriage on his own side.

"Sophia!" he said sternly.

Out from under the carriage Sophia came with a bounce of joy that at last her presence was recognized. Her tail, which was slowly shaping itself to an aristocratic ring at its end, was wagging furiously. From her lips, tight-closed, yet smiling, there dangled negligently the limp body of a half-grown chicken.

The occupants of the carriage exchanged a glance of consternation. Then they asked, simultaneously, —

"Where in the world do you suppose she got it?"

“What in the world are we going to do with her?”

Laying the chicken tenderly on the ground, Sophia seated herself by the roadside and smirked at them, while she waited for them to proceed.

“Oh, dear! I wonder if we ought to go back,” Peggy said ruefully, after a vain attempt to stare Sophia out of countenance without laughing.

Mr. McAlister shook his head.

“No; I think she will follow.”

“There does n't appear to be much doubt of her ability in that direction,” Peggy said grimly. “It's only a question of the amount of hunting she may attempt to do on the way. I can't answer for her, Mr. Hubert.”

“But you don't want to go home?”

“Not a bit. I am having too good a time.”

“Go on, Mark.”

“If anything happens, remember you were the one to decide,” she warned him, as Mark sped away along the crest of the hill.

“I promise to bear all the consequences,” he answered, in the same tone.

For a time, it seemed that nothing was likely

to happen. Mark had settled into a swift, even trot, and Sophia, a dust-colored patch upon the dusty road, went leaping away, half a hundred feet in advance. Now and then she made a slight detour to this side or to that; but for the most part she attended strictly to business, and behaved herself as a well-descended dog should do. From occasional references to her, the talk drifted away from her entirely, and Mr. McAlister and Peggy fell to chatting about all manner of impersonal details. Mark, meanwhile, fired by the flying feet before him, was flying over the road at a great pace, his head up, his nostrils distended in excitement over this novel race.

Then came the unexpected. From under the very feet of Sophia there sprang a wild rabbit which went leaping away, straight towards the advancing horse. In an instant, Sophia's hunting instincts were on the alert. Nose to earth, she went bounding after the rabbit, and flew down the road directly towards Mark's nose, at a speed which would have discomposed the nerves of a plough horse. Even Mr. McAlister held his breath at the bolt-like rush. He tightened his grip on the lines; but he was a second too late. Mark shied violently, and came into col-

lision with Sophia, who, not counting upon his shying, had swerved slightly to one side. There was a frightened snort, a high-pitched yelp; then Sophia Smith, uninjured save for the blow to her pride, rolled to one side out of harm's way, while Mark went tearing up the road, with the broken-thilled carriage skittering this way and that at his heels.

"Stay where you are, Peggy! Don't jump!"

Her answering voice was steady and even.

"I'm all right. Mark will go to meditating in a minute."

"Not this time. Hold tight. We're going to strike the post."

The forward wheel crashed against a telephone pole, and Mark broke away and raced up the road. A moment later, Peggy, half-dazed with the shock of her fall, sat up and looked about her.

"Are you hurt, Margaret?"

The voice sounded rather far away, considering the fact that Mr. McAlister was standing close at her side. She rubbed her hand across her face. Then, pulling together her scattered senses, she sprang to her feet.

"Not a bit," she answered him.

"You are quite sure?"

“Perfectly. I am tough, and can stand an occasional upsetting. Where is Mark?”

“In the next town, by this time.”

“And Sophia?”

He pointed backward to the dust-colored spot flying up the road towards them. Then suddenly Peggy bethought herself, and glanced up into his face. It was white, and there was a bluish ring about the lips.

“Oh, are you hurt?” she cried, in sudden alarm.

“Only my finger.”

“And that?”

He held up his right forefinger and frowned at it ruefully.

“I am rather afraid it is broken,” he said quietly. “It is growing late, Peggy. What if we walk on until we come to a house?”

CHAPTER SIX

THE Sabbath quiet of the next afternoon was broken by the scratch of Peggy's stub pen and the creak of Peggy's rocking-chair, which mingled in a dismal duet. She raised her eyes from her letter, as the six young people crossed the lawn.

"Well, I hope you feel better in your consciences," she remarked affably.

"We were only sorry you were n't with us, dear. It was a lovely service," Nathalie said, as she sat down on the edge of the veranda, and drew up a chair for her hat and prayer-book.

"I thought I'd do more good staying at home."

"And putting in the time making some good resolutions?" Kingsley inquired.

She frowned.

"No; writing to Cousin Eudora."

Her brother nodded up at her from his place at her feet.

“That is a good deed, Peggy. I have been meaning to do it; but I kept putting it off.”

“If I put things off, I never do them.”

Dr. Holden laughed.

“That sounds suspiciously like a rebuke to you, Hal.”

“It’s no such thing. When I rebuke, I do it straight, not with a back-handed slap,” Peggy retorted. “Besides, there is no especial reason I should rebuke Hal. The truth is, I forgot all about Cousin Eudora until to-day.”

“Because you were having such a good time with us, Peggy Ann?” Kingsley asked.

“Because I was so busy training Sophia Smith. I’ve a good mind to ask Cousin Eudora how Christian Scientists train dogs not to slip their collars.”

“Tighten them,” John suggested.

“The collars, or the dogs?”

“Both. If I were in your place, Peggy, I would tie a knot in her neck to hold the collar down.”

“Good idea, Jack! It is long enough. Nathalie Arterburn, did you wear those gloves to church with that plain hat?”

“Yes. Why not?”

“Because they don’t match.”

"They 're both white."

"Yes; but one is fit for a party, the other goes with your walking-clothes," Peggy admonished her severely. "At least, just while you are a bride, and everybody is watching you, I do wish you would be a little bit more careful."

"You might make a catalogue of her clothes, with cross references to the ones that go together," Ursula suggested, just as Mac observed, in pretended alarm, —

"Peggy, do you really mean that everybody is watching us?"

"Not you; only just Nathalie," she answered ruthlessly. "The man never counts for much."

It was Ursula who changed the subject.

"And so, if it is pleasant to-morrow, we are really to go to the Glen," she said.

Harry looked up.

"I have n't heard of it. Who are going?" he asked.

"All of us. Mrs. Barrett has been planning it for a week; but it takes all day, and the mornings have been so threatening. She promises us a good day, to-morrow, though."

"How are you going?" Nathalie inquired.

"That's the question." Kingsley rose as he spoke, coolly pushed Mac to one side, and took

his place beside Nathalie. "There will be, let's see, how many of us? Four from our house and four of you."

"Then take your trap and our surrey," Mac suggested. "Rex, you and Ursula can come in with us, and Peggy and Hal can go with your mother. That breaks up two family parties."

"If that is what you are after, you'd better put Nathalie in with Mrs. Barrett," Peggy advised them dryly. "Nathalie, is that the prayer-book you were married out of?"

"Yes. Dr. Aldrich always gives it to the bride."

"I should think you would be more careful of it."

"I am careful."

"But it is getting scratched already. Haven't you another one you could use?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you use it, then, and save this?"

"Because I don't wish to, Peggy."

Nathalie's patience was about ended, and her dignity was a bit overpowering. Kingsley came to the rescue.

"Peggy Ann," he inquired; "if you had a brand-new husband, should you use him, or should you put him in the closet to save him?"

"If I had a brand-new husband, I should n't scratch him all up, the first thing," she retorted.

Kingsley whistled thoughtfully.

"Mayhap," he observed. "Still, I have my doubts."

"What about lunch?" Nathalie said, breaking in upon the sparring. "What time do we start, Ursula?"

"As soon after nine as we can be ready."

"Then I must rise with the lark and cook things."

"What's the use? The mater has stuff enough planned for us all but Peggy. We can buy her a loaf of bread, as we pass the bakery."

Peggy raised her head. Seated nearer the window than the others, she was the only one to hear the voices within the house.

"Yes, it's a confoundedly bad time," Hubert McAlister was saying to his father. "Both clerks are away, and I have to get together some sort of notes on the Thomas case. I never supposed a forefinger was so useful."

"Whom can you get?" his father asked.

"I don't know. Midsummer is a bad time. I'll start early, to-morrow, and I may be able to find somebody."

The creak of Peggy's chair stopped short.

"You can save your loaf, then," she said abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"That I'm not going."

"Oh, Peggy!"

She liked John, and she was pleased at his accent of regret.

"I'm sorry, Jack," she said more gently.

"Then do go. It will spoil all the fun, if you are n't there."

"My going or not going is n't as important as all that," she answered grimly.

"But Mrs. Barrett wants us all, Peggy," Ursula urged her.

"I'm sorry."

Her brother turned and rested his arm across her knee.

"Won't you please go, Peggy?" he asked.
"I wish you would."

She dropped her hand over his.

"I'm sorry, Hal," she repeated slowly; "but really I can't. I have something else that I must do."

And that was all she would vouchsafe to tell them.

There was no vacant seat, however, when the two carriages drove away from The Savins, the

next morning. By dint of much persuasion, old Dr. McAlister had been coaxed into joining the expedition, and even Peggy's most loyal adherents could not but admit that their pleasure had gained by her resolution to remain at home. Directly after breakfast, Peggy had mysteriously vanished, so Hubert McAlister stood alone on the steps to wish them a jovial day. Then he took his hat and started in the direction of his office.

Half an hour later, he wearily mounted the stairs and opened his office door. Even Hubert McAlister's customary optimism was at a low ebb, that morning. His finger ached dully, and his back had been wrenched by his fall. Under some conditions he would have felt justified in taking the advice of his father, and spending the day in bed. Instead of that, notes must be prepared and records copied for an important case, and a diligent search of the town had disclosed to him the fact that not a copyist was to be had.

"Good-morning again," a composed voice met him as he entered.

He halted in amazement, one hand on the door, the other just in the act of lifting his hat from his head.

"Where did you come from?"

Peggy rose from her seat beside the table. Dressed in spotless blue gingham, her cuffs covered with coils of brown paper, and her hair brushed smoothly away from her face, she looked as pretty and demure a clerk as a busy lawyer could desire.

"From The Savins," she answered nonchalantly.

"But how did you get in?"

"The janitor. I told him you wanted me."

"But I did n't."

"I'm sorry," she said, with apparent meekness. "Still, one is allowed to fib a little in a good cause. It's not altogether a fib, either. You wanted a clerk."

"Yes, but —"

"Well, I'm your man. That's what I came for. I wish I'd known you were going to be so late, though, for then I could have given Sophia her morning walk."

He still looked a little puzzled.

"Well, go and give it to her now."

Half impatiently she seated herself at the table again.

"What a bat you are!" she said explosively.

“I should think anybody would see that I was ready to go to work.”

“To work at what?”

“Copying your stuff. Lawyers always have reams of copying to do, and you know you can't write with your finger all splinted up.”

He held out his left hand to her.

“Margaret, this is good of you. I appreciate it, child; but I can't have you shut up in this office, the whole morning.”

“Then leave the door open,” she advised him. “Where are your papers?”

“I — I —”

Her chin rose in the air.

“Of course, if you think I don't write well enough —” she said a little haughtily.

Even while he wondered at her quick-witted reading of his thoughts, he saw that there was no use in denying the charge.

“I suppose lawyers are fussy people,” he began apologetically; but she interrupted him, —

“Yes, and so are bachelors. Still, I'll do my best, and you might have given my common sense the benefit of the doubt. I shouldn't have offered, if I had expected to spoil your work. But there, will that do?” And she

rapidly wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper and tossed it to him.

He smiled in approval.

"It is perfect, much better than Miss Cromwell's work. What are your charges by the hour?"

For a moment, she stared blankly at him. Then the color rushed to her cheeks, and her eyes glittered angrily. Rising, she removed her paper cuffs and put on her hat.

"Why, Peggy, child, what's the matter?" he asked in blank amazement.

"Nothing."

"Where are you going?"

"Home. That is, to The Savins."

"Why?"

"Because I want to."

"But I thought you were going to help me."

"I was; but I'm not," she said, with a suspicious gulp.

"But I need help, Peggy."

Even at sight of his bandaged finger her face did not relent.

"And your writing is very clear and clean."

Behind her shut teeth she swallowed hard.

"And I'd pay you well," he blundered on,

quite unconscious of the girlish devotion he was wounding to the quick.

She turned on him sharply.

"That's just it. I don't want your old money."

"But I'd have to pay any clerk."

"I'm not your clerk," she snapped. Then of a sudden her voice turned appealing. "Mr. Hubert, can't you imagine having a thing done out of mere friendship?" Her voice steadied again. "But even if you can't, I've a right to do your work for a few days. It is only squaring up a debt."

"What debt?"

"Your finger. My dog did it."

"Your dog?"

She mistook the force of his question.

"Well, Nathalie's dog, then," she said impatiently. "I have all the care of it, so I called it mine. I didn't suppose I needed to be so accurate as all that."

"But how did your dog break my finger?"

"By running into Mark and making him upset things. You're a lawyer, and you ought to know that you could collect damages." She spoke hotly. Then she paused. "Mr. Hubert," she said at length, as she held out her hand; "I

did n't mean to be cross; but you made me. All night long, I have been counting on coming down here to help you until your finger grew up. I thought I should have such a good time. And now you've made me cross; and I never supposed you could do it. You've been good to me since I came here. But about my being down here: if I can't help you, say so, and send me home. If I can be of any sort of use, then let me stay. But, for mercy's sake, don't talk about paying me. There are some things that are n't a question of money."

He glanced down at the strong, firm hand lying inside his own, then up at the intent face.

"Thank you, Margaret," he said gratefully. "I shall be glad to have you stay."

CHAPTER SEVEN

PEGGY pursued her investigations.

“But how did you know when you had it?”

“Had — ?” Mrs. Farrington asked blankly.

“Inspiration. How did it feel, when it first came to you?”

Mrs. Farrington laughed with a girlish blitheness which belied her fifty years.

“I did n't even know I had it now, Peggy.”

“Of course you must have it. Else how do you write your books?”

“With a pen.”

“Yes, but what animates the pen?” Peggy persisted.

Mrs. Farrington's eyes twinkled at the grandiloquent phrase.

“Elbow grease,” she responded calmly.

Peggy's impatience caused her to bounce in her chair like a kernel of corn on a red-hot stove.

“ Oh, don't laugh at me,” she begged. “ I want to be an author, and I do wish you 'd tell me how to go to work.”

“ It depends something upon what you want to auth,” Mrs. Farrington said, still laughing a little.

“ Books, just like yours,” Peggy answered with admiring fervor.

“ Oh, but I hope you will try for something a great deal better than that.”

“ I could n't.”

“ What about *Pride and Prejudice*?” Mrs. Farrington reminded her.

“ I know; but they are n't to-day. I must do something that 's up to date,” Peggy answered. “ That 's the reason I like your books; your heroine's clothes are always such good style.”

Mrs. Farrington could contain herself no longer, and her laugh rang out so infectiously that even Peggy joined in it. A moment later, however, Peggy turned grave again, and her accent was rather aggrieved, as she said, —

“ Truly, Mrs. Farrington, I never thought you would laugh at me. Only yesterday, Mr. Hubert was telling how good you were to beginners. I supposed you would be willing to tell me how to go to work in the first place.”

"I am afraid you would n't take my advice."

"Yes, truly and honestly I would."

"Are you sure? Well, get all the paper and ink you want, and go to work. Write to your heart's content; but be sure you have a good hot stove within reach."

Peggy sat up alertly.

"Does it make cold chills go down your back that much?" she asked, with a sudden lapse into the vernacular of her Vermont home.

"No. I think I usually get rather warm over my work, and the paper inclines to get sticky," Mrs. Farrington responded prosaically.

"Then what is the stove for?"

"To burn things."

"Burn up my stories?" Peggy demanded in consternation.

"Yes, for a few years."

"You did n't."

"Ask Mr. Farrington to tell you about my first novel. But, Peggy, child, what makes you want to write?"

"I think I have it in me. Besides, it must be so perfectly lovely, when the checks come in."

Mrs. Farrington frowned.

"That is the least of my care," she answered a little abruptly.

“How queer! But then you ’re rich. I suppose that makes a difference. I don’t see what people write for, if it is n’t to get money. Some authors get a cent a word, and there are ever and ever so many words in a book.”

Mrs. Farrington rose.

“Peggy, you have been reading the *Advice to Young Authors* columns. They never tell the truth. But even if they did, child, no writer worthy of the name works merely for the money.”

“What, then?” Peggy asked incredulously.

“Because she has something to say that seems to her worth the saying.”

Peggy’s next question hit the bull’s-eye.

“But, even after you ’ve said it, how do you know it is worth saying?”

Mrs. Farrington suddenly changed her mind and sat down again.

“We don’t, Peggy. We can only do the very best that ’s in us, and then abide by the consequences.”

“But I want to write,” Peggy reiterated thoughtfully.

“Why?”

“I must do something. I get tired of myself and everybody else, unless I keep busy.”

"But why write?" Mrs. Farrington persisted.

The answer was unexpected.

"Because it is clean and ladylike."

"If that is all, I think you 'd better try something else, Peggy."

"I don't see why. I may be inspired without knowing it. You said only just now that you did n't know you had any inspiration."

"Peggy, dear, what is inspiration?"

Again Peggy's answer was unexpected.

"Something that makes you weep over what you have written, even before the ink is dry."

"I should call that nothing in the world but hysterical conceit," was Mrs. Farrington's comment. "Peggy, what do you suppose are the only three things needed for a novel?"

Peggy shook her head.

"I don't know."

"An idea, grit enough to do a great deal of hard, grinding drudgery, and conscience enough not to write anything that you know is harmful."

"Hm!" Peggy commented. "If that's all, I think I may as well begin. I can do that as well as anybody else."

"Perhaps. Time will show." Then she

bent forward and took the girl's hand into her own. "Peggy, dear, I believe you are a little homesick."

"Yes. But how did you know?"

"When a girl of your age gets restless and wants to take a profession, there is always something wrong. Sometimes it's digestion, sometimes it is nothing at all but discontent. Your digestion is perfect. Why aren't you happy here?"

"Because I don't count for anything to any of you."

"Not even to Harry?"

"Not enough to say so."

"Peggy, only last night he was talking to me about you. He told me of some long walks you had been taking together, and he said he had had no idea what a companionable girl you were."

"Companionable? Yes. But let Nathalie come in sight and he forgets all about companionship me."

"Do you wonder?"

"No, I don't know as I do. Nathalie is good. I'm not."

"That was n't what I meant. Nathalie and Harry have been together, all the time for the

last few years. You have been away from him, and — ”

“ Whose fault was it, I'd like to know,” Peggy interrupted.

“ Nobody's fault. Necessity made it. But Harry has grown to depend on Nathalie for everything.”

“ I should just say he had,” Peggy grumbled. “ I don't count for a row of pins.”

“ I'm not so sure. Even if you don't, though, the remedy is within your reach.”

“ How ? ”

“ By making yourself as dependable as Nathalie.”

“ She was born so. I was n't.”

“ Then grow so.”

“ I can't. Goodness does n't come natural to me, Mrs. Farrington.”

“ Acquire it, then.”

Peggy eyed her despairingly.

“ You don't know anything about it,” she broke out. “ You never were bad, real down-right ugly, in your life.”

“ Were you ? ”

“ Yes, lots of times,” Peggy confessed, in a sudden wave of contrition. “ I don't go to do it. It just does itself. You people that are

always so good, and so meek, and so ladylike, don't have much mercy on a girl like me."

She had pulled away her hand, and she now sat with her elbows on her knees, her chin in her palms, scowling thoughtfully out across the lawn. Mrs. Farrington watched her in silence for a moment.

"Peggy," she said then; "there are a good many episodes of my own girlhood that I would like to forget; but they won't be forgotten. There are whole weeks at a time that I would cross out if I could; but I can't. I imagine that is the case with most girls. But I was n't as steady and as thoughtful as I might have been; my temper used to run away with me again and again. What do you suppose steadied me more than anything else?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Peggy spoke slowly, her eyes still on the farther side of the lawn.

"The loyalty of my brother Hubert, and the finding out, all at once, that Mr. Farrington counted on me as he did. For two or three years, when I first knew him, he was an invalid, tied to a couch and a wheeled chair. We grew to be such good friends, and I found out that he needed me, missed me when I forgot him, was

hurt when I was cross, and blue when I left him alone."

"Yes, but that was different from most cases. He could n't get anybody else," Peggy commented unflatteringly. "But I have n't anybody like that."

"Not just like that. But what about Harry?"

"Hal?"

"Yes."

"My brother Harry?" The accent was incredulous.

"Yes. He needs you, Peggy. He would count on you, if you would let him."

"I'd like to see him. It's Nathalie that he wants."

"Peggy," Mrs. Farrington asked suddenly; "are you jealous?"

"Of Nathalie? Not much! She has her place; I have mine. Her place is with Hal; mine is n't."

"Her place now is with Mac. In a way, Harry is left alone. He knows it, too. You are the only person in the world who can stop that loneliness."

"How, then?" Peggy's tone was a little incredulous.

“Just as Nathalie did when she was your age. Care for his interests. Talk over his work with him, and, what’s more, talk over your own play. Ask his advice about your plans, and before long he will be asking your advice about his. Peggy, you are n’t a child any longer. In some ways you are a good deal of a woman. Every man needs a woman to help him along. She need n’t be related to him; but it is better if she is. One of the sweetest relations of all is between brother and sister; but, in the very first of it, it must be made by the sister. It was Nathalie, not Harry, who made the first advances. It must be you.”

“How do you know he wants them made?”

“Because he is lonely for Nathalie, — for the old Nathalie who was all in all to him; because he is delicate and depressed.”

“What depresses him?”

“The knowing that he is n’t strong, and that, every single day, he must work a little beyond the limit of his strength.”

“What does he work so hard for?” she asked restively. “I don’t see any need for it.”

“Who else would pay Ralph’s bills in Andover, and buy your gowns, and get things for Fizzums?”

Peggy looked rather aghast.

"I never thought much about all that," she said slowly. "The money always came, after a fashion; and I supposed, as much as I ever stopped to suppose anything at all, that Hal worked himself to death just for the pleasure of working."

Mrs. Farrington shook her head.

"Then the long and the short of the matter is that I've been acting like a pig," Peggy burst out penitently. "But how could I know without being told? I suppose I ought to have known it. I did n't, though." She pondered the situation for a minute or two. Then she asked abruptly, "Mrs. Farrington, do you think Hal would ever care about a thorny thing like me?"

"He does care now, Peggy."

"Care as he used to care for Nathalie?"

"Sometimes the sweetest and spiciest roses have the sharpest thorns," Mrs. Farrington suggested, with a smile.

"I'm no rose. I'm a bramble. Truly, if I made the advances you tell about, Hal would dodge out of my way."

"Try him and see."

"I would, only —"

"Only what?"

"What makes you think it's in me to make them at all?"

"Because, under the brambles, you're very much of a woman," Mrs. Farrington answered quietly.

"Me? Who said so?"

"My brother, for one person."

"Mr. Hubert?" Peggy's hands dropped into her lap, and she turned sharply to face her companion.

"Yes."

"What does he know about it?" she queried blankly.

Mrs. Farrington laughed.

"Did n't he help bring me up? And, besides that, you were in his office every day for two weeks."

"Yes, and I did have such a good time," Peggy sighed regretfully.

"So did he."

Her face grew eager.

"Did he like it, too?"

"So much so that he spoke to me about it."

"I wish it had lasted longer," Peggy said, with a second sigh.

"Why did n't it?"

“His finger grew up, and his clerk came back.”

“Why not go back there?”

“He does n't need me.”

“But if he did?”

“And you say Hal does.” Her tone was still regretful.

Mrs. Farrington took a sudden decision.

“Not in the same way, not for so much time. One need n't hinder the other. Now, Peggy, my brother says you are one of the best helpers he has ever had. If he should find that he still needed you for a part of each day, would you go back into the office and spoil your lazy summer?”

Peggy's hands shut, thumbs out.

“Oh, if I could!”

“I think you can. I will ask him, to-night, and see what he says.”

Peggy looked up sharply.

“Now don't you go to cramming me down his throat,” she objected. “Mr. Hubert is so good to me, he'd take me and make something for me to do, if he thought I wanted it. That's not what I do want, though. People must really need me and want me, or else I am somewhere else.”

Mrs. Farrington answered her with perfect gravity.

"I know what you mean, Peggy, and I should feel just as you do. I can make my brother understand, I know; but I think he will be glad to have you."

Peggy drew a long breath.

"Mrs. Farrington," she said slowly; "I'm afraid you must change your mind now about your having real inspirations."

Mrs. Farrington smiled down at the brightening face.

"No inspiration, Peggy, only a little common sense and a good deal of experience. As a rule, a healthy girl detests being idle. I wonder, though, whether you won't find this as satisfactory as writing books."

Peggy rose and stood beside her.

"I'll wait till I have tried them both," she answered, laughing. "One is as clean as the other and as ladylike. I'm not sure, though, that it is as profitable or as exciting; but I am going to try them both, and judge for myself."

CHAPTER EIGHT

OVER the western slope of The Savins the afternoon sunshine lay in heavy yellow bands between the tall trees. The strip of salt marsh and the open country beyond it glowed in the clear yellow light, and the one distant glimpse of blue sea glittered with silver reflections from the crests of the waves. Birds wheeled to and fro in the air and chattered in the trees, where the squirrels waged with them their daily war for possession. Everything was full of life and sunshine and content, except Peggy Arterburn and Sophia Smith.

Thrown face downward on the soft moss, her tear-stained face resting on her crossed arms, Peggy lay motionless, save for the long sobs that now and then shook her whole lithe body. Beside her, her face full of anxious consternation, her lips drooping sorrowfully, and one ear tilted rakishly upward across her brow, Sophia Smith sat in sympathetic silence. Even to her puppy soul it was plainly apparent that something was

wrong. She was full of pity; nevertheless it was impossible for her to express that pity save by the somewhat inadequate method of licking away the tears as fast as they came. She had tried that method. It had not only eased her mind, but she had discovered that salty water, taken in moderation, tasted good on a hot day. Accordingly she had licked again, too greedily this time, with the discouraging result that her young mistress had rolled over on her face. For a minute or two longer, the soft tongue had pried into Peggy's neck, into her ears, twined itself through a loophole of the sheltering arms. Then Sophia had given up in despair. Sympathy and salt water alike were beyond her reach. She removed herself to Peggy's feet, where she sat watching, an anxious frown furrowing her dust-colored brow.

Suddenly her tail uncurled itself and began to thump the moss, while she gave a little soprano bark of welcome. The next minute, Ursula came strolling along the crest of the hill, crooning happily to herself.

Peggy's head nestled more closely into the moss, as if, ostrich-like, she hoped to avoid observation.

“Why, Peggy!”

There was no answer.

“Down, Sophia! Charge, or whatever you call it! Peggy, is something wrong?”

Peggy's arms closed over her head, and her nose buried itself among the roots of the moss.

Ursula came a step nearer. Her brow was wrinkled with an anxiety akin to that of Sophia, who, now that her hospitable greeting had been given, had returned to her seat beside Peggy's heels.

“Peggy, dear, what is it? Is something wrong?” Ursula asked again, as, casting aside the greenish white clovers in her hand, she dropped down at Peggy's side.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“I'm not going to tell you.” There was a hostile accent on the final word.

“Why not?”

“Because you'd walk straight off and tell Nathalie.”

“Not if you did n't want me to.”

“You would, too. You tell her everything. And Rex, too.”

“Perhaps Rex does. I don't.”

“I don't mean that, Ursula Thain.”

In the acuteness of her exasperation, Peggy



lifted her nose from the ground, disclosing a tear-streaked face dappled with bits of earth and dried moss. Sophia licked her lips hungrily at the sight, while Ursula made a brave struggle against her sense of humor.

"What do you mean, then?" she asked, as soon as she dared to speak.

Again the answer came, moss-ruffled.

"I mean that you tell Rex Barrett everything, every single thing that stirs."

"But I don't, Peggy."

With a bounce as sudden as if some one had touched a hidden spring, Peggy sat up.

"Who told him about the target?" she demanded.

This time Ursula laughed, not, however, at Peggy, but at the memory which Peggy's words evoked. The day before, Sophia, accidentally left free to make a tour of discovery, had toured through the length and breadth of The Savins, and had discovered Peggy's target, fastened high on a tree trunk. Something in the gaudy colors had appealed to Sophia's artistic soul. Standing on her hind legs, she had stretched herself to the full of her elastic length, and then, with infinite dexterity and infinite toil, she had succeeded in possessing herself of her unwieldy

booty. Once it was in her possession, she had lost no time in reducing it to its elements. It had taken Peggy a long hour to rake up the scattered stuffing; but, save for a gaudy tatter hanging from Sophia's lips, the covering had vanished as completely as the roses of yesteryear. The next day, however, the chain of evidence was lengthened by Sophia's mysterious and acute illness, and Ursula, who had come upon Peggy in the midst of her raking, had not been slow to join the links of the chain. For three long hours, it seemed that Sophia's puppy life was about to be ended. At last, however, Mac rose to his feet, drew a deep breath, and turned down his sleeves.

"There, Nathalie," he said, and his voice was triumphant; "I never worked harder over a human baby in my life; but, in a case like this, it is the work that tells. I think Sophia is good for ten years yet; but, if we had n't found her when we did, ten minutes more would have been the finish of her."

And Nathalie had wiped her eyes, and then gone in search of Peggy. An hour before, Kingsley had suggested the probable cause of Sophia's illness. While his suggestion had been of use to Mac in helping him to diagnose the

case, it had also been the cause of Peggy's rebuke to Ursula. Ursula sought to defend herself.

"But that is only one thing, Peggy."

"What if 't is n't? It's enough. Besides, straws show the way the wind blows."

"Yes, I noticed that, yesterday, while you were raking them up," Ursula responded irrepressibly.

With a second bounce, Peggy once more buried her face in the moss.

"Yes, that's just the way!" she lamented brokenly.

Ursula looked puzzled.

"What way?"

"The way you all make fun of me."

"But, Peggy, we don't. Now that Sophia is all right again, even you must see how funny it all was."

"For my part, I can't see any fun. I'm glad you can," Peggy returned haughtily, as she sat up again and wiped her eyes. "But you thought things, and then you had to rush off and tell them to Rex. He told Nathalie, and now —"

"Now?"

"Now Nathalie has been scolding my ears

off," Peggy said hotly. "It's all your fault, too."

"My fault? I did n't feed your old target to the dog, and, what's more, I don't believe Nathalie ever scolded you in her life," Ursula responded, with equal heat.

"That shows you don't know anything about it." With a jerk Peggy tightened the ribbon on her hair.

"I know Nathalie Arterburn well enough to know that, if she scolded you, you richly deserved it," Ursula answered, with some spirit.

"I did not deserve it. I tell you, you don't know anything about it. You were n't there."

"What did she say?"

"All sorts of cruel things."

Ursula cast a stick in the direction of Sophia, who, still languid from her recent illness, watched it with indifference, then turned her brown eyes back to her young mistress.

"Nathalie is never cruel," Ursula said shortly.

"She was then. She began to scold me, without asking me a question how it happened."

"How what happened?"

“Sophia and the target, of course. Anybody with some sense would know what I was talking about. She said I was careless, and — and —”

Ursula eyed her meditatively.

“Well, you were,” she said.

“I was not.”

“Then how did she get loose?”

“I untied her.”

“And forgot her?”

“N— not exactly. Harry called me off, and I did n't go back for a little while.”

“Oh, but I suppose you kept thinking of Sophia all the time you were gone.”

In the face of Ursula's mockery, Peggy cast veracity to the winds.

“Certainly,” she answered, with crushing dignity.

Again Ursula laughed.

“I suppose that's some of the Christian Science you got from Miss Eudora. You gave Sophia absent treatment to keep her from running away. Well, it worked as well as most absent treatment does.”

Peggy rose to her feet. Sophia rose also and ranged alongside. Peggy's brown hand shook a little, as it lay on the dog's shaggy neck.

“Ursula,” she said, with a sudden quiet dig-

nity; "if all you can do is to make fun of me, I think we have talked long enough."

Ursula's face changed at the tone.

"Come back here, Peggy," she said.

"No. I am going into the house."

"Please don't go yet. I'm sorry I laughed at you; I did n't suppose you would care. I'm a good deal more sorry, though, to have made you get a scolding."

"And yet you think I deserved it."

"Yes, I do. Still, that's no reason I should mix up in it. I did n't suppose there would be any harm in my saying what I thought, and I don't suppose Rex did, either."

Peggy's chin stiffened.

"It's generally better to let other people's affairs alone."

"I know that; so do we all. But we keep on mixing up in them. I did n't tell Rex that I thought you were careless, Peggy. That came from somewhere else along the line."

"From Rex, most likely," Peggy said, with a sudden wave of hostility.

"No, I don't think so."

"Then from Nathalie. It's twice mean from her, for she ought to be grateful to me for training her everlasting old puppy."

"She is."

Peggy cast herself down on the ground again with a sudden flop.

"Well, she ought to be. She would n't have any sort of sense about it, herself."

"You are doing it well, Peggy. Where did you learn it?"

Peggy answered more quietly, for she was somewhat mollified by Ursula's tone of admiration.

"Froebel," she replied concisely.

"Who?"

"Froebel. I am bringing her up according to kindergarten ideas," Peggy explained loftily.

"Really? How did you learn them?"

"From Fizzums. He went to a kindergarten for a few months once, and some of it was awfully funny."

"But I thought kindergarten meant braiding paper mats and sewing pricked cardboard," Ursula said a little blankly.

"Oh, that's only part. Sophia does n't do that part."

"What does she do, then?"

"Not get whipped, and make her lessons into games, like jumping fences for a biscuit, and suggesting new ideas to her, and changing them very often."

"Oh! And you teach Sophia that?"

"Yes." Suddenly Peggy bent over and buried her face in the hairy side. "It works, too. She knows I love her and am trying to make her grow up good, and she'll let me do anything with her."

"Even to taking a bone away from her?"

"Of course." Peggy's accent was scornful. "I could take a whole shank of beef away from her, and she would n't make the least bit of fuss."

Ursula nodded in approval.

"You are doing well with her, Peggy."

"Then at least my summer is n't being altogether wasted," Peggy said rather grudgingly.

"Who said it was?" Ursula demanded in astonishment, as Peggy's mood went off on this fresh tack.

"Nobody. One does n't have to be told facts."

"But it is n't a fact."

"Yes, it is, too."

"And besides, when it comes to that, are n't we all wasting our summers?"

"You are supposed to be resting, and so are the boys."

"Well, are n't you?"

"No. I'm not resting, for the simple reason that I'm not aware of being tired."

"And then you are the only one of us all who pretends to do anything," Ursula urged, still trying to console the feelings of her refractory companion.

"What do I do?"

"Spend your mornings in Mr. McAlister's office."

For the moment, Peggy's face cleared.

"Oh, that's not work," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because we have a fine time doing it."

"Well, your ideas of a fine time and mine don't match very well," Ursula observed. "It would n't be my ideal of bliss to spend these lovely mornings on an office stool, copying briefs and wills and things."

"That's all you know about it. I sit in a chair, — a swivel chair with arms, — and I copy contracts."

"Well, copy poems about death, if you choose. What I mean is that I should hate the being shut up and the copying things."

Peggy lifted her chin.

"That's because you don't know Mr. McAlister," she said, with crushing finality.

"No," Ursula said; "I don't. I'm not so sure that I want to, either."

The blood rushed to Peggy's cheeks.

"I should like to know why?" she demanded.

"Because I am most mortally afraid of him," Ursula confessed.

Peggy's face relaxed something of its severity.

"But don't you admire him?" she asked.

"Ye—es, as one admires John Quincy Adams and the Apostle Paul."

It was Peggy's turn to be perplexed.

"What in the world are you driving at, Ursula?"

"That he is too good, and too calm and respectable."

"He's no such thing." Then Peggy's face relaxed still more. "But that is because you don't understand him, Ursula," she explained. "I used to feel that way, before I really knew him. Now I think he is the nicest person here."

"Nicer than Sophia Smith?" Ursula asked, in no wise vexed at Peggy's accent of superiority.

But Peggy's serenity was not as yet sufficiently deep-seated to be proof against teasing.

"What a dunce you are, Ursula!" she said sharply.

"Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to say?"

"Yes. I think you are a meddling minx."

"Anything else?" Ursula's drawl was not calculated to placate an angry soul.

"Yes. You are the most disagreeable person I ever saw, and I don't see how Hal can endure to have you around."

"You mean you think I am the most disagreeable," Ursula corrected blandly. "Anything else?"

"No. You're not worth talking to."

"Then I'll take my turn; it's only fair." Her tone lost its drawl and became incisive. "Peggy Arterburn, I think you are very cross."

"I don't care what you think."

"And I think you are very selfish."

"Think away, if you want to."

"And I think you are very rude."

"What of it?"

"And I think you are old enough to know better."

"Suppose I am? It's not your place to tell me so."

“And I think, if you keep on, you won't have a friend left in the world.”

“How do you know I have any now?”

The unruffled insolence of Peggy's manner was maddening. Ursula yielded to it.

“I think that, if you have any at all, you've a whole lot more than you deserve,” she said angrily.

The scarlet tide rushed up to the roots of Peggy's hair. Then it receded, and in its wake her face went white to the lips. There was an interval before she spoke. Then she said quietly, —

“I had supposed I had just two, Hal and Mr. Hubert. Now I don't know but I've three, and the third is Ursula Thain. If you had minced matters any, Ursula, I should have hated you, hated you with all my might. As it is, I rather like you. It was n't any of your business to interfere, and it was n't good manners to sit down in cold blood and tell me what you think of me. You're like an emergency doctor that comes of his own accord and gives a horrid great pill. Still, I should n't wonder at all if the pill did me good.” As she spoke, she looked up to meet Ursula's brown eyes with eyes that held no cloud of bitterness. Then she laughed.

“ And what 's more,” she added ; “ I should n't wonder at all, either, if you sometimes needed a similar pill yourself.”

And hand in hand they went down the hill together, with Sophia Smith trudging neglected at their heels.

CHAPTER NINE

IN spite of the chorus that hailed her as she passed the veranda, Peggy went her way. Under her arm was a portfolio, over her arm was a rug, and at her heels was the omnipresent Sophia Smith, dangling along like an enormous chatelaine at the end of her chain. The group on the veranda was too remote from Peggy's pathway to see the pen rampant in her hair and the determined light in her eyes.

"What do you suppose it is now?" Kingsley inquired from the hammock.

"There's never any telling. It may be letters; it may be she is going to write out a list of directions concerning the exercise of Sophia Smith," Mac responded.

"Does n't it ever remind you of 'Mary had a little Lamb'?" Nathalie asked. "But when I took Sophia, I fondly imagined that I was going to have a dog to play with. Now Peggy has assumed such strict control that I feel as if I ought n't to interfere."

"She is bringing her up well, though," Mac said defensively.

"Too well. Sophia is growing in grace and goodness. Still, it is a new idea that a puppy can't have a bedtime romp because it makes her too nervous to sleep, and that she must be tucked up in a blanket when she comes in warm from a run."

"How is her appetite?" John asked.

"Superb; but even there Peggy reigns supreme. Jack Myers, that poor, defenceless animal, is brought up, day in and day out, on porridge, nothing but porridge. Peggy sees to it, herself, boils up a fresh supply, every morning. She nearly took my head off, yesterday, when she found me feeding Sophia a slice of stale cake."

"Let her work," Kingsley advised indolently. "It can't more than kill the dog, and it keeps Peggy amused. Likewise, it keeps her out of our way."

"Now, Rex," Nathalie protested; "do have a little regard for the possible feelings of Peggy's relatives."

Kingsley sat up, Turkwise, in the hammock, and clasped an ankle in either hand.

"Oh, come down off your injured innocence,

Nathalie," he admonished her. "You know yourself that Peggy is sometimes a trial."

"Do you know, I am beginning to wonder whether any of it is our fault," Ursula said bluntly.

"Of course not. We don't have faults." And, having disposed of the matter to his own entire satisfaction, Kingsley stretched himself out at full length again.

"No; but really," Ursula persisted. "I don't mean just here. It began, last summer. We treated her like a child, and gave her to understand that she was too young to belong to our set. I don't know as I wonder that it made her turn fractious."

"But it did n't," Kingsley objected lazily.

"Yes, I think it did." Ursula's tone was thoughtful.

Kingsley shook his head.

"No; born so," he returned concisely.

Ursula turned upon him with unexpected warmth.

"Really, Rex, you are n't fair to Peggy."

"Prove it," he advised her.

"Well, for one thing, I had it out with her yesterday —"

"Meaning a tooth?" her cousin inquired.

Ursula frowned.

“Jack, don't interrupt, when I 'm in earnest. In fact, it 's better not to interrupt at all, unless you have something worth saying. But I told Peggy a few of her sins, and she took it superbly.”

“Then you 'd better get to work on the balance of them,” Kingsley suggested.

But Ursula shook her head.

“Laugh, if you want to,” she answered; “but I am going to look out for Peggy, and, what 's more, Jack, you 've got to do it, too.”

Meanwhile, the subject of the discussion had made her way to her favorite refuge under a distant oak tree, chained Sophia to the tree trunk, and spread out her rug on the moss. There she settled herself, with her back against the tree, her chin in her hands, and her elbows on her portfolio. Sophia, prostrate at her side, thoughtfully chewed at the stick which Peggy had provided for her entertainment. On the level ground at their feet, the late daisies nodded in the breeze. A kingbird over their heads scolded shrilly, and a procession of black ants meandered ceaselessly to and fro across the rug, across Sophia's flanks, and across Peggy's trim ankles. And still Peggy sat motionless, her

brows bent into a frown, her eyes fixed upon the trio of giant chestnuts in the middle distance.

All at once her brow cleared. In her relief, she even spoke her thoughts aloud.

"I don't really believe there's any use in doing the first chapter now," she observed. "I can fill that in, any time, and I might as well get to work on the love part. That's easier, and I won't need to take so much pains with it, for people will be interested in it, anyhow."

She was silent again, and sat with her eyes fixed on a patch of waving grass beside her. The heavy brown heads, nodding and swaying on their thin green stalks, held her attention fascinated for a few minutes. Then she felt her eyes narrowing, and, rousing herself, she opened her inkstand with a click. The click in turn aroused Sophia who promptly came into collision with the ink, and dyed one forepaw in the black pool which trickled down into the moss.

"Never mind, dear. You didn't mean to be bad. You can lick it off, and I've enough left for to-day," Peggy said consolingly. "Oh, dear, do go back to sleep. How can I do anything, if you ramp around so?"

By dint of much persuasion, Sophia was lulled

to sleep again, and Peggy opened her portfolio, dipped her pen, and once more fell to staring at the grass. Sophia stirred slightly in her sleep, and Peggy, bending forward, thoughtfully wiped her pen on the nearest cushiony toe.

“Oh, dear me!” she sighed. “How do you suppose she goes to work to begin?”

But beyond a sleepy kick in the direction of the ink, Sophia vouchsafed no reply, and Peggy returned to her musing. Her frown deepened and grew more anxious. From time to time she dipped her pen with an energy that extorted a discordant scraping from the bottom of her inkstand; but, save for a decorative border of polyangular pigs, her paper stared back at her blankly.

“Oh, Sophia Smith, how ever shall I begin?” she demanded at last.

Sophia's sleep was never so sound as to deafen her to Peggy's voice. She stirred, stretched, then licked a trio of new-made pigs into inky formlessness. The next minute, her inky tongue descended upon Peggy's nose. With a patience shown to no one else, Peggy gently pushed the dog away.

“There, Sophia! That will do. You don't

help me any. Or do you mean that I am to stop drawing pigs and get to work?"

Sophia yawned politely. She was still rather sleepy, and the conversation struck her as being too abstract to be interesting. Peggy kissed her again, this time on the bridge of her nose; then she gripped her will with both hands, roused herself from her lethargy, and set to work.

An hour later, her pen was tearing madly over the paper. A pile of loose sheets lay on the moss beside her, some of them filled on both sides, some with but a line or two, as if the idea had suddenly lost coherence and had been laid away for another time. Little dabs of ink dotted them here and there, and one single leaf was adorned, aside from its four lines of writing, with a triple rank of polyangular pigs. Obviously, at that point Peggy's Pegasus had shown an inclination to balk.

A sudden breeze fluttered the pages and sent a dozen of them scurrying off up the hill. With a startled exclamation, Peggy sprang to catch them, chased them over the crest of the slope, and brought them back in triumph. Her absence was short; nevertheless, it was long enough to give Sophia time to develop a taste for literature. Peggy dropped down on the rug

again to find her last sheet licked into an inky puddle, and beside it Sophia, seated in dignified silence, with the lid of the inverted inkstand delicately held in her bared teeth. Only her bristly beard suggested that, next time her mistress left ink in the way, a mustache cup would be a wise receptacle.

“Sophia!”

At the rebuke, Sophia dropped the inkstand and sought to appease her mistress with a caress. Peggy took refuge behind a corner of the rug, and Sophia, mistaking her defensive operations for a new sort of game, frisked around and around the tree until Peggy, like the martyrs of old, was securely bound to the stake. Then, with a final lunge and a sweep of her paw, Sophia capsized her martyr and, removing herself to the brief limit of her chain, sat down to see what happened next.

As it chanced, it was Kingsley Barrett who happened.

“Hullo, Peggy Ann! That the latest thing in ring games?” he inquired affably, as he sauntered down the hill.

For the once Peggy was unable to stand on her dignity. Prostrate on the ground, moored by her armpits to the oak tree and with her

heels muffled in the inky rug, she was discouraged to find that, in this hour of need, her dignity refused to yield her any support.

"Oh, Rex, do come and unfasten Sophia," she begged him.

Kingsley paused to survey the group.

"It strikes me it would be a good deal more to the point to unfasten you," he remarked coolly.

"Well, anybody. Do hurry up and not be all day about it," she urged impatiently.

"Oh, no; I'll be through by dinner time," he reassured her.

"Yes; but hurry!" She emphasized her words by a futile little kick into the heart of the rug.

"What's the matter? Are n't you comfy?"

"Try it, yourself."

"I don't want to. I'm not Froebelizing a puppy. Honestly, Peggy, if I were in your place, I would n't use more than fifty feet of chain. It gets in knots, you know, if it is too long, and I hate to pick out knots. I always did. The mater always used to unsnarl my fish-lines for me, when I was a kid."

"Kingsley Barrett, let me loose!"

"All in good time, Peggy Ann. I am work-

ing as hard as it is safe for me to work, this hot weather. What were you going to do, when Sophia interrupted you?"

Peggy deigned to give no reply. With her teeth tight shut, she held her peace until, the last twist unwound, she could rise to her feet. Then she stooped to gather up her belongings.

"Thank you, Kingsley," she said, with crushing brevity, as she turned away in the direction of the house.

That same evening, the entire household of The Savins was grouped on the east veranda, when Kingsley, with Ursula at his side, came across the broad patches of yellow moonlight that spotted the smooth-cropped lawn.

"Great old night!" he observed, as he dropped down on the edge of the veranda at Nathalie's feet. "Seen any stray geniuses around here lately?"

"Only me. Why?" Harry asked.

"I came on the fresh trail of one, to-day; but you need n't pose for it, Hal. It's not your size."

"What size is it, then?"

"Bouncing, but feminine, I should say. It's not always easy to be sure, though."

"Where was it?"

"That's telling."

"How did you find it?"

"That's also telling."

"What was it?"

"This." From his side pocket Kingsley drew out some loose sheets of paper and waved them in the moonlight. "What's the matter, Peggy Ann? Did a mosquito bite you?"

Peggy had drawn in her breath with a sharp catch. Then she was still, utterly ignoring Kingsley's question.

"Peggy Ann?"

"Yes?"

"Did something bite you?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Something with a sharp tongue," she retorted.

"Things don't bite with their tongues, they use their teeth, Peggy-Ann."

"Oh, stop talking nonsense, and show us your trail," Nathalie urged him.

"In Dutch they call it spoor. I too say it's poor," Kingsley observed. "Doubtless the genius called it polite light literature."

From her distant corner, Mrs. Farrington started up in alarm.

"Rex, did I drop any of my new novel around in public?"

"No such luck, Aunt Ted. I only wish you had. No, this is n't of your sort. It is far more elegant and hifalutin than the products of your pen."

"Oh, read it, Rex. We were just longing for a little excitement."

"This is sure enough excitement. It makes my blood fair run cold. What's the matter, Peggy?"

"I'm going in," she said shortly.

"Oh, it's not so chilly as all that. Do stay and hear it. You'll find it quite worth your while."

"You'd better stay, Peggy," Mr. McAlister advised her. "Else we may think you wrote it."

"But you can't read it in this light, Rex," Nathalie suggested.

"That depends on whether you can hold a candle to it," he returned.

"It depends a good deal more on whether it is worth the candle."

"Listen, and judge for yourself," he counselled her, as he crossed the veranda and sat down in the patch of light that shone out from

a window. "I'm sorry to say that I have only five pages, and apparently they don't hitch together. Still, they are fruity pages. Now listen. I suppose there might have been something that came before, to serve as preface to explain who this gentleman was. 'But Richard Balfour in his narrow padded cell may loom large in the future, but to-night a divine bliss has her in thrall and —'"

"Who's *her*?" Mr. McAlister asked.

"Does n't say, Uncle Hubert. It is just plain HER. Well, as I was saying, 'thrall and this Iron God of Love,' all capitals, 'that is to lead her, has decreed that the front steps' — no, 'the first steps — shall be strewn with rose leaves.' There! Is n't that awful pretty?" Kingsley looked up for admiration.

"Wonderful! Go on, Rex. Ted, you may get a few points from this."

"Who did it, Rex?"

"'F I know."

"Where did you find it?"

"I'm not telling."

"Oh, go on," Ursula demanded. "I want some more."

"The night walk back to the Manor through the scented, star-lit garden was a strange and

wonderful one to them both. For he was as pagan as she. Both at marrow had lived the same hard, imperious lives, and with the incoming of this strange new power, strange new thoughts and feelings came suddenly to life. Arthur, pulling forward an arm-chair, is in a cool way telling the squire where they had been.' ”

“ Arm-chair ? ”

“ Yes. This hitches on all right. It's page fifty-one, and the other was fifty. Don't interrupt, Nathalie.”

“ But where did he get his arm-chair ? ”

“ Out of his pocket, most likely. ‘ Eleanor, shaking still, wonders at his calmness. The next minute she is still more surprized ’ — with a z — ‘ when he turns to her. ’ Then there are a whole lot of dashes. ‘ His muscular hand is on her chair; he is looking down at her. ’ More dashes. Is n't that a thrilling climax ? ‘ Under that tender, ardent look, ’ ” Kingsley's voice mounted to a falsetto; “ ‘ she quivers her whole being, stirred — ’ ”

“ Do mind your pauses, Rex.”

“ I was trying to mind hers, and they're past all finding out. Well, if you insist, ‘ She quivers, her whole being stirred to its utmost,

inmost depth.' Another dash, a good long one. 'Then suddenly, with a wild shriek, she sees the face of Another Man' — great big capitals and underlined, and then a dash. Where was I? Oh. 'Another Man — the one that she hated to remember, Richard Balfour. Then for one long terrible second she has all the horror of one sliding down a flower-covered precipice. She closes her eyes with a sick feeling of fear. When she opens' — Each sentence begins a new paragraph. — 'When she opens them it is to find her satin-shod feet beneath their frothy ruffles resting on a — ' "

"Rex Barrett, stop! That does n't come next, and you know it." Then, moved to sudden despair by her involuntary self-betrayal, Peggy snatched the leaves from Kingsley's hands, gulped down a monstrous sob, and rushed away into the house, leaving the others to stifle their mirth as best they could, while Kingsley exulted in the full success of his experiment.

CHAPTER TEN

“**I** DON'T think I was meant for an author,” Peggy said ruefully, the next morning.

“Perhaps not. There are other things in the world than writing books.”

“Yes, darning stockings,” she returned grimly. “That does n't signify that I care to do them, though.”

“And do you care to do literature?”

“Yes. At least, I did until you all made fun of me. Really, Hal, I think Rex was very horrid.”

“He probably had no idea that you would care so much.”

“Then he does n't know much,” Peggy responded flatly. “Anybody cares about being laughed at. Besides, that story was bone of my bone and ink of my ink-pot. It was n't so very bad, either.”

Harry maintained a discreet silence, and she prodded him with a question.

“ Was it so very bad, Hal? ”

“ N—no. ”

“ What was the matter with it? ” she demanded, in swift defiance.

“ I — I ’m not sure. ”

“ But something was. ”

“ It was n’t quite up to Mrs. Farrington’s work, ” he said guardedly.

“ Why should it be? She has done whole dozens of them; this was my first, and I could n’t seem to make it go. ”

“ Perhaps you ’ll get the trick of it in time, ” her brother suggested, with an effort at consolation.

“ No, that ’s what I ’m driving at. I can’t, and I ’m not going to try it again. ”

“ Why not? ”

“ Too hard work. Making something out of nothing is n’t my line. I need something besides ink to start on. ”

He smiled at her intent face.

“ How many irons do you wish to roast at once, young sister? ”

“ One. ”

“ But you have two now. ”

"What ones?"

"What two, you mean. Law and pedagogy, Mr. Hubert and Sophia Smith."

She sniffed disdainfully.

"They both are just fun. Besides, they will end with the summer. I want something to last, something I can do after I go back to Northford."

"There will be school then."

Once more she sniffed.

"Yes; but such a school! And that does n't take much time. Besides, I'm in the top room now. I am old enough to be beginning to think what next. I don't want to stay in Northford under Cousin Eudora's thumb, all my days. She can sew patchwork and eat boiled beef forever, if she chooses. I want something else."

"And yet you don't like it here."

"Who says I don't like it?" she asked contradictiously.

"You said so."

"When?"

"One night when we walked up to the reservoir in the twilight."

"Oh, then. That was before I was used to it, when I did n't have anything to do."

"And now you have changed your mind?"

Meditatively she dropped her chin on her hands, and spoke with slow deliberation.

“ Well, I—should—just—say—I—had.”

“ What has done it ? ”

“ The same thing that has done all my deeds of grace, getting busy and keeping so,” she answered gravely. “ There’s something the matter with me, Hal. As soon as I get lazy, I get cross. I like to work.”

“ And yet Cousin Eudora says — ” he reminded her.

She interrupted him hotly.

“ Cousin Eudora is an old poke. Her idea of work is peeling potatoes and weeding the zinnia bed. I hate zinnias; and, when I keep house, I’ll cook my potatoes in their skins. But I don’t mean the everlasting work that’s never done; I mean something that counts.”

“ I was under the impression that house-keeping counted,” he suggested. “ Nathalie—”

Again she interrupted.

“ Yes, Nathalie would potter with her pots and pans, all day long. She had n’t any ambition.”

“ Perhaps not. She has turned into a good deal of a woman, though.”

Peggy’s mouth drooped at the corners.

"I suppose that means me," she said, in plaintive resentment.

Her brother laughed. Then he bent down and took her face in his two slim hands.

"Yes, Peggy, it does mean you. It always will mean you, when you try to slur Nathalie. Without her, my life would have been dreary enough, little sister, and I owe her more than you can ever dream. But because Nathalie is domestic it does n't signify that you must be just like her. We don't all need to do the same work, and I am not sure that you ought to cook, and weed flower beds till the end of time."

"But I can't take Mr. Hubert's office back to Northford with me; and I've about decided that it's no use for me to try to write novels," she said despondingly.

"No, but is n't there anything else?"

"I had thought a little of being an actress," she replied slowly.

In his astonishment, Harry Arterburn sat upright in the hammock and stared at her.

"Peg-gy Arterburn!"

"Well, what of it?" she returned a little defiantly.

He caught the ring of defiance, and controlled his amusement.

"I am afraid you would n't find that much more satisfactory than authorship," he replied, with becoming gravity.

"But I can do it. I can't seem to get the hang of doing novels."

"How do you know you can act?"

"Oh, I've tried that," she answered, with the conscious pride of a Siddons.

"Where?"

"In Northford, lots of times. Really, I have, Hal." In her eagerness, she rose and seated herself in the hammock at his side. "Last Christmas was the best. We did *The Mistletoe Bough*, and I was the bride. There was a lovely song that went with it, *Young Lovel's Bride*, with trotting horses and queer ghosts spooking about, and everything; but everybody said that I was the best part of it all."

Harry smiled, as he looked down into the animated face.

"I don't doubt it," he said heartily. "I only wish I could have been there."

"It was in the town hall, at a school entertainment, and I wore Cousin Eudora's mother's wedding clothes. They pinched me half to death, too; and I thought they'd never drop the curtain and let me crawl out of my chest.

We only had three rehearsals, and how I did love them! Hal!"

"Peggy!"

"I wish they'd let us give a play here."

"I am afraid they would n't."

"Why not?"

"Too much fuss."

She shook her head undauntedly.

"No. We could give it out of doors, the way all the colleges are doing. Rex and Ursula and Jack could act, and I truly want you to see how well I can do."

"It would be fun, Peggy; but I'm afraid it's impossible."

"You wait. I am going to talk to Rex about it. Then you would see what I mean by wanting to be an actress."

"Yes, dear; but —"

Impatiently she broke in.

"When you call me *dear*, Harry Arterburn, I always know there's a *but* coming."

He slid his hand through her arm, noting with surprise that she made no attempt to draw away.

"There is a *but*, Peggy, a good large one. Have you ever been behind the scenes at a real theatre?"

"I was never even in front of them," she confessed.

"You will be, some day. But I hope you will never go any farther. A near view of the paint and spangles takes off most of their beauty. And the endless hours of study and rehearsing, and more study and more rehearsing, make it dreary work for all but the one or two great actors who get to the top. Amateur theatricals are good fun, Peggy; but, if I were you, I'd stop at those and not think much about the rest."

"I never supposed there was so much work to it," she said thoughtfully.

"There is work about most things, little sister."

"So I notice," she answered soberly. "I don't want to shirk, Hal. What can I do?"

"Stay in Northford and finish your school."

"That's only one more year. What then?"

"College."

Her eyes met his eyes squarely.

"Hal, I won't. I don't want to go, and it would be a wicked waste of money to send me. Study goes against my grain. If I want to know things, I can read them. Otherwise, I might as well let them alone, for they won't stick in my mind."

"But I wanted to send you to college, Peggy."

"What for? Nathalie did n't go."

"No; but it seemed to me more in your line."

"I'm not sure I have any line," she answered, with a sigh. "Seems to me I'm only a muddle."

"How old are you, Peggy?"

"Sixteen in the fall. You ought to know the ages of your own family, Hal."

He ignored the implied accusation.

"The line has n't had time to show itself yet."

"Mrs. Farrington had written a story, before she was as old as I am."

"She was the exception that proves the rule, then. You've plenty of time yet to decide what you want to do."

"Yes; but I'd like to be about it. It's easier to reach out, if you know what you're reaching after," she said restively.

"Then sit still for a year."

She turned her eyes on him rebukingly.

"Hal, I should die."

He laughed at her energy. Then his face grew grave.

"We all have to sit and wait now and then.

Do you remember me, last summer, after I was ill in Northford?"

Her face softened at the recollection.

"Yes. That was the first I ever thought much about you. You taught me to play solitaire then, you know; and I found it such a comfort, whenever Cousin Eudora elected to sweep the whole house in one morning."

"Peggy, I don't believe you like housework."

"No; I abhor it," she answered, with an energy that set the hammock to swinging in a wide arc.

"I am sorry."

"I don't see why."

"Because I had begun to dream dreams, Peggy."

"Do talk sense, Hal. You sound sentimental," she rebuked him.

"Perhaps I am," he confessed.

"Don't. Nathalie is enough for one family," she said shortly. "I hoped you had more sense."

There was a prolonged pause. Then, as she looked up, she was surprised at the expression in his blue eyes. He was balancing his glasses on his thumb; without them he looked younger, less strong, and infinitely pained. With a swift

gesture she bent towards him and laid her hand on his, glasses and all.

“Hal, I did n't mean to be snappy,” she said contritely. “You did sound very soft; but I suppose it's your age, and all that. What were your dreams about?”

“About you, Peggy, and about me.”

“What about us?”

“Nothing that you would like, I'm afraid. It's only that I have been wondering whether — whether you could be happy to live in New York.”

Her brows rose dubiously.

“With Nathalie?”

“No, with me.”

“But that would be with Nathalie, too.”

He shook his head.

“Not after this first year. I have promised to stay with them, this winter. After that they will be better alone. They would be better alone now; only Mac worries about me, and he lets Nathalie worry. By the end of another year, I shall be so strong that there will be no need of Mac's keeping his eye on me. And then — ”

“Well?” Peggy's accent was interrogative.

“Then I had n't known what next. But, as

we get better acquainted, it seems to me we might have good times living together, just as Nathalie and I used to do."

Her face brightened. Then she shook her head.

"It would be no use, Hal. I'm too snappish. I should hurt you, day in and day out. Sometimes I might mean to; sometimes I should do it accidentally, as I did just now. I'm too thorny. I must live with people who have skins thick enough not to mind the thorns."

"Then you don't want to do it, Peggy?"

"Yes, I do. That makes it all the worse. I like you, Hal, like you a lot better than I ever meant to; and, for the sake of being with you, I would put up with almost anything, housework and all. Only, I don't know anything about housework."

"Could n't you learn? Nathalie did."

She frowned. Then she faced him sharply.

"Oh, Harry, do please, please, please stop quoting Nathalie to me! You don't know how it goes against the grain. Besides, it's no manner of use. She's Nathalie; I'm me. You can't make us over into each other, if you work over us till the crack of doom. She pussy-cats you to death; I don't believe in that sort of thing,

myself. And yet, after all, if I tried hard enough, I honestly think I could make you just as comfortable as Nathalie did."

Her eyes dropped to the ground too soon to let her see the smile with which her brother noted the unconscious tightening of her fingers over his hand.

"But would you be contented, Peggy?"

"Yes, if I thought you were."

"As contented as if you were an actress?"

"Yes. That is, if I did things really well. I don't want to be doing any second-rate work, or doing it in a second-rate way."

"But I thought you called housekeeping second-rate."

"That depends on whether you eat boiled beef and cabbage for Sunday dinner," she answered quickly. "So is copying law papers second-rate work, if you get in a hurry and blot things. I don't care so much what the work is, as long as it is something that counts. And, Hal —" The words caught in her throat.

"Yes, Peggy?"

"I'm queer and thorny; but it does count a good deal that, in spite of it all, you want to have me around."

He saw that the tears were near the surface,

and he longed to take her into his arms; but he knew that his young sister would resent such a proceeding as an affront to her dignity. Accordingly, he contented himself with holding out his hand.

“Is it a bargain, Peggy? Do we keep house together after this year?”

Her answer surprised him almost as much as did the strength in her slim brown fingers.

“For always and always, Hal, if you'll let me.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“MARGARET! Margaret!”

Up-stairs in her room Peggy was chanting *Comin' through the Rye* at least two octaves higher than the law allows, and with a lusty vigor that should have been death to sentiment. At the call, she stopped her song in the very middle of a note, and rushed to the head of the stairs.

“Here I am. Do you want me?”

Hubert McAlister was standing in the hall, a telegram in his hand and an anxious light in his eyes. Nevertheless, he smiled up at the animated face above him.

“Come down here, if you are n't busy.”

With a headlong rush which irresistibly reminded him of Sophia Smith, she dropped down on the seat at the foot of the stairs.

“I'm never too busy to talk business,” she returned promptly.

He smiled again.

"How do you know it is business?"

"Your eyes say so. They are awful tell-tales. Moreover, it's not only business; but it is something that worries you. You might as well have it out," she advised him, much in the tone of the dentist who advises the removal of an aching tooth.

He sat down beside her and glanced again at the telegram in his hand.

"Is that it?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Let me see — that is, if you're willing," she amended hurriedly, for Hubert McAlister was one of the few persons to whom she intended to accord full deference.

He handed her the paper, and she knitted her brows over its contents.

"Eliza dead. Red handkerchief on parlor table. Elegant swimming."

He surveyed her quizzically, and she laughed as she met his eyes.

"It sounds like a page of my novel," she said.

"But who is Eliza, and is she drowned?"

"No. It is a private code. Never mind just what each word means. It amounts to this: there has come up some new evidence in the Thomas case, evidence that I can't afford

to miss, and I must go to New York, this morning."

"What fun! Is the evidence there, and will it help you to win the case?" she asked eagerly; for long since she had discovered that this case, involving a will and a property of some hundreds of thousands, was the chief interest of her companion; that in it he was crossing swords with some of the most brilliant and unscrupulous lawyers of the state.

"I can't tell. I hope so. Anyway, it is worth the trying. I must go down, this morning."

"Well, success to you! Have you any orders for the day?" she asked, with a swift reassumption of the clerkly manner which Mr. McAlister found so amusing.

"The usual thing: see to the mail, of course, and then you might copy those deeds we were looking over, yesterday. I shall need the copies, next week. But, Margaret, child, this will leave you alone in that office, all day long."

She looked up sharply.

"Are you afraid I shall get into mischief? I promise not to meddle with things in the safe."

Under the mockery of her tone, there was a little sharp edge that matched the light in her

eyes. Both vanished, however, at Mr. McAlister's answering laugh, and her voice was friendly again, as she added, —

“Where is Miss Cromwell?”

“Her vacation begins, to-day.”

“Oh, I forgot. Well, I am glad she's out of the way. She wheezes like a grampus, and she turns over her typewriter, every four words, to make sure she has n't said anything reckless. She's good; but she is awfully poky, and she says *How?* when you ask her a question. I'm glad she will be out of the way.” Peggy's heels struck the floor in time with her climax.

“I did n't choose her for her social qualities, Peggy.”

“No; you took her because her mother had lost her mind,” Peggy answered bluntly, and with fine disregard for her pronouns. “I know all about that.”

He ignored the charge.

“But I'm afraid you'll be very lonely.”

“Not I. I'm not that kind. But may I take Sophia with me?”

“For protection?”

“No, for company. I don't need any protection. And I promise you she sha'n't ramp around the office. I'll tie her to the desk.”

“Just as you choose. Don't let her drive away any possible clients, though. I need all I can get. And what shall I bring back from New York?”

“Evidence for yourself, Huyler for me,” she responded promptly. “Now I must scabble my room into some sort of order, if I'm to be at the office on time.”

He smiled up at her, as she rose and stood beside him.

“A good day to you, Margaret! I'm learning to depend on my new clerk, and I find her very dependable.”

She nodded down at him.

“Thank you,” she said, with sudden gravity. “I only wish she were more so.”

Half an hour later, she went up the stairs with Sophia at her heels, and let herself into the office. The morning sun and a fresh breeze brightened the place, and Peggy's face was quite content as she moved up and down the great room, throwing the windows wide open, unlocking the vault and gathering together the letters to be opened at her leisure. Then she tied Sophia to the desk and fell to work at the morning mail. She glanced up, as the janitor came in for orders.

“Mr. McAlister has had to go to New York this morning,” she said. “I shall be here, all day, except for his usual hour at noon. If anyone comes then, Andrew, just say I shall be here at two.”

He smiled at her approvingly. Her bright, girlish, off-hand ways pleased him; her independence was altogether unlike the crankiness of the “lady clerks” in the other offices. Moreover, he was human enough to enjoy the unvarying courtesy with which she treated both himself and the boy in the elevator. Girls like Peggy Arterburn and dogs of Sophia’s breed were rare objects in his life. He bent down to inspect Sophia more closely.

Instantly Sophia resolved to spare him the effort. Swiftly unfolding herself, she rose on her hind legs and sought to embrace the air above the janitor’s head. The janitor dodged, and Peggy sprang to the rescue.

“Oh, please excuse her!” she begged, as she jerked Sophia back with an energy that reduced the dog to a sprawling heap under the desk. “She’s only a puppy, you know.”

Involuntarily he had withdrawn to the threshold. From that safe vantage ground, he now freed his mind.

“Great Scott! What’ll she be when she grows up into a dog?”

The next minute, his retreating steps sounded at the far end of the hallway.

For the space of two hours, Peggy worked steadily. Then, with a yawn, she leaned back in her chair and looked about her. The past five weeks had made the room seem very familiar to her, with its wide, leather-backed chairs, its airy windows, and the great door of the vault in the corner behind Mr. McAlister’s desk. The vault itself was especially attractive to Peggy. Its files of papers suggested untold stories enough to fill a library; the little square safe in the corner, the safe of which no one but Mr. McAlister knew the combination, might, for all she could tell, be stuffed with golden ingots, or crammed with the ashes of torn-up wills such as do duty in the pages of the unwary novelists who are not versed in law. Peggy smiled to herself, as she recalled the merciless criticism which Mr. McAlister had bestowed upon one of her own favorite heroes for taking the law into his hands in this summary fashion. Then, turning from the vault, her glance dropped to Sophia, snoozing on the floor at her feet.

“ Is Mr. McAlister in ? ”

Her glance raised itself again with a jerk. It rested upon the speaker, and it promptly registered the impression that he was not a gentleman. The impression came from his collar and cravat, from the angle at which his hat was tilted; above all, it came from his shifty eyes.

“ No, he is not here, to-day.”

“ I am sorry. Is he out of town ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ When will he be back ? ”

“ Early to-morrow morning.”

The man paused, as if thinking over the situation. Then he shook his head.

“ I am afraid that will be too late. Can I see his head clerk ? ”

A little satisfied smile stole around the corners of Peggy's lips.

“ I am Mr. McAlister's clerk,” she said, with infinite dignity.

For an instant, the shifty eyes fell upon her. Then they moved away again. However, that instant had been long enough to convince the man that he had taken the measure of this attractive child. He rested one elbow on the desk, and spoke with assurance.

“ Well, if Mr. McAlister is n't here, I suppose

I can tell you what I want. Haswell and Deane have sent me up to get the records of the Thomas case. There's a flaw in one of their copies, and they need to verify them all, before the matter comes into the courts."

"Haswell and Deane?"

"Yes."

"Are you their clerk?"

"No. I'm Mr. Haswell's brother-in-law. He is short of help, this morning, and I said I would run up here for him."

Peggy reflected swiftly. Haswell and Deane were associated with Hubert McAlister in the Thomas case. She knew that papers had passed back and forth between them. There was no especial reason that these records should not be allowed to go into their hands. Nevertheless, she distrusted the man. He was too glib. Moreover, it was inconceivable to her that a man of Mr. Haswell's type could have a sister married to a man who wore his hat on the side of his head. She thought rapidly and to the point.

"You have a note from Mr. Haswell?"

"No. What for?"

Peggy's mind went back to an interview she had overheard between Hubert McAlister and a messenger boy, and she took her cue from that.

"Unless you can show me some credentials, it will be impossible for me to trust you with the documents," she quoted gravely.

In spite of his annoyance, the man smiled, as the weighty sentence rolled off Peggy's tongue. Then he put his second elbow on her desk.

"I'm sorry," he said familiarly. "I supposed my word would be enough."

"But it is n't," she returned undauntedly, for she realized less and less dimly that something was wrong.

"But I must have those papers. Mr. Haswell is waiting," he persisted.

She turned to the telephone on Mr. McAlister's desk, at which she was sitting.

"I can call up Mr. Haswell," she said, with a sudden accent of relief. "I never thought of that."

Quickly the man interposed.

"He is n't in his office."

"Well, somebody else is."

"Nobody else knew of his sending me."

Peggy's heart began to bump against her ribs; but she met his eyes without flinching.

"Then we can wait till Mr. Haswell gets back."

“He has been called away on business, and won't be back until night.”

Peggy swung her chair away from the telephone. An angry light was blazing in her eyes.

“Then we'll wait until to-night,” she said shortly. “Meanwhile, if you'll excuse me, I must go to work.”

Abruptly the man's tone changed.

“Now look here, my girl, I've got to have those papers. What's more, I'm going to have them. There's nobody else here to know what has become of them. Give them to me, and I'll make it worth your while.”

“What!” Peggy exploded into wrath, as she sprang up from her chair.

“Yes. I'll pay you well. You need n't even give them to me. Just tell me where they are. That will let you out of the charge of having taken them.”

With a sudden grinding blow, Peggy's heel descended upon the outstretched paw of the slumbering Sophia Smith. There was a high soprano shriek, half of pain, half of anger; then Sophia, like a vast Jack-in-the-Box, leaped up out of the nook where she had lain hidden from the man's sight. The man dodged back-

ward, and his comment was monosyllabic and utterly profane.

“Ssst! Sophia, sssst!” Peggy hissed softly.

Sophia heard and heeded. With a terrific lunge she cast herself upon the man, rested her paws on his shoulders, and fell to licking his face in ecstatic welcome.

“Sophia!” Peggy protested, midway between laughter and tears over the failure of her ruse.

The man read her intention.

“Oh, don’t mind. I like dogs, and this is a beautiful one,” he said genially. “Deerhound, is n’t it?”

“Staghound,” Peggy corrected him. She wished to prolong the situation until she could decide what to do next.

“Really? Not very common, are they?”

“No.”

“I thought not. Beautiful eyes.”

“Yes.” Peggy nodded; but the nod was for herself, not for her questioner. Her determination was taken. Assault failing, she would try stratagem. Nevertheless, intrepid as she was, Peggy’s heart wellnigh failed her, as she faced the man with a smile. “You were just saying —” she faltered hesitatingly.

The man interpreted her hesitation as being the girl's reluctance to share in a crime. He hastened to reassure her.

"That I would make it worth your while to give me the papers? Well, I will."

"But if I get caught?"

"You won't. I'll see to that. Just tell me where the papers are. Then lock the door so we need n't be interrupted, and go and stand by the window. You can be looking down into the street, and need n't see a thing till I have unlocked the door and gone."

"Well," Peggy assented doubtfully.

"You'll do it?"

"Yes."

"Where are the papers?"

A mocking light came into Peggy's eyes.

"What will you give me?"

The answer was short and to the point.

"Ten thousand dollars."

She gasped at the amount. Then she rallied.

"Not enough. Make it fifteen," she haggled.

The man eyed her with a certain admiration.

"Well, I must say, for so young a girl you are a cool hand at this game. Well, fifteen it is. Where are the papers?"

"In the safe in the vault."

Noiselessly he shut the office door and locked it.

“Now go and stand by the front window.”

Her color came at the tone of command, and her chin tilted upward aggressively. Then she crossed the room to the window.

“Don't turn around, when you answer my questions. Where is the safe?”

“In the back left-hand corner of the vault.”

“Is it locked?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know the combination?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

Peggy hesitated. Then she answered glibly, —

“Two — seven — nine — two.”

The man repeated it after her.

“Two — seven — nine — two. Is that right?”

“Yes. It sticks a little; but it will come open. The papers are in the left-hand corner.”

There was an interval while the man, on his knees before the safe, wrestled with the combination. Outside, Peggy's hand opened and shut nervously, as it lay on Sophia's ragged back. The man's right elbow pointed straight

to the open pigeonhole where lay the records of the Thomas case; but the vault was dark, and he was too absorbed with the combination to heed any open pigeonholes.

“Two — seven — nine — two?” he asked at length, as he sat back on his heels and drew his sleeve across his face.

“Two — six — nine — two,” Peggy corrected him blandly.

“You said seven before.”

“You must have misunderstood me. I said six. Two — six — nine — two.”

Again she heard the turning of the knobs, and she sidled a step nearer the door of the vault, paused to listen, sidled another step, listened again, and again moved stealthily onward. Suddenly she gathered all her strength and courage, grasped the heavy door with both hands, and hurled it together with a clang. There was the snap of the springing lock, the pull of a bolt; then Peggy unlocked the office door, threw it open, and, with Sophia leaping at her heels, dashed away down the stairs in search of the janitor.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“**T**EDDY, that is a good deal of a girl.”

Dr. McAlister, his son, and Mrs. Farrington were sitting in the library of The Savins. From the veranda outside came the chatter of young voices; but the silence within had lasted long. Hubert McAlister broke it.

Mrs. Farrington nodded.

“You mean Peggy?”

“Yes. She saved the day.”

“You think the man was sent by the Thomas heirs?” Dr. McAlister asked.

“There is no doubt of it. He neglected to look over his papers before he came; and when the officers went through his pockets, they found evidence enough to convict him over the heads of a bribed jury. Miss Cromwell would have given him the papers. She is a trusting soul.”

“Peggy is n't. She is always on the defensive,” his sister observed.

“Well for me that she was. If the man had carried off those records, the heirs could have

snapped their fingers in my face. It was a clever plan, giving me a false scent in New York, and then terrorizing my own clerk in my absence."

"So idiotic of them to think they could get the best of you!"

He smiled across at his twin sister.

"You're a loyal soul, Ted. But still, even you must admit that I was taken in completely. Peggy deserves the praise."

"And has it," she reminded him. "She is the happiest girl in New England to-night, Hu. Your commendation has set her up on mental stilts."

"Let us hope she won't tumble off," Dr. McAlister said indulgently. "I like the child. I have n't had much to say to her; but I have been watching her cornerwise, and she seems to me well worth the watching."

"She was, to-day," Mrs. Farrington added. "I wish you had seen her, Hu, as she came tearing up to the house, calling for Harry. She was just like a live coal, bareheaded, out of breath, and fairly shaking with excitement. She just said, 'I've got him,' and then dropped down on the grass, while we were left wondering who Him might be."

They all laughed. Then Dr. McAlister took up the tale, —

“And so, as soon as I found the trouble was at the office, I went over there with Harry. We left Peggy getting her breath on the lawn here; but when we went into the office, there she was with Andrew, standing guard over the vault, and she hailed us with ‘He’s in there. I just heard him.’”

“And still you did n’t know what it was?” Mrs. Farrington asked.

“Not an idea whether it was a bear or a burglar. Andrew knew no more about it than we did. Peggy had sent him up, post haste, to see that He did n’t escape, and then had dashed off in search of Harry. Poor Andrew looked badly scared; but by that time Peggy was as calm as a May morning, and little by little we extracted the story from her.”

“And the fellow really tried to bully her and then to bribe her?” Hubert said thoughtfully.

“Apparently. Harry telephoned for the police, and we had him out in a hurry. He was a most crestfallen villain, too, for he had to own up to having been trapped by a girl of fifteen.”

Rising, Hubert McAlister paced the length

of the room, and returned to his former seat by the table.

"I wish I knew how to thank the girl," he said slowly. "She might have done harm, to-day, that could never have been set right. She was in actual danger, too. The man had a revolver in his pocket."

Mrs. Farrington started. Then she laughed.

"Nonsense, Hu! He never would have used it."

"You can't tell. He was playing a desperate game, and was ready to take any chances. Peggy was a plucky girl to face him."

Dr. McAlister came out of a short reverie.

"I think she rather enjoyed the fun of it all," he said thoughtfully. "If I am any judge of girls, Peggy is n't easily frightened."

"Look out that you don't spoil her, Hu," his sister cautioned him.

He shook his head.

"If I know anything of girls," he quoted; "and I do, for I assisted at your youth, Ted; if I know anything at all about girls, when a fifteen-year-old girl has done a really fine thing, I see no harm in telling her of the fact. Sometimes a little praise acts as a goad. It sets a pace that she feels in honor bound to keep up."

Mrs. Farrington nodded meditatively.

"Hu, you ought never to have been a bachelor," she said.

Peggy, meanwhile, was enthroned in the hammock, with Kingsley and John at her feet, while she told the tale of her adventures. For the once, she was queen bee of the hive, and she was taking infinite delight in her supremacy, infinite pleasure in the consciousness that, for the once, even Kingsley Barrett was treating her with respect.

"But, really and truly, were n't you frightened, Peggy?" Ursula asked at length.

"Not half so frightened as I was wrathful at Sophia. Great stupid! She could have made the man think she was about to eat him up. Instead, she greeted him like a long-lost brother, and kissed his hair into sticky little spikes all over his forehead."

"What did he look like?" John inquired.

"Horrid," she replied tersely.

"Just a plain, every-day sort of villain?" Kingsley queried.

"Not according to my idea. He was short, and used cheap perfumery and a patent collar all shiny blue. I prefer a villain in top boots and a red neckerchief, myself. They are much more inspiring."

"Suppose he had heard you moving towards the door, and bounced out at you?" Ursula suggested.

"Then I should have banged him with the big office ruler, and called Andrew," Peggy replied tranquilly. "There's no use in bringing up bugbears that did n't happen, Ursula. It was all very matter of fact and funny. The only question was whether I could coax him into the vault."

"Where did you get the idea, Peggy Ann?" Kingsley inquired.

"Ask Cousin Eudora. There's a dark closet under the front stairs," Peggy explained. "What's sauce for the gosling is sauce for the gander. Of course I could n't order him into the closet, as Cousin Eudora used to order me, so I had to trap him."

"You certainly did it," John said admiringly. "I wish I had been there to see."

Peggy laughed at the memory.

"I wish you had been there when we opened the vault door, Jack. It was so funny and so solemn; just like the way one calls the cat and opens up a mouse-trap. Andrew opened the door, and Hal pulled me out of the way into a corner, and the policemen stood in a ring, with

their clubs ready to knock him down. Then Andrew put his eye to the crack and opened the door a bit wider. There was an awful pause; but nothing happened. Then he banged the door wide open, and we all looked in. The man was sitting there, with his back against the safe and his shoe-soles in our very faces, and his hair dried all into spikes, as Sophia had left it."

"What did he say? Did he swear very badly?" Ursula asked greedily.

Peggy giggled again.

"That was the funniest part of the whole. He just said, 'Gentlemen, that girl has trumped my ace.' Then he stood up and dusted himself off as calmly as if he had merely slipped off his bicycle."

From his seat on the floor, Kingsley looked up at her approvingly.

"Peggy, you're a brick," he said.

Her cheeks dimpled; then an echo of the old hostile ring came back into her voice as she answered, —

"Don't be too sure. And, anyway, it seems to have taken some time for you to discover it."

The next afternoon, however, found her repenting her words.

"I wish Rex did n't exasperate me so, Jack," she said suddenly.

"What's the matter with you two? You never seem to get on," John responded, with masculine bluntness.

"I know it. I'm sorry; but I don't think it's all my fault."

"But everybody likes Rex."

"I'm somebody," she retorted.

"Well, why don't you like him?"

"Because he is so everlastingly cocky," she replied frankly. "From the first day I ever saw him till to-day, I've never seen him when he did n't behave as if he were the one great toad in a puddle full of tadpoles. It drives me half frantic. He's polite to the tadpoles — sometimes; but his very politeness goes against my grain."

"Peggy, you are n't fair to Rex."

Peggy liked John. In certain ways, the tall, blond, self-contained fellow came rather near to her girlish ideals. Just now, she liked his direct defence of his friend.

"What makes you think so?" she asked more gently.

"I don't think; I know. You take him on the surface, and you hate him because he teases

you. Of course he teases you. He teases everything. But you don't see the other side, that he's always generous and jolly, always ready to share his bread and cheese with the next man."

"And always ready to let you know he thinks he is just about perfection," Peggy added discontentedly.

John looked at her haughtily for a moment.

"Peggy Arterburn, if you were a boy, I'd thrash you for that speech. As long as you're a girl, I suppose I've got to reason with you, though I never yet saw a girl that would listen to reason," he said sharply.

Peggy stared approvingly at the scarlet spot that was showing itself in either cheek. Anger was undoubtedly becoming to John Myers.

"And I never yet saw a man who would take time to do any reasoning," she retaliated.

"Well, you just listen now. Rex Barrett was brought up in a family that thought the world was n't good enough for him."

"So were you." Peggy's accent was full of composure.

"What if I was? But there's the point. It came within an ace of spoiling me. Ask Ursula. But Rex never has been spoiled."

"No," Peggy drawled. "He's past that."

John crossed his knees with an angry jerk.

"Look here, Peggy Arterburn, you don't know what you're talking about. There isn't a more popular man in his class than Rex Barrett; there isn't a more generous one, or one more loyal to his friends than he is."

"That's what Nathalie says," Peggy answered calmly. "I don't agree with her, though."

"Just because you don't know him —"

Peggy interrupted his sentence.

"I have known him a good deal longer than you have, you know."

"But not as well."

"Don't be too sure," she said loftily.

John changed his line of argument.

"Peggy, have you ever known Rex to do a sneaky thing, or a thing that was caddish?"

"What do you mean by *caddish*?"

"Off color. Not like a man. Oh, you know what I mean."

Peggy rebuked him.

"No. Please remember that, in Northford, we don't talk student slang."

"That's not student slang; it's a good English word. But I don't want to fight about

side issues; I want to find out what's the matter with Rex Barrett."

"But you just said there was n't anything the matter with Rex Barrett."

"Well, hang it, there is n't!"

"Then how can you expect to find it out?"

John rose stiffly and started down the steps. Nonchalantly Peggy rocked to and fro, until he was half way across the lawn. Then she called, —

"Oh, Jack, come back!"

"Can't," he answered, without turning his head.

"Why not?"

"Letters to write."

With a dozen swift steps, she gained his side, and stood looking up at him with merry, mocking eyes.

"You know that is nothing in the world but a fib, Jack Myers. Two minutes ago, you were settled for the whole afternoon. You'd much better come back and finish fighting it out. It's sneaky to run away after the first round."

He glanced down at her eager brown face above the crisp white gown, and his anger cooled a little.

"Peggy, you are a trial," he said, as he

allowed himself to be escorted back to the veranda.

"I know that. That's why I am so good for you all. The best salad needs a little red pepper," she returned. Then, as she seated herself, her wayward mood suddenly left her. "Jack, I like the way you stand up for Rex. It is very becoming to you," she added.

"I want you to like Rex."

"Perhaps I do, better than I am willing to show."

"What's the harm of showing it?"

Peggy rested her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands. Her arms showed round and brown where her thin sleeves fell away from them, and her hair, ruffled by the summer breeze, stood out from her face in loosened rings. For the moment, her shrewd eyes were gentle, and John, as he watched her, told himself that this momentary mood sat well upon her.

"I'm not so sure you would show it in my place," she said slowly. "Rex teases me; he makes it perfectly evident that it is all Nathalie with him, that he thinks I am nothing but a pert child. He is always so easy and elegant, and so — so immaculate that he makes me feel

shabby and commonplace in comparison. It's not that I am afraid of him. I'm no more afraid of him than I am of you, but you never make me feel like a hanger-on. It is n't exactly that he patronizes me, either; but he just makes me feel at a disadvantage, whenever I am with him."

"I don't see why."

"Neither do I; but it is there, and it makes me fighty. If he were n't always so the best of every single situation, I should get over it," Peggy replied, with a recurrent wave of impatience. "If just once, one single time, I could see Rex Barrett get the worst of things, I should n't be afraid of him any more."

John looked at her distrustfully.

"You don't want anything to happen to him, Peggy?"

"Of course not. I'm not so bad as that. Away down underneath it all, I like Rex; at least, I should like him, if I dared," she answered. "It's only that I don't dare. We never meet on even ground, and I hate being the under dog in all the fights. If the time ever comes that Rex does lose his luck, I will stand by him as well as anybody."

And she was true to her word.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT The Savins, amateur theatricals were the order of the day. Home-made wigs and slashed doublets of cotton flannel lay about on veranda chairs, and Kingsley and John wandered about with playbooks sticking out of their side pockets. Peggy's will had been law, during the week following the office episode, and, for some days, Peggy had been willing an out-door play with all her might and main. Accordingly, she had resolved to strike while the iron was hot.

Hubert McAlister, mindful of certain chapters of his own boyhood, had agreed with Peggy that the plan was a good one. He had promised to furnish the audience, if Peggy would furnish the actors. Together, they had enlisted the sympathies of Mrs. Farrington; and, after many hours of anxious council, they had decided upon a play by the latest-elected Academician. To Mrs. Farrington's plea for its suitability and

its literary merits, Peggy had added the more prosaic one of its needing but six characters and a mob, and the mob, she argued, could be left to the imagination. Then, the council ended, she sallied forth to gather together her company.

To her surprise, she met with unexpected successes and unexpected obstacles. John, on whom she had counted as a sure ally, scoffed at the whole idea, and denied his ability to act, or even to learn his lines. Kingsley, on the other hand, plunged into the discussion with great zest, offered to take any or all of the parts, from the hero to the mob, and, in the space of five minutes, gave her more practical suggestions regarding stagecraft than she had gained from her whole Northford experiences.

“But, if we can't have Jack, we may as well give up the whole thing,” Peggy said mournfully, after she emerged, worsted, from an hour-long argument with John.

“Never say die, Peggy Ann,” Kingsley advised her cheerfully. “I'll play all the parts but yours, if need be; but we are going to put the thing through.”

“What do you suppose is the reason he won't act?” she demanded.

“He says he is bound to have stage fright,”

Ursula answered, from her seat farther up the slope.

“Perfect nonsense! I’d be ashamed to own it, anyway,” Peggy said irately. “It’s mean to break up the whole play, too. Just think how lovely it would be, out here under these trees!”

“Can’t you wrestle with Pettijack, Ursula?” Kingsley asked.

“No use. When he makes up his mind, he can’t be budged, any more than Mount Ararat can. He —”

Peggy interrupted.

“He’s not going to get off so easily as all that. You go for him, Rex. Then, if that does n’t work, I’ll attack him again.”

“Can’t we get on without him?” Ursula suggested.

“I don’t care whether we can or can’t. We just won’t. He has no business to look *Lorenzo* to perfection, and then refuse to act,” Peggy said undauntedly. “What’s more, he is going to act.”

“Don’t be too sure. Let’s count up, and see what material we have already. You are going to do *Marie*, Peggy.”

“Unless Ursula wants it,” Peggy answered, with reluctant generosity.

Ursula's color came. She too loved theatricals; she too had been casting covetous eyes over the lines of *Marie*, the heroine.

"Oh, I think you 'd better do *Marie*, Peggy."

"Not if you want it." Peggy's accent was courteously hostile.

"But you have all the care."

"All the more reason I should have a small part." Peggy's tone lost its courteous hostility and became viciously polite.

"But *Marie* is the best part."

"So I think."

"And you want me to take it?"

"I think perhaps it would be better on some accounts if you were to take it," Peggy explained elaborately.

She had reckoned without her host. Ursula's face lighted, as she hastened to close the bargain.

"Well, if you really think so. But it's so dear of you, Peggy, to give up *Marie*, when I know you would make so much more of it than I can."

"I don't know. If you believe I can do it bet—"

Peggy was already repenting of her rash generosity; but Ursula rushed on in happy unconsciousness, —

"Well, you're a dear, generous girl, and I will do the very best I can."

Peggy glared at her in silent wrath; but Ursula was dazzled by the sun in her eyes, and saw nothing.

"What will you take, then?" Ursula asked.

"*Toinette*."

"Peggy! That's the poorest part of all," Ursula protested. "She is nothing but a servant."

"What of that? I've come to the conclusion that that's what I'm best fitted for," Peggy said gruffly, for the sudden disappointment had wrecked all her carefully-built castles in the air. As *Marie*, she had planned to astonish her brother and Hubert McAlister with the tragic power of her acting. As *Toinette*, the maid, she could merely walk through her part, in grim revolt at its tameness.

"But it is so short," Ursula urged again.

"So much the less to learn," Peggy retorted.

"Why don't you be the mother?"

"Nathalie is built for that."

"Well; but I'm sorry. Now, if you really want me to talk to Jack, I'll see what I can do with him." And Ursula rose and sauntered away towards the house, still too absorbed in

her own content to pay any heed to Peggy's darkening face.

A pause followed her going. Peggy was too full of woe to dare trust her voice just then. Circumstances had run away with her, and had betrayed her into the involuntary giving up of the one thing she had been most determined to possess. Kingsley, meanwhile, had been watching the scene with interest. Ursula had had no notion of being selfish; nevertheless, for the first time in his life, Kingsley's sympathies had been wholly with Peggy. From the first, it had been tacitly understood that Peggy was to have the part of *Marie*. Now, caught in a trap of her own making, it had never seemed to occur to her to reassert her lost rights. A word from him would have set the matter straight; but he was possessed of a sudden curiosity to see how the virtue of renunciation would sit upon Peggy's shoulders. Plainly, it galled her; but it was not unbecoming, and Kingsley resolved to let it rest there.

"Oh, dear!" Peggy said at length, when Ursula's figure vanished from sight among the trees.

Kingsley purposely misunderstood her.

"Too bad Pettijack won't act; is n't it?"

"It's not that; but —"

"Oh, it will go off all right, Peggy Ann. Ask Hal to take the odd part."

"Hal? Harry Arterburn?" she said blankly.

"Sure."

"He won't act."

"Why not won't he?"

"He's too old."

"Mac is going in for it."

"That's different."

"They're just of an age."

"Yes; but Mac will act because Nathalie does."

"And Hal will act because Ursula does. Want to bet?"

"No; there is n't chance enough for you, to make it fair. Harry Arterburn would no sooner act than he would pick a pocket."

"Offer him *Alphonse* and see," Kingsley predicted cheerfully.

"*Alphonse*? It's *Alphonse* you're going to do."

"No; I've changed my mind. I want *Jacques*."

"*Jacques*! Rex, that's a worse part than mine, and you have n't any Ursula to —"

"Steady!" Kingsley cautioned her. "When

you've done a good piece of work, Peggy Ann, don't add any finishing touches, or you may spoil it. But *Jacques* has a possibility that appeals to me. There's the one scene over the fence, where *Jacques* and *Toinette* have the stage to themselves, and they can make as much or as little of it as they please."

Peggy flushed under the steadfast gaze that seemed to be looking her over with a new interest. Then she flushed still deeper, as she caught his meaning. She gave a short, sidelong nod of decision.

"Rex, we'll do it together; and, what's more, we'll make it the main scene of the whole play."

Satisfied with his manœuvre, Kingsley rolled over on his back and lay blinking up at the sun.

"Modesty is n't your strong point, Peggy Ann," he observed. "Nevertheless, I think you have told the truth. Now I want you to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Do you promise?"

"Never, without knowing what I'm promising."

"Then you're no woman," Kingsley re-

turned calmly. "They generally promise in haste, and break their promises at leisure."

"Much you know about it," Peggy replied hotly. "Women always keep their promises, women worth counting, that is. And, even if they did n't, I don't think it's manners to slander women to a woman's face."

Kingsley peered over his shoulder.

"No; I mean myself," she explained hotly.

"You? You're nothing but a little girl."

Peggy sniffed in taciturn hostility.

"Why, it seems only yesterday," Kingsley went on, with thoughtful deliberation; "that you upset Nathalie's piecebags, and went to sleep on the ruins."

Peggy's color came.

"Rex, I wish you would remember there are some things —"

"It was one day when you were shut up in the closet," Kingsley continued.

"Kingsley, keep still! What was it you wanted me to promise?"

Kingsley came out from his reminiscent mood with a jerk.

"Oh, yes. And you'll promise?"

"Not in the dark."

“ Like the dark closet? You were put in there because — ”

Peggy rose.

“ Where are you going, Peggy Ann? ”

“ Into the house. ”

“ Don't. ”

“ I prefer to. ”

“ *Pax vobiscum!* ” Kingsley remarked composedly. “ Being interpreted, that means we'll cry quits and start again. Don't let's fight, Peggy Ann. It is entirely too warm. ”

“ I did n't begin it. ”

“ No; perhaps not. Therefore it's your place to end it. As I said before, *pax vobiscum!* Now, promise me this: if you do *Toinette* to my *Jacques*, promise me you won't rehearse our one scene with the others, or tell them anything about it until the final dress rehearsal. ”

“ Is that all? Of course, I'll promise that. But what a fuss to make over such a small matter! ”

“ Don't be too sure it is a small matter, Peggy Ann. ”

“ It is only five or six speeches apiece. ”

“ Mayhap. Let be; let be! ” Kingsley tapped his brow, waved his hands, palm up,

and then, rising, departed without another word.

Late that same evening, he walked into Mrs. Farrington's library, kicked a hassock to her side and then coiled up his long length ingratiatingly at her feet.

"Auntie Teddy, am I your pet and darling favorite nevvv?" he demanded.

Resting her hand on his head, she tilted the head backwards and looked down into his eyes.

"Certainly not. Mac is my favorite," she returned, laughing.

"Fickle woman! When I was ill, once on a time, you called me your dearest boy."

"It was merely a figure of speech, Rex. Still, you'll pass in a crowd."

"So glad! But now I want you to do something for me, Aunt Ted. By the way, did anyone ever think to mention to you that you have the beauty of Venus and the mental graces of Minerva?"

"Often. But what do you want?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that dramatic writing is just in your line?"

"Flatterer!"

"No; honor bright, I'm getting to the point," Kingsley protested. "Are you too

busy with your everlasting old novel to rewrite one scene in this play we are going to give?"

"Which?"

"The little one between *Toinette* and *Jacques*."

"But that's no scene at all, Rex. What do you want to do with it?"

"Now you see here." Kingsley rose, as he spoke, and faced his aunt from the hearthrug. "There is n't anything to it now; but there's got to be. Peggy and I are going to do it, and we want you to write it over and make it into one of the crack scenes."

"You and Peggy? But I thought —"

Kingsley interrupted her.

"So did we all, till a few minutes ago. Ursula has upset it all, though. It was this way. Peggy had an attack of manners and offered *Marie's* part to Ursula. Such attacks are so rare that no wonder Ursula took it in earnest. She gobbled it up from under Peggy's very nose. Peggy was ready to wail or to fight, or both; then she got a good grip of herself and stood by her words, and Ursula went off, without any idea that Peggy's heart was cracked. As a rule, I've no use for Peggy. This time, though, I rather liked her, and I'm

going to help her out of her woes. I have told her I want to do *Jacques*, and I made her promise to keep our scene a secret till the final day. Now, the question is: will you rewrite that scene, or must I try to do it, myself? Somehow or other, it's got to be done; but I shall probably bungle it entirely."

Mrs. Farrington sat staring at her tall nephew, while she made a swift mental calculation.

"Bring over the book, to-morrow, Rex," she said then. "If you'll have it here, by the time I'm through breakfast, I will see what I can do with it. It's not in my line; but I'd like to help you out with Peggy."

"Aunt Ted, you are n't half bad," he responded gratefully.

"Neither is Peggy," she replied; "and I am delighted that at last you are beginning to find it out."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“**A**FTER this, I’ll never say that things don’t happen outside of stories,” Peggy observed contentedly.

Regardless of appearances, she was sitting bareheaded on a bench overlooking the Hudson. Behind her, the Tomb rose white against the indigo sky; before her, the Palisades stretched away to the northward; beside her was Hubert McAlister. The August sun above was sending great splashes of light down through the trees, brightening the girl’s hair and scorching her nose to an unlovely scarlet. Peggy was heedless of sunburn, however; her contentment was too perfect to be marred by the thought of the blistered nose to come.

“Then you’re having a good day?”

“Ain’t I!” she said, with the occasional lapse into country vernacular which marked her more earnest moods. “And to think we used to live in sight of all this, and I never cared a row of pins about it!”

"You were rather too young."

"Ten. I ought to have had my eyes open by that time. Still, one needs to live in the country to appreciate the city. Nathalie makes me cross; she takes it all so as a matter of course. Wait till I get here, and see!"

"How long must I wait?" her companion asked idly, with his eyes fixed on the shining pathway of the broad river.

"Next year. A year from next fall, I mean."

"Are you coming here then?"

"Yes." Peggy spoke with conscious pride. "Hal thinks he needs me to keep house for him."

"How do you like the prospect?"

"I love it." Peggy clasped her hands rapturously. "Just think of being here, right in the middle of this great city, where I can see it going on all the time, night and day, day in and day out!"

"And the housekeeping?"

Her face fell.

"Oh, that will be the ugly part of it. Still, I shall make it as easy as I can. We can eat breakfast foods and baker's bread, and Hal says there will be a person to scrub up."

Man though he was and apart from domestic cares, Mr. McAlister threw back his head and laughed like a boy.

"Poor Harry!" he said at length.

"I don't see why."

"I was thinking of the starvation that awaits him."

"Oh, he won't starve," Peggy said confidently. "You'll see how well I am going to do. I shall be in Northford, all this next year, and Cousin Eudora will teach me to do things. I can learn in a year, I know. The worst of it is, Cousin Eudora is one of those old-fashioned women who think housekeeping is the only thing that counts."

"Well, is n't it?"

"No. I don't believe in fussing over it so much. One can get along easily, and be just as well off. Nathalie makes me wild, with her everlasting messing, and dusting, and turning vases of flowers round and round to see which is the company side. If things are clean and wholesome, that's all I care. I want a little time for other things."

"I am afraid Harry will regret his house-keeper," Mr. McAlister said, with the friendly smile that took so much of the sting out of his rebukes.

"Then he'd better find it out, before it is too late," Peggy said a little mutinously.

"Or the housekeeper would better make up her mind to work a little harder."

"Nobody ever said I was lazy." Peggy's accent was that of injured innocence.

"No."

"Nor that I shirked."

"No."

She looked up at him with some asperity.

"Do you think I shirk, Mr. McAlister?"

The answer rang true, and it satisfied even Peggy.

"I think you are the best worker I have ever had in my office, Margaret."

"Then what in the world is the matter?" she demanded.

"Nothing; only that I don't want you to spoil your good record, when you go to house-keeping. It's all in you, Peggy. Just let it come out. Hal needs a sister to look out for him. Make yourself as invaluable to him, next year, as you have been to me, this summer."

The color rose in her cheeks.

"Have I really been invaluable, Mr. McAlister?"

"Almost. You have worked well, and,

what's more, you have worked as if your whole heart were in it, as if you enjoyed it."

"So I have."

"No more than I. I shall miss you, when you go back to Northford, Peggy."

She faced him abruptly.

"Miss me in the office, or miss me humanly?" she demanded.

"Both."

She folded her hands at the back of her brown head, and eyed him, half thoughtfully, half mockingly. Her lips were smiling; but her eyes were gentler than usual and altogether happy.

"Then I may as well sing my *Nunc Dimittis*," she observed. "It's the very first time in my life, Mr. McAlister, that anybody has ever missed me, and I'm pow'ful 'fraid it will be the last."

Hubert McAlister had not thought it necessary to specify the business which had called him to New York, that day. He had simply announced to the family at The Savins that such a trip was to be made and, apparently quite as an afterthought, he had invited Peggy to go with him. For three entire days, the girl had lived in a state of rapturous anticipation,

alternating, in her leisure moments, between confiding her delight to the velvet ears of Sophia Smith and rearranging the row of collar, belt, gloves and purse that lay on her dressing table in readiness for the early-morning start. And yet the morning was hours old to Peggy when, immaculate in her plain gown, she stood on the platform, waiting for the train which was to bear her cityward.

During the two-hour journey, Mr. McAlister's business dissolved into the thinnest possible pretence; and, as they left the cars, Peggy realized that she had before her the prospect of an entire day of holiday making. She felt inclined to gasp at the joyous prospect. Then she rose to meet it with an attempted nonchalance which merely increased her companion's understanding of her satisfaction.

"I must step in at Brander's office, for a minute," he said, as they were passing through the station. "Then we'll go to the St. Denis for lunch, and have the afternoon to play. What do you want to see?"

Peggy's answer was prompt and unexpected.

"Wall Street and Grant's Tomb."

"We are going almost to Wall Street now. What else? The shops?"

"What's the use?" Peggy said bluntly. "I've all the clothes I need, and no money to get any others."

Her companion looked slightly relieved. His idea of taking a young girl to New York consisted chiefly in the dread of dawdling aimlessly among yards of silk and ranks of yellow posts surmounted with be-garlanded hats. Peggy's programme pleased him. Nevertheless, he forced himself to a remonstrance.

"But would n't you like to see them?"

"What for? You can get plenty of clothes, such as they are, in Northford. You don't find Wall Street there, and I've always wanted to see how it looks, outside the picture in the geography."

"Well, is it like the geography picture?" Mr. McAlister asked, two hours later, as they stood in the south gateway of Trinity churchyard, and looked back into the narrow cañon from which they had just emerged.

"Oh, ever so much better and bigger and busier. I'm so glad to have been there, and I love it all, the knowing how it used to be the very edge of the city, and the feeling that now it is the very middle of things and that whole fortunes are made there, every day."

"And lost, too," he reminded her gravely.

"Yes," she answered, with equal gravity. "There's Jack, you know. I kept thinking of him, while we were in there, thinking that, somehow or other, if it had n't been for Wall Street, he would have been so rich he would n't care whether his clothes wore out or not."

"Do you want to be rich, Peggy?"

As so often happened, her reply surprised him.

"No; not especially. I'd a good deal rather understand how money is made than make it, myself."

He looked down at her thoughtfully, as they paced the walks of the quaint old churchyard.

"Margaret, you ought to be a business woman."

He was astonished at the hot wave of color that surged up across her face.

"Oh, I wish I could!"

"Why can't you?"

She shut her teeth for a moment, before replying quietly, —

"But what about Hal?"

"Yes, I know. It would be a good thing for you to be together. In a way, he needs you. Still, I'm not sure you —"

"Let's not talk about it," she begged him. "It is so queer how you go into things, Mr. Hubert. For ever so long, I have been uneasy, without knowing just what it was I wanted. Now, all at once, you have told me what it is."

"Perhaps you would n't find it any better than writing novels," he suggested.

"Don't. That was just a streak of idiocy," she returned. "I want to forget it."

"You may want to forget this."

"No; this is what I've been after, all the time. I went for the other, just as babies grab at all sorts of things, before they learn to steer their hands," she said sagely. "I honestly believe this is the real thing; but I don't see how I am to get it."

"Wait," he advised her. "Things don't come in a day."

Late afternoon found them on the bench by the river. Hubert had been an excellent guide, and Peggy had explored to her heart's content. Glad to rest and to enjoy the beauty of the picture at her feet, she had allowed the silence to last for long minutes. Mr. McAlister broke it.

"Margaret, I wonder if you realize how much you know about the Thomas case."

She dropped her reverie abruptly, and be-

came once more the alert, eager Peggy who occupied a corner of his office.

"I know a good deal," she answered. "This morning gave me ever so many new points. I was sorry to be in the way, for I could n't help hearing all you were saying."

"I knew you heard. What did you think about it?"

"That it cleared up most of the weak spots on our side," she replied shrewdly. "Now, if we can only get hold of that missing footman, we're all straight to the end."

He smiled at her involuntary use of the first person.

"Yes, that is the present tangle. But he may come to light before October."

"Is that when the case comes up?"

"Yes, unless they postpone it again."

"Oh, dear! I shall be in Northford by that time, and miss all the fun. It has been so interesting and so full of queer turns and tricks. Is all law like that?"

He shook his head.

"No; most of it is prosy and dull enough to make up. This is an uncommonly exciting case."

"I should say so, a man that drowned him-

self in a bathtub, and left a will leaving his ebony brushes to his sons and neglecting to mention his money!" Peggy's tone betrayed her amusement. "But I have just loved it all, Mr. Hubert. It has been the cream of the whole summer."

"And you think you understand it?"

"Why, of course," Peggy answered coolly.

He watched her for a minute. Then, obeying some sudden whim, he said, —

"Margaret, I'm going to try you, and see. Suppose you begin at the very beginning and tell me how the case stands."

"With what I heard, this morning, put in at the right places?" she questioned eagerly.

"Yes."

"All right. Listen!"

He did listen, and he confessed himself astonished at what he heard. For full ten minutes, Peggy's tongue wagged ceaselessly, while her eyes lighted and the deep color burned in her cheeks. Step by step, she went over the case, sifting her facts and grouping them by their importance, not with the understanding of a child, but with the clear-headed grasp of a grown person. It was no mere feat of memory. The facts she had overheard, that morn-

ing, were as neatly labelled and put in their proper places as were those she had so often heard discussed in the office at home. As he listened, Hubert McAlister told himself that the tempestuous, aggressive, cocksure Peggy was on the threshold of her right work. For a moment, he started up, meaning to warn her to keep her secrets well in hand. Then he reproached himself. Peggy Arterburn was not the girl to babble about facts of primary importance. He was willing to trust himself in her hands. He settled back in his seat, and heard her in silence and to the end.

His silence lasted so long that she faced him uneasily.

“Well?” she demanded.

Slowly he drew a long breath.

“You have surprised me, Margaret,” he said then. “The simple truth is that you know more about this case than any one except myself. It may be something of a responsibility for you; but I think you will be able to meet it. The time may come when I shall need your help.”

Her eyes met his eyes squarely.

“When you do, I’ll be on hand,” she answered, simply as a child.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“NERVOUS, Peggy Ann?”

“Not a bit,” she returned undauntedly, though her cheeks had gone white underneath her paint.

Kingsley's laugh was restless.

“I am, then. Who ever supposed that Uncle Hu and Aunt Ted would have imported such a caravan? They must have been waiting to pay off their social debts for the last ten years. Peggy Ann, I confess to a sickly feeling of fear.”

“What's the use? Oh, look at that fat woman with the purple lawn frills!”

“Where is your respect? She is Mrs. Judge of Probate. The dromedary in green is Mrs. Baptist Minister.”

“Come to the theatre?”

“Certainly. She is only Mrs. Minister. Peggy, suppose they don't like our scene?”

“Then they can lump it,” she replied composedly, as she settled her cap. “It's the best scene, and we do it awfully well.”

"There's one thing about it: you'll never be hung for your modesty, Peggy Ann. Still, if it does n't go, we can throw the blame on Aunt Ted."

Peggy rose to Mrs. Farrington's support.

"Yes; but it is the best part of the whole play. I wonder what the others will say, when it comes."

"Don't care. That's our show, Peggy Ann."

"How did you ever get them to cut it out at rehearsal?" she asked.

"Told them we fought like fury, every time we went through it, and they'd much better keep out of the way."

Peggy laughed till she shook her cap awry.

"Rex! What an awful fib!"

"Mayhap. Still, they could n't contradict me, knowing our habits."

His tone was mocking and, underneath her paint, Peggy flushed a little. The laugh died out of her eyes, as she faced her companion gravely.

"But do you know, Rex, I've an idea that the worst of our fighting may be in the past."

He looked down at her quizzically.

"Feel ill anywhere, Peggy Ann?"

"Ill? No. Why?"

“Penitence, and all that. It sounds sort of mortuary. When people like you talk about their sins being in the past, it generally is supposed to mean business.”

She eyed him half merrily, half in despair.

“Rex, you are incorrigible.”

“Yes. It runs in the family. Mac used to be; then he handed on his supply to me. He was saved by an Arterburn,” Kingsley added suggestively.

“Oh.”

“Yes. It may be that the same fate is in store for me. Strange if you should prove to be my means of sanctification, Peggy Ann! It will be one more proof that good can come from untoward sources.”

“And that untoward objects can be moved by good influences,” she retorted, with a good-natured indifference which of old she had been powerless to show in the presence of Kingsley’s teasing. “But do stop talking nonsense, Rex, and help me compose my mind. Are the others dressed?”

“Ursula and Nathalie are ready. Mac was wrestling with his wig, when I left him. It was too tight in the cerebellum, and he could n’t make it stick.”

“ You need n't be critical; your bald spot is fearfully askew. But do tell me who all these people are. Does n't Mrs. Farrington look too sweet, out there under the trees? ”

“ She can't hold a candle to the mater, ” Kingsley objected, for he was an adoring son.

In all truth, Mrs. Barrett looked an ideal hostess, tall and graceful and gracious in her long white gown. Beside her stood Mrs. Farrington, helping to receive the many guests, for Hubert McAlister had been true to his promise, and Peggy's play was assuming the dignity of a function. The broad lawn of The Savins was crowded; dainty gowns swished over the crisp turf, and an occasional black coat threw into relief the soft colors of midsummer finery. Out-door plays were a rarity in that neighborhood, and the McAlisters had a host of friends. Nevertheless, only Mrs. Farrington and her twin brother below and the two conspirators peering out from an up-stairs window knew that one scene of the play had been rewritten for the occasion by one of the great American novelists, and that, into this little scene, she had put some of the most effective work which had ever come from her energetic pen. Only the writer herself knew what had been her object in the task.

Even Mrs. Barrett, critical in all things, admitted to herself that she was satisfied, an hour later. The setting itself was enough to inspire the least enthusiastic of actors. Far at the west of the grounds, the hill dropped away to form a natural amphitheatre where the guests sat ranged on rugs and cushions, a brilliant patch of color beneath the dark green oak trees. Wings of tree trunks, flies of drooping boughs, and a background of orchard and meadow bounded the great stage where the little romance worked itself out to a sunny conclusion.

It was all very Frenchy and very frothy until, close to the beginning of the final act, master and mistress left the stage to their servants, and the attention focussed itself upon *Toinette* and *Jacques*.

“Why — but —” Ursula protested softly in the background.

Mrs. Farrington, also in the background, motioned her to silence.

“Wait,” she said briefly. “Your cue won’t come for quite a long time.”

Merry, mocking, tormenting, yet plaintive, the maid was passing from mood to mood, now teasing her would-be lover, now in hot dispute,

now dropping for a moment her mask of waywardness to show the face of true maidenhood hidden underneath. Then, of a sudden, she became haughty again, and repelled his advances with a proud disdain. From the impersonal discussion of the foibles of master and mistress, the scene wound on, turning and twisting this way and that, in and out among *Toinette's* moods until, with a sudden rush, it ended in the love-making which had been foreordained in the beginning.

It was the great scene of the play. The secret had been kept so well that none of the other actors had gained an inkling of what had been in store for them. Long hours of careful rehearsing had done their work and, as the happy lovers sauntered away into the wings, the applause from the audience was caught up and echoed tenfold from behind the scenes.

"Shall we go back?" Peggy asked.

"You bet! I don't often get an encore, Peggy Ann," Kingsley responded jovially. "I'm going to have the good of this one, so you may as well come along and see me do it."

"You need n't take all the credit," she reminded him saucily.

He stared down approvingly at the top of her head. All at once, that day, it had struck him that little Peggy was going to blossom out into an uncommonly pretty girl. Of her cleverness, he had never felt any doubt; now he wondered whether he had ever fully realized certain of her other qualities.

"I'm willing to take all the credit," he returned calmly. "You've done all the work; you ought to leave something to me."

Her face brightened, and she held out her hand with a gesture which was half the wayward Peggy, half the coquettish French *Toinette*.

"That's the first good word you ever said of me, Rex," she told him.

"Very likely. I'm not so sure it will be the last, though," he answered, as, hand in hand, they bowed low before the audience.

Back in the rear rank, Mrs. Barrett touched Harry's arm.

"Confess that you are proud of your sister," she bade him.

"Of both."

"No. This is Peggy's turn. Nathalie is almost perfect; but her success does n't lie in the line of the drama. Peggy was distracting."

“What about Rex?” he queried, with a smile.

“He was just her foil; she has made her part and his, too. Don't grudge her her little success, Harry. It is wonderfully becoming to her; she fairly snaps with vitality, and I never saw her look half so well before.”

“So Rex thinks,” her husband suggested.

Mrs. Farrington had joined them. Now she faced Mr. Barrett with a smile.

“That was just what I intended he should do,” she said.

He gave her a sudden glance of comprehension.

“Ted, I always knew you came near being a genius; but do you mean that you did it on purpose?”

“Did what?” his wife inquired.

“Wrote up Peggy in italics, put her in just as she was, only more so, and then left Rex to discover her good points.”

Mrs. Farrington laid her finger on her lip.

“Yes; but don't let the others hear. I thought it was the best way to show him what she really was like.”

“Apparently he approves,” his father said,

with a comically expressive glance towards the distant spot among the trees where Peggy and her companion sat absorbed in a conversation so close that presently it led to their missing their cue.

Mrs. Barrett studied them thoughtfully for a moment. Then she turned to Harry.

"Of course, they are nothing but babies, and Rex is my cardiac core," she said deliberately. "Nevertheless, after years and years have lapsed, I am not sure I should mind at all, if he did."

Side by side *Toinette* and *Jacques* received the congratulations of the departing guests. Ursula as heroine and Mac as hero each held sway in a small circle; but, for the hour, servants' hall was the fashionable rendezvous, and Peggy's small head was wellnigh turned with the praises that were showered upon it. Kingsley, meanwhile, was receiving his share of commendation with an amused tolerance which was inexpressibly galling to Peggy to whom the affair had been a matter of deadly earnest.

"I believe you don't care a snap, after all the fuss," she said irately, as the last guest went rustling away.

Kingsley scratched his bald spot thoughtfully.

"Snap at me and see," he suggested at length.

"Thanks. I never snap." Peggy was tired, her girlish nerves were reacting from the excitement of the afternoon, and her tone was undeniably touchy.

"What about now?" he queried coolly, for it never once occurred to his masculine mind that the girl was weary and irritable. To his vast surprise, he had been finding Peggy a most enjoyable companion who, upon occasion, could meet teasing with teasing and give good interest. As the rehearsals had gone on, the occasions had become more and more frequent, until he had come to the conclusion that Peggy's new attitude would be a constant one. Three weeks before, he would have expected Peggy's next words. Now, however, they took him quite by surprise. Moreover, they hurt him keenly.

"It is enough to make anybody snappish, Rex Barrett, to have to work over you for three mortal weeks, and then have you step in and take all the credit. I really had no idea you could be as selfish as all that."

Peggy's thrust was neither true nor logical, as she was quite aware. Nevertheless, John's vaunting of his friend's generosity had rankled

in her mind. It had seemed to her that it had been given as a covert rebuke to herself, yet her resentment had been directed, not against John, but against Kingsley. Forgotten for weeks, it now flashed up again. She took no account of the fact that, without Kingsley's intervention, her own part in the play would have dwindled to insignificance; she took no account of the long, merry hours they had spent in rehearsal. She was tired. She was discovering, for the first time in her life, that even success is disappointing; and she vented her bad temper by aiming her thrust with vicious deliberation.

Kingsley undertook to reason with her.

"Peggy Ann, what do you mean? Everybody is shying laurels and compliments at you. Those that hit me are only the ones that miss fire."

"Oh, what is the use of discussing it?" she burst out. "At least, we can be thankful it's over and done with."

This time, he surveyed her in open astonishment.

"But I thought you enjoyed it, Peggy Ann."

"Do stop Peggy-Ann-ing me!" she said angrily. "You know it's not my name. Enjoy it? How could I?"

"The same way I did," Kingsley replied quietly, for, during the past days, he had developed a sound liking for Peggy, and he was loath to renew their former hostility.

Peggy, chin in air, turned on her heel.

"Then you must be a good deal more easily satisfied than I am," she said, as she walked away in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HER brother followed her to her room. "Come in," she said shortly, in answer to his knock.

As he entered, she saw that his blue eyes were full of trouble. Already a second reaction had come, and she met him anxiously.

"Hal, what is wrong?" she asked, before he had time to speak.

"I am a good deal disappointed."

"In me?"

"Yes, Peggy."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wanted you to like it so much. Did n't I do any of it well?"

"I don't mean the acting, Peggy."

"You liked that?"

"Yes. It was capital, and I was proud of my small sister."

Still in her maid's dress and cap, she faced him eagerly, her eyes shining again in her pleasure at his praise.

“I am so glad. I was acting right at you, Hal, wondering how you liked it, and yet not daring to look at you for a single minute.”

“You are a good deal of an actress, Peggy.”

She had dropped down on the side of her bed, where she sat looking up at him in smiling pleasure. Then something in the gravity of his tone struck her ear, and she grew grave in her turn.

“Then what did n't you like, Hal?”

“Your talk to Rex, just now.”

She rose.

“Were you listening?” she asked sharply.

“I was coming to congratulate you, and I could n't help hearing.”

She dropped back on the bed again, and wearily pushed her cap aside.

“Oh dear, I might have known you would be somewhere within range,” she lamented. “I never yet tried to make a good impression that I did n't go and spoil it all, the very next minute.”

“Because your impression is only skin deep?” he asked quietly.

“Harry Arterburn, how dare you say such things to me?” she demanded, in swift anger.

“Because they are true.”

“But they are n’t.”

For a minute, he stood hesitating, while he looked down at her heated, wrathful face. Then he seated himself beside her on the edge of the bed, and rested his hand on her shoulder. At first, she attempted to draw away from him. Then she sat still and passive.

“Peggy dear,” he said; “I hate to be always lecturing you. It must make you think me a fussy sort of fellow; but really it is on your account that I do it. When I know that I have a young sister who can be loyal and kindly and generous, it hurts my feelings to have other people thinking she is cranky and bad-tempered, just because she loses her temper now and then. When you have the other thing in you, Peggy, why can’t you show it to more people? There are only a few of us who know the other side of you. What is the reason?”

“Because I’m nothing in the world but a fire-cracker, Hal, a horrid little fire-cracker always ready to go off,” she answered, in a sudden wave of penitence.

“I know, dear; but I wish you were n’t. You can be such a trump, Peggy, that I want you to stay so. Your thorns are mostly on the outside; but they are very scratchy ones.”

Chin in hand, she sat eyeing the floor.

"But I don't scratch you, Hal."

"Not often now, Peggy. But you do scratch the others. Rex was all cut up, to-day."

Peggy gave a hostile sniff.

"Not he."

"Why?"

"It takes a good deal more than that to cut up Rex Barrett."

"Did you see his face, when you went away?"

"Of course not," she said shortly. "I don't have eyes in the back of my head."

"Well, I did. You hurt Rex, Peggy; I really don't see why it hurt him so much. But I — we all — had been so delighted over the fun you have had out of your rehearsals, and we hoped you were going to be good friends at last."

"I don't see why it's everybody's business what we do," Peggy muttered restively.

"Because we all are so very fond of Rex, and because a few of us know that Peggy Arterburn has more good in her than she likes people to find out. Now see here, Peggy. This summer has taught me a good many things, among others that I am very fond and proud of my small

sister. But it has taught me this: that my small sister needs an occasional lecture on her sins, and that her old brother is the best person to give it to her, just because there's nobody else who cares half so much for her. Now here's the lecture. Peggy, you must not let your temper run away with you. You must not get angry over trifles, or over nothing at all. You must be more patient and courteous with the others. It's not becoming to any girl to go about with a chip everlastingly balanced on her shoulder." Suddenly he rose and stood facing her. "That's all, Peggy," he said, with a complete change of tone. "Think it over, dear; have a little patience and a little pluck, and things will go better with you and with us all." And he left her alone.

An informal supper was served to actors and hosts, that night, on Mrs. Farrington's broad veranda. Peggy was the last to appear. She was still in costume; but the paint on her cheeks presented a curiously streaked appearance, and one side of her lower lip was caught between her teeth. With a nod to the others, she walked straight across to Kingsley and held out her hand.

"I'm sorry I was horrid," she said tersely.

The next afternoon, however, gave them both cause to forget the passing scar upon their new-formed friendship.

In one corner of The Savins under the trio of huge chestnut trees where, in her childhood, Mrs. Farrington had been accustomed to look for lurking Indians, the young people had constructed a species of athletic field. There was the tennis court, there was the little green where Kingsley was wont to console himself for the absence of any golf links, and there, affixed to the middle tree, hung Peggy's target.

Faithful to her resolution to ride on the cow-catcher of the train which should introduce the new sport, Peggy had worked patiently in her own behalf, that summer. No one of the others had even feigned to manifest the least interest in her hobby. Ursula scoffed; Nathalie predicted gory victims of her bow, and the boys ignored her completely. Accordingly, it was only Sophia Smith who could be induced to accompany Peggy to her practice. Once there and tied to a tree out of the way of harm to herself or to the arrows, the dog was accustomed to sit and smirk in idleness while her mistress toiled. It was toil, too. Peggy's thumb blistered and then became callous, her

back ached and her feet grew weary with the unending steps it took for her to find the arrows that went wide of the mark. Nevertheless, the girl persevered. Archery was a harder task than she had supposed. Accordingly, she shut her teeth and proceeded to master it. Peggy Arterburn had no respect whatsoever for the futilities of life.

The afternoon after the play found her tired and fractious. Even the office had dragged, that morning; lunch had been a period of stupid talk, and, lunch over, she gathered up her bow and Sophia, and started across the hill.

It was still early, so early that the noon sun lay hot over the grass. Peggy fastened Sophia to her usual tree. Then she dropped down on the turf and fanned herself with her hat.

“Archery may be warm work,” she said aloud; “but it is nothing to leading Sophia. That creature has the strength of a Jersey cow.”

She paused to look at her hard brown hands. Then she bent over, patted the dog's nose and stroked back her bristling eyebrows.

“Sophia, we're a good deal alike, old girl; are n't we?” she added thoughtfully. “We both tug at our leads; but the worst harm

we do is n't intentional. Oh dear, why did n't I tell Rex to come over and play some tennis, when it gets shady?"

Sophia refused to answer the question, and Peggy, turning her back on the dog, devoted herself to stringing her bow. That done, she picked up her arrows, paced off her distance from the target, and took deliberate aim.

It had been only during the past two or three weeks that Peggy's target had suffered, save by the onslaughts of Sophia Smith. The arrows had gone over it and under, to this side and to that, leaving the ringed expanse free from spot or puncture. Peggy's strength was great; her weapons flew far and wide; but, even now that she occasionally grazed the rim, the bull's-eye seemed to her as unattainable as ever.

"It is a great sight easier to hitch your wagon to a star than 't is to hitch your arrows into the bull's-eye," she muttered vengefully, as her first arrow apparently tried its best to impale the sun in the heavens.

She fitted a second arrow to her string, took steady aim, and had the mortification of feeling her thumb slip away from the cord. The arrow started straight towards the target, loitered,

sagged, and fell impotently, not twenty feet from Peggy's toes.

"That would have gone, if it only had," she commented to herself rather enigmatically. "Let's see if I can't make it, this time. The third is the lucky number."

Again she settled her arrow and took careful aim. Then, with all the strength of her sturdy muscles, she snapped the string. The arrow darted off on a swift, strong flight slightly to the left of the target, crashed through a bush and was lost to sight. The next minute, Peggy's heart stopped for a beat, and then began to batter her ribs until she could scarcely breathe.

"Rex!" she screamed. "Rex! Kingsley! Are you there?"

Waiting for no answering call, she went plunging away after the arrow. Over the grass, past the bush she flew. Then she stopped short in terror. On the ground just back of the bush sat Kingsley, his back towards her, and a little red stain marking the back of his head. At her exclamation, he turned slowly around, to show her a whimsical smile on a rather pale face.

"Two inches lower, and you'd have made a finish of me, Peggy Ann," he said coolly.

"As it is, you're the second Arterburn who has had designs on my head."

"But, Rex, have I killed you?" she demanded tragically.

"No; we McAlisters die hard," he answered. Then he dropped backwards towards Peggy who sprang to catch him in her arms.

Peggy's emergency training consisted solely of common sense. Nevertheless, it was only a moment before Kingsley's gray eyes opened again. In spite of his weakness, he smiled, as a great tear splashed down on his upturned face.

"Don't drown me, Peggy," he advised her weakly. "And it hurts to wash out cuts with salt water."

"Oh, please, please don't joke, Rex," she implored him a little hysterically.

He eyed her half mockingly, as he lay with his head in her lap.

"It would n't be myself, if I did n't," he answered, with a whimsical truthfulness which was destined to come back to her again and again in the after years.

"But are you terribly hurt?"

"About as much as I was when Nathalie slugged me with her driver. I shall live

through it, Peggy Ann. It is plain I am destined for the halter. It's disgustfully milk-soppish to faint, though. Do boost a little, and see if I can't sit up."

"No; you'd better lie still for a while," she urged.

"Why? It's nothing but a scratch."

Shutting her teeth, she took a steady look at the brown head in her lap. From crown to brow, it was marked with a scarlet line; but even Peggy, unaccustomed to such sights, could make out that the trouble was on the surface.

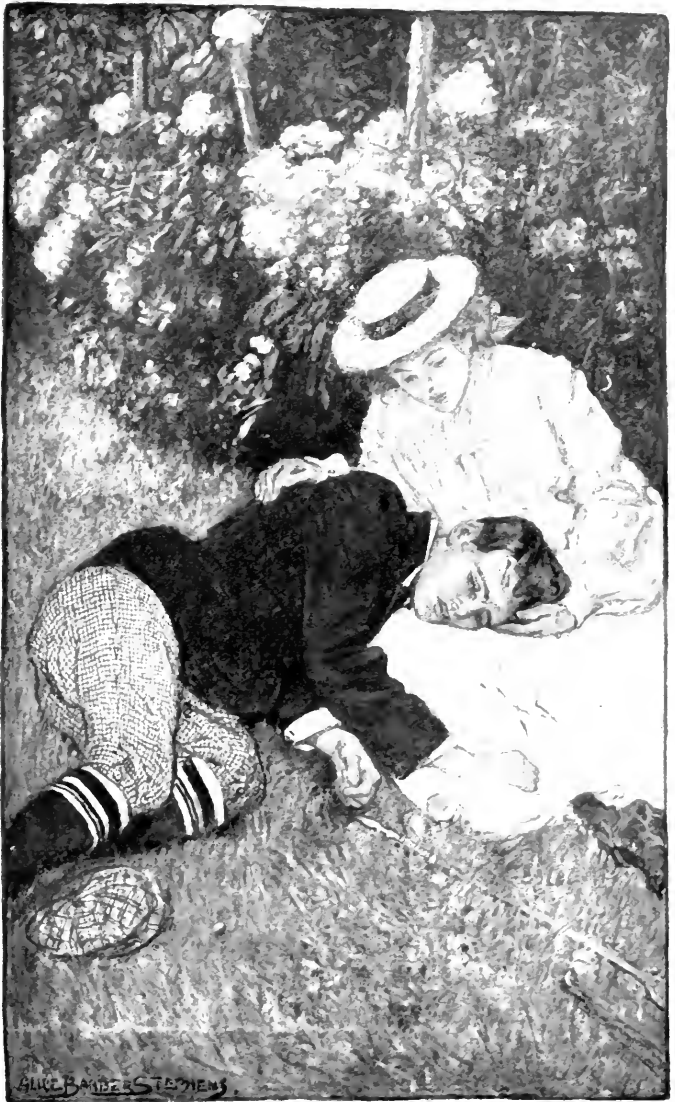
"And yet, it's awful to think I did it, Rex," she added, while a second shower dropped on his upturned face. "Truly, I'm sorry to cry all over you; but just suppose I had killed you!"

Far back in his gray eyes, there came a questioning look that slowly took form upon his lips.

"Should you have cared so very much, Peggy?"

This time, her head went down into her clasped hands.

"Oh, Rex, don't talk about it," she wailed. "It makes me sick to think of it, even, and it



ALICE BARBER STEPHENS.

would have been so terrible, just as we were getting not to fight and all. I believe it would have killed me."

His eyes showed his satisfaction, though his lips were laughing, as he answered, —

"Then we could have been buried in one grave, Peggy Ann, in a thoroughly sentimental fashion. But, as it is, I think we'll stick it out long enough to have a good many more fights."

The wound had stopped bleeding, and the color was coming back into his cheeks. Peggy breathed more freely, as she watched him, for she told herself that the worst was over. As yet, neither of them had any suspicion of what was still in store for Kingsley.

"How did you come to be here, anyway?" she asked suddenly.

At the question, the boy's face whitened a little.

"Oh, I forgot that part," he said, with some reluctance. "I was over here, this morning, and I must have dropped to sleep."

"And did n't go home to lunch?"

"No."

"How queer!" Then, as she watched him, she saw that something was wrong, and her

voice once more took on its sharper accent of fear. "What is it, Rex?"

"What's what?" He tried to meet her eyes unconcernedly.

"What is wrong?"

"What makes you think anything is?"

"I don't think; I know it. You may as well tell me what it is." Her sentences came, clear and detached.

"Why?"

"So that I can help you out."

"How do you know you can?"

"What is the use of wasting words?" she said impatiently. "You may as well tell me, Rex, and at least let me do the best I can."

He was silent for a minute, evidently thinking over her words. Then his gray eyes met her eyes steadily.

"I'm not sure there's any harm in telling you, Peggy. You won't babble and make a fuss. It's only this, I whacked at a golf ball, and missed it, and I half twisted myself in two. I'm afraid it has done something that it ought n't, and I don't want the mater to know it, for fear she'll worry. She has always been fussy about me, since the time I broke myself before, you know."

"And it hurt?" she asked sharply.

"Hurt! I should say it did. I managed to pull myself over into the shade, and then I think the pain must have let up a little, for I fell asleep. I suppose you waked me, and I sat up just in time to act as pincushion for your arrow."

"And now?" she said, with a steadiness that surprised him.

"Now I've got to get home, and you may find yourself made useful in a way you won't like, Peggy Ann. That house seems to me a day's journey away. Do you mind being turned into a walking-stick, till we get in sight of somebody?"

For her only answer, she turned and held out her two strong, brown hands.

"Let me pull you up," she said, smiling. "This is where my training with Sophia is bound to count."

Half way to the house, he halted wearily.

"Confound it! What a bore this is!" he said, as he rested his weight against a tree trunk. "Peggy, I'll break you in two, I'm such a big fellow."

"Not a bit," she protested dauntlessly. "You're nothing to Sophia. But sha'n't I call somebody?"

He shook his head.

“No. Promise you won't tell, Peggy Ann. It would just set them to fussing for nothing; and it won't last but a day. I'll pretend headache, and lie off till to-morrow; by that time, I shall have untwisted myself again. Mighty lucky you shot me; else, I'd have had to go hunt for an excuse to play ill.”

She bit her lip sharply. It was a new idea to her that Kingsley Barrett could be weak and in pain; and the idea hurt her.

“But you must n't let it go. Do tell Mac,” she begged him.

“Not yet, Peggy Ann,” he answered pluckily. “I don't want to make a fuss over nothing. Let's wait to see what the morrow will bring forth.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PEGGY appeared in the doorway of the library at The Savins, the next morning.

"Mr. Hubert?"

"Yes?"

"May I be late at the office?"

He looked up with a smile for the tall girl before him.

"Of course, Margaret."

Her eyes were uncommonly grave.

"Thank you," she said briefly. "I may be quite late."

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

Peggy never fibbed easily. Now there was a perceptible hesitation in her manner.

"N—no."

His eyes searched her face in kindly scrutiny. She blushed under his gaze.

"At least, nothing that I can tell you," she amended honestly.

"I'm sorry, Margaret. I should like to help

you out of your worries. If I can be of any use to you, let me know."

She took a step nearer and stood looking down at him, her hands loosely locked behind her, her sharp face very gentle.

"There's no one else I would trust half so soon," she said quietly; "but this is n't my own worry. I'll be at the office, as soon as I can get there."

Without stopping for a hat, she crossed the sunny lawn and went down the street in the direction of the Barretts' house. There was neither indecision nor yet alertness in her step. She moved quickly; yet her head was bent in swift, anxious thought. Peggy was pondering the contents of a note which John had just brought her from Kingsley. The note, read by John, would have been merely a summons to her to come over to join in some interrupted revel; but Peggy knew better. Under its whimsical fun, she read the message of serious trouble.

She found Kingsley alone on the veranda. Stretched out at the full of his long length in a steamer chair, novel in hand, he looked the picture of lazy content; and his voice rang out from afar in hearty greeting.

“Hullo, Peggy Ann! I thought we could finish up that scheme over here. It's quieter than at The Savins.”

Peggy's eyes narrowed shrewdly; but her answering hail was keyed to his.

“Where are Jack and Ursula?”

“Driving with Nathalie. Did n't you see them start?”

“No; I must have been in the library,” she answered unconcernedly, as she came up the steps.

Kingsley pushed a chair towards her with his foot.

“Sit down. I'm sorry not to rise and hand you to your seat; but I'm saving up my energy, to-day.”

“Things bad?” Peggy queried tersely, as she dropped into the chair.

“Beastly. Ached like thunder, all night. The nap you interrupted was the last I've had.”

“How is your head?” she asked anxiously.

“That's the least of my troubles. Of course, I brush my hair with caution; but my head appears to be the toughest part of my anatomy.”

“Where's the other trouble?”

He laughed.

“Better ask where it is n't.”

"Rex," she protested; "don't joke, and please don't scare me to death. What is the matter, really and truly?"

"I appear to have twisted myself into a tight knot that refuses to untwist," he replied composedly.

"Where?"

"Over on our one lonesome golf link."

"No; where on you?" she asked impatiently.

"Oh, me? Well, somewhere between my head and my heels. To be more accurate, it appears to have taken up all the slack of me between my shoulder-blades and my knees."

"What does Mac say?"

"Nothing."

"Have n't you told him?" she demanded.

"No. Mac is an old granny. He would pull a long face and scare the mater, and I don't want her to know."

"Why not?"

Kingsley clasped his hands at the back of his head.

"Because I hope to make Keys next spring, Peggy Ann."

"Of course, we all expect that; but what has Keys to do with your knot? Or are you going to wait for them to unlock it?"

Kingsley raised his brows.

“Your mind is n't logical, Peggy; it takes too long jumps. The trouble I fear is nearer than that.”

“What then?”

“That, if the mater gets wind of this, she'll shut down on my going back at all.”

With a bounce, Peggy sat up and faced him.

“Rex! Is it as bad as all that?”

“Feels so. Anyway, my feelings are hurt. Moreover, I do hate to have a lot of women clucking over me. The mater has some sense; but there are too many others.”

“Me?” she asked a little sharply.

“No.” He surveyed her quizzically. “You can generally be relied upon not to gush, Peggy Ann.”

Her lips straightened, and she nodded to herself. Then she said suddenly, —

“But that does n't mean I don't care, Rex.”

“Naturally. I know a thing or two. Else I would n't have trusted you with the tale of my woes.”

She frowned thoughtfully.

“They sound rather woful, Rex.”

“ You bet! Now the question is what to do next.”

“ Who knows it? ”

“ You. And I.” Kingsley spoke in two detached sentences.

“ Anybody else? ”

“ No.”

“ But they know something is wrong? ”

“ Nobody but the mater. I told her I had headache and wanted to be let alone.”

In spite of her anxiety, Peggy laughed outright.

“ And then straightway you sent for me. Well, I must say, Rex, your own mind is n't always logical.”

“ She did n't know I sent.”

“ Then she probably is wondering why I have n't sense enough to go home.”

“ No. But you see I can't go on shamming headache, a fellow who has neither nerves nor indigestion. What's to do next? ”

“ How much does it hurt? ”

“ Like the deuce, when I move. Not a bit, if I keep still.”

“ Is it better than it was at first? ”

“ No.”

“ But it ought to be,” she said slowly.

"It is n't, though. Maybe it has n't had time. You might send for Miss Eudora to give it absent treatment."

"You'd much better let Mac tackle it at short range," she advised him.

"I don't want to."

"Then try your grandfather."

Kingsley shook his head.

"He's worse. He would only talk it over with Mac, and two wagging heads are worse than one."

Peggy rested her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands, and stared at her companion in silent meditation.

"What did you want of me?" she asked abruptly at length.

"What I'm not getting, advice. Also a little sympathy," he added, after a short pause.

Bending over, she took his hand in her strong brown one.

"I honestly did n't dare give it to you, Rex. I was afraid you would think I was gushing, or making a fuss. Besides, I'm too anxious even to know whether I'm sorry or not. I'm so afraid you've done something awful to yourself."

Kingsley frowned.

“So am I,” he said, with the first falling cadence that had escaped him.

The next moment, he could have bitten out his tongue with regret for the words and their accent. Peggy's eyes clouded, grew misty, and then her head went down on their two hands. She pulled herself together quickly, however; but not so quickly but that Kingsley had felt the swift rush of tears, hot and large, that dropped upon his fingers.

“By Jove, Peggy, I never supposed you'd care,” he said in surprise.

“I'd like to know why not,” she said a little fiercely, as she brushed her hair away from her face.

“Why, because — Oh, I don't know. But I'm glad you do.”

Forgetting her ruffled hair, she faced him steadily.

“Rex, we've fought, all summer long; and you've teased me until I have been about half wild. And yet — I suppose it's the woman of me — and yet, after all, I honestly think I like you best of all the tribe.”

“For a fact?”

“Yes. You don't deserve it, though.”

Her words had the ring of mockery; but it

pleased him to take them in earnest, and the earnestness sat well upon him.

"No, Peggy, I don't," he said humbly.

There was a short silence. Peggy broke it.

"Rex, as I say, I'm awfully worried. You ought to tell Mac. Let me go for him."

"He'll tell."

"Not if we make him promise."

Kingsley eyed her distrustfully. He knew Mac better than she did. He knew, too, that there might be reason for Mac's telling. Man-like, he shrank from the necessary coddling that too often accompanies illness. He also shrank from hearing a truth which might be unwelcome.

"It's a good time," Peggy urged practically. "Mac is at home now and alone. Nathalie won't be back till time for lunch. Let me get Mac now."

Shutting his teeth hard, Kingsley sat upright.

"No; I'll go over there."

"What's the use?"

"To keep the mater from seeing."

Peggy watched his whitening face.

"But you can't. You must n't."

With the outward semblance of a smile, Kingsley turned to face her.

“A fellow can generally do anything he makes up his mind he will do, Peggy Ann.”

“Don't try it,” she begged.

“No use wasting words; I'm going. Now see here, we'll strike a bargain. I will talk it over with Mac, on condition that, if he says it's nothing much, you and he will promise not to tell another soul.”

Peggy rose and stood beside him.

“I promise,” she said quietly. “Now, if we come around by the driveway, nobody can see us, and you can lean on my shoulder. It's too bad I'm not any taller; but this is all there is of me.”

Kingsley smiled down at her grimly.

“Sometimes quantity counts for less than quality,” he answered, as he took her arm.

As Peggy had predicted, they found Mac alone at The Savins. Kingsley made light of the whole situation until he had sworn his cousin to secrecy. Then, in the fewest possible words, he asked Mac's opinion.

“Sorry you did n't come right over here, old man,” Mac said cheerily then. “It probably is n't much; but I could have given you a more comfortable night. Peggy, if you'll go out and sit on the stairs for a space, I'll take a look at the knotty place, as Rex calls it.”

Mac's blue eyes were so impenetrable, his voice so cheery that Peggy left the room, firmly convinced that Kingsley had been frightened for nothing. Accordingly, she went after her hat, ready to start for the office, so soon as Mac should have dismissed their fears. As she came down the stairs again, she could hear low voices in the library; but, happily oblivious of what they were saying, she dropped down on the bottom step and fell to crooning contentedly to herself.

"A month?" Kingsley asked drearily at length.

"Yes, about that, old man."

"But Yale opens in three weeks?" he questioned.

Mac shook his head.

"Sorry, Rex; but you'll be lucky to get off with that. Such a strain is worse than any amount of broken bones."

Kingsley whistled. Then he drew in his breath.

"You're a jovial sort of prophet, Mac. What can I do, whilst?"

Very gently Mac's hand dropped from the chair-back to his cousin's shoulder.

"Possess your soul in patience and your

body in quietness," he said slowly. Doctor as he was, he had dealt many a blow, but few that had hurt himself more keenly than this one.

"No golf?"

"No exercise at all for the present, Rex. For a week or so, you'll have to keep still."

Kingsley looked straight into his cousin's eyes. He saw something there that sent the color from his brown cheeks.

"Is it as bad as that, Mac?"

"I hope not. Honestly, Rex, I believe not. If you take care of yourself, I hope six weeks will see you in condition again; but it is n't a case that can be played with. You gave yourself a bad wrench. Then you lay down on the ground and fell asleep, without troubling yourself to cool off. The two things did n't work well together."

"And now?" Kingsley asked steadily.

"Now I am going to keep you rather flat, for a month. I'm sorry to spoil your vacation; but —"

"I suppose so," Kingsley replied rather absently.

The silence between them lengthened. Suddenly Mac raised his head.

"Here comes Nathalie. Sha'n't I send her

in?" he asked, with the air of a doctor prescribing an infallible cure for the present ill.

But Kingsley shook his head.

"Not just now, Mac," he said quietly. "Instead, — don't think I've gone daft," he added, with a mirthless little laugh; "instead, if you don't mind, I wish you'd go and tell Peggy about it, and ask her to come in here, for a few minutes."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“**W**HAT are you doing here in office hours, I'd like to know,” Kingsley demanded, the next morning.

“Playing truant.”

“Uncle Hu will be after you.”

Deliberately she fastened Sophia to a tree, mounted the steps and sat down beside the steamer chair.

“Let him!” she said concisely.

“And then he'll dismiss you.”

She cocked her chin in the air.

“He can't. I know so much that I'm invaluable.”

Kingsley let his novel slide to the floor, and clasped his hands back of his head.

“Conceit, thy name is —”

“Peggy,” she responded. “I know it; you have told me so before. Still, I have a reason for my conceit. Are n't you all squabbling for me, I'd like to know.”

"I had n't observed it."

"Well, I had," she returned composedly. "Hal wants me; Mr. Hubert can't get along without me, and now I have left them both in the lurch, because I knew you 'd like to have me frolic with you."

"Not much frolicking for me for the present, Peggy Ann."

She dropped into her favorite pose, elbows on knees, her chin in her hands.

"Maybe not. It's horrid, too, perfectly horrid. Still, there is no especial use in your getting pensive about it," she observed.

"Things might be a lot worse."

"Yes. They also might be a lot better."

"Never mind that. Be thankful for what you've got, and forget the rest."

His gray eyes twinkled at her tone.

"Did Miss Eudora teach you that, Peggy Ann?"

"No; I evolved it. It's common sense. Just think, Rex, you might be a lone orphan in a five-story tenement."

"Yes, and I also might be a blue chimpanzee in a menagerie. But I don't see what bearing the fact has upon the case."

"Teaches you to count your mercies. You

have an ancestral home, next door, and kind and tender parents."

"By Jove, yes! One kind and tender parent is on the verge of apoplexy, this morning, because he can't decide what key he shall use for his new sonata," Kingsley said, with a laugh. "I advised him to try the whole bunch, one after another; but even that did n't suit him. It must be awful to have an oversoul, and then mislay the key to it."

"Where's Jack?" Peggy asked abruptly.

"Gone fishing."

Her brows went upward, and Kingsley hastened to explain.

"Their plans were all made, and I would n't let them stay at home."

"Hh! They need n't have asked your permission."

"They did n't. I dropped in my commands, yesterday noon. I'm all right, and the mater ordered lunch served out here."

"Has she gone?"

Peggy's tone showed her disapproval rather too plainly for Kingsley's pleasure.

"Yes. I told her I would n't stay still, unless she went. She made a great row; but I fairly scared her into going. Good for her,"

Kingsley responded, with a serene unconsciousness of the uneasy hours Mrs. Barrett must pass, away from her prostrate offspring. "I promised her that, if she would go, I would n't budge, all day long; and she arranged to have things brought to me. I say, Peggy Ann, why don't you come back here and eat lunch with me?"

"What about your father?"

"He'll be here, too."

"I — I don't believe I'd better."

"What's the reason? I'll send word over to The Savins."

"I'm afraid of your father," she confessed desperately.

Again Kingsley's laugh shook the chair.

"The poor old pater! What has he done?"

"Not generally; only when he is writing things," she explained.

"Oh, I begin to see. You think he gets nerves, and throws things? That does n't happen often. As a rule, when he is working, he eats for ten, and forgets to talk. That may not sound artistic; but it's the fact. Come back and observe him," he advised her.

She settled back in her chair.

"All right," she answered a little dubiously.

“ But, if you don't mind about my coming back, I think I might as well stay now. I'm a very desirable companion, too, for I know seven kinds of solitaire, and, if you prefer to read books, I've brought some stockings to darn. If you had the least particle of chivalry, you'd offer to read aloud to me, while I do it.”

Kingsley surveyed her in languid approval.

“ By Jove, Peggy, you are a good fellow,” he remarked.

That morning was the first of many which differed from one another, according to Kingsley's firm belief, merely in the slight details of the weather and of the consequent position of the steamer chair. The strain had been a severe one; and, though it was yielding to Mac's prompt, efficient treatment, nevertheless it would suffice to keep Kingsley on his back for some time. As long as he was quiet, he suffered little or no pain; but the monotony of his days and the lack of exercise maddened him, and the active fellow chafed under his restraint. For the most part, however, he took it with stoic resignation or jovial optimism; but, being neither saint nor hero, it must be confessed that he had days when his patience and courage gave place to absolute bad temper. It was impossible

for him to read, all the time; solitaire he had always regarded as the sport with which the weak-minded spinster amuses herself during the naps of her pet cat, and his mother was obliged to give occasional hours to her husband and her housekeeping.

From the start, Kingsley had laid down one law with such emphasis that it had, perforce, been obeyed. Because he was temporarily laid low, Ursula and John should make no change in their plans; the summer life and the summer junketings should go on without him. The edict had been followed by rebellious murmurings; but Kingsley had had his way in the end. Day after day, he waved farewell to the merry quintette who drove away from the door of The Savins, never dreaming how large a share of their pleasure was lost with the loss of their jovial comrade whose bidding they dared not gainsay.

Peggy, meanwhile, stuck to him with the persistence and the scratchiness of a burr. In vain he ordered her off. She refused to go; or, going, she came back again, half an hour later, on some fresh pretext. Once there, she neither coddled Kingsley nor condoled with him. She merely stayed within range. Sometimes she

gossiped with him; sometimes she teased him; sometimes she graciously permitted him to read to her; and sometimes she fought with him with a healthy and unsentimental vigor. Now and then he turned the tables, and fell to teasing her until her patience was scattered to the winds and, rising, she stalked away and left him alone. By the time she reappeared, they were mutually penitent and on their good behavior once more. In so far as Peggy was concerned, Kingsley's days were never monotonous. In her society, he passed through every mood of content, annoyance, liking and rage in swift succession; but the resultant of all the moods was a hearty and growing affection for his wayward, but loyal comrade.

Left to themselves, Nathalie and Ursula laughed a little, now and then, over Kingsley's defection from his old-time allegiances. Time was when Peggy's society was a thing to be avoided; time was when Kingsley would have been clamorous for their society. Now, while he was always glad to see them, merry and cordial during their calls beside his chair, and politely regretful over their departure, it was Peggy for whom he was really watching, Peggy to whom he turned for comprehension, Peggy

whose company he sought, when his black-lined moods were upon him.

However, there was compensation in all things, and both girls were finding that the ripening summer was leaving them less and less time and thought for Kingsley Barrett. To Ursula, the days were passing like a dream, golden with happiness and touched with the rose-color of romance. She was still only a child, far too young for any real thought of love. Nevertheless, her girlish ideals were centering wholly in Harry Arterburn, her girlish hopes were vaguely concerning themselves with his future. For the present, it was enough for her to know that he never appeared more content than when she was beside him. Satisfied with that certainty, she made no effort to forecast the future.

And Nathalie?

It seemed to her now, as she looked backward over her life, that she had never before known what happiness meant. The past years had always been full of good things for her; but they amounted to nothing, in comparison with the absolute joy of the present. For Nathalie, it was as she had said: Mac was the central point of her solar system. And

Mac's every thought began and ended in his wife.

Early September was lengthening the evenings, and the moonlight lay over the lawn in broad yellow splashes, one night when Nathalie gave voice to her content. Mac had found her alone on the veranda, when he came back from a flying trip to New York. Bending over her shoulder, he dropped a little leather box into her lap.

"You extravagant boy! What is this?" she asked, as the cover flew back to show a milky gleam from within.

"Three months, to-day," he reminded her. "I was afraid you might forget."

Without a word, she pulled him down on the arm of her chair, and, for a moment, the two golden heads touched each other.

"Mac," she said contentedly at last, while she nestled her head into the crook of his elbow; "this has been a wonderful summer."

"Yes, dearest."

"You've come back again, Mac?" Peggy's voice inquired from the shadowy doorway. "I do wish you would come in and get your dinner. You know we promised to go over and play whist with Rex, to-night."

"Mmm? Yes. Where are Ursula and Jack?" Mac queried absently, with his gaze still on the yellow hair beside him.

"Mac—Alister Holden! They went home on the noon train, to-day. You'll be forgetting your name next."

"No matter, as long as I remember yours, Peggy," he retorted good-humoredly. "Run in, there's a dear soul, and tell Jane I am here."

"All right. You come in now, though." And Peggy vanished.

Nathalie gave a little sigh.

"The summer is nearly over, Mac."

"Are you sorry?"

"Yes. I dread the breaking-up. It has seemed as if each day was better than the one before it had been."

"But there are better ones to come, Nathalie."

"Perhaps. Don't tempt fate too far, though. Besides, I don't believe anything could be happier than this."

"You've enjoyed having Ursula here?"

"Yes, and the being with Aunt Teddy and Grandpa McAlister. But, after all, Mac, it has all been mostly you."

Stooping, he took the box from her hand and slid the great pearl on her finger.

"Nathalie," he said, and his voice was full of tender reverence; "I know life better than you do, dear, and I know that, if you can say that after three months of marriage, I have nothing left to wish for."

"Mac, I do wish you would hurry." Peggy's voice sounded plaintive. "The soup is freezing over, and the beans won't be fit to eat."

Mac straightened up abruptly.

"Oh, hang the beans, Peggy! I'll come, in a minute."

"Well, you need n't be so cross about it," she retorted. "You know you don't like cold things, and you know Rex is waiting."

"Let him wait," Nathalie advised.

"Poor Rex!" Peggy said rebukingly. "He is out of all the fun, and I should think you would be sorry for him."

"So we are. Why don't you run over and stay with him till we come?" Mac suggested tactfully.

"Because, if I did, you'd sit there mooning, for an hour, and forget all about us," Peggy answered, with exceeding bluntness. "I'm going up-stairs now to get ready. I wish

you'd come and change your gown, too, Nathalie."

"What's the use?"

"Becomingness. You are n't half so careful to choose becoming colors, nowadays. I should be ashamed to drop back, as soon as I was married." And Peggy's determined step echoed on the stairs.

Nathalie broke the pause which followed her going.

"Mac, do you know — have you thought — that is, has it occurred to you that the summer has meant a good deal to someone besides ourselves?"

He smiled.

"To Hal?"

"Yes. Do you suppose the dear fellow realizes how plainly he has shown it?"

"No. He and Ursula have been as innocent as a pair of babes in the wood."

"He has looked like a mute at a funeral, all the afternoon," Nathalie commented irreverently.

"Was the leave-taking such an ordeal?"

"Yes. Ursula had a few tears, and Hal hung to her hand a little longer than the law allows. I really could n't see the reason for

much emotion, as long as he will see her again in two weeks."

"How should you like it, Nathalie?"

"Mac! Mac Holden, do go in and get your dinner." It was an exasperated voice which came floating down to them from an up-stairs window.

"Yes, Peggy. Just going. What do you think of it, Nathalie?"

"That he is too old for her, and —"

"Am I too old for you, dear?"

Again the yellow hair brushed his sleeve.

"Mac! The idea!"

"But Hal is my twin."

"And Ursula is a year younger than I," she added conclusively. "Still, I love Ursula like a sister. But, Mac, if Hal should ever marry Ursula, what would become of Peggy?"

Mac smiled thoughtfully to himself.

"Wait a few years, and then ask Rex," he advised her.

"Do you really think so?"

"I really hope so. They both are splendid stuff. Just now they are very good cronies; but that so often grows into something else."

Nathalie drew a long breath.

"Then that is one more deed the summer has

done. Just think how they used to squabble, when we first came here!"

"It was mainly Peggy's fault. She was very thorny at first; but she is getting bravely over it."

"Poor Rex!" Nathalie said suddenly.

"Yes. Still, he is gaining," Mac answered gravely. "I was frightened at first; but I think the worst is over, though it is bad enough now. He has cause to remember the summer."

"How long do you think it will be?"

"I'm not sure; but I hope Thanksgiving will see him on his feet again. His worst time will come, after he gets back to the city, when he can have neither college nor society. He will miss Peggy, then."

"Aunt Babe has invited her to go back with them; but Hal thought it would be better for her to be in Northford," Nathalie said thoughtfully. "I'll do what I can for Rex, and —"

"Mac, do go in and eat!" Peggy ordered, as she appeared in the doorway for a second time. "It is really very cruel and selfish for you two creatures to sit there by yourselves, and keep us waiting. I am going over to Rex now. If you are n't there in ten minutes, I shall send Mrs. Barrett for you. Now do go in!" She

seized Mac by the sleeve, dragged him to the doorway and pushed him over the threshold. Then, gathering up her fluffy white gown in both hands, she turned rebukingly to her sister. "Nathalie," she said with severity; "I had always supposed that, when a person had been married for three mortal months, it was time for the loving to be over."

But Nathalie shook her head.

"No, Peggy," she answered contentedly; "it is only just time for the best of it to begin."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“**Y**ES, it has been a perfect summer,” Nathalie sighed contentedly, two days later.

“For you. Mine has been in the imperfect tense,” Kingsley commented.

“In the sense of incomplete action? You are having a horrid time of it, Rex; and, moreover, you have spoiled half our fun. We simply can’t get on without you.”

“But you ’ll have to, for one while yet,” he predicted gloomily.

“Not so long as you think. Mac says you will be able to go back to college, by Thanksgiving.”

“Yes, confound it! That will cut out two good months, and junior year is the best of things. Let’s talk about the moon, Nathalie. It turns my heart to water, when I think of all I am missing.” He laughed, as he spoke; but his laugh was a bit dreary. Then he threw

back his head and took a long breath. "I'm losing all my grip," he added. "Too much coddling plays the mischief with a man. There's no telling where I'd have been by now, if I had n't had Peggy to slug me, now and then."

"And she goes, to-morrow," Nathalie said.

"Yes, worse luck! You were my first and best friend, Nathalie; but you forsook me for Mac, and I've had to take up with Peggy. Now, just as I am finding Peggy an invaluable companion, behold, she falls to packing her trunk. I foresee that I am doomed to a lonely old age."

Nathalie's reply was interrupted by the appearing of Peggy herself. The girl came bouncing into the room, anxious and breathless.

"Has anyone seen Sophia Smith?" she panted.

"No. Has she mislaid herself?" Kingsley inquired tranquilly.

"I can't find her anywhere."

"Sophia lost?" In her turn, Nathalie started up.

"Not lost, Nathalie; only gone before."

"Stop joking, Rex. Have you seen her?"

"No. She is n't given to making formal

calls, and Mac said he would rather I did n't take her to walk at present."

"And you have n't seen her go by?"

"No, Peggy Ann; no white streak has darkened my horizon."

"But when did you see her last, Peggy?" Nathalie asked.

"At dinner time. I took her for a long walk, this afternoon, clear to the shore. It was the longest walk she has had at all, and she had a beautiful time. I put on her best blue bow, and she was too dear," Peggy explained incoherently. "Then she ate a huge supper, fairly gobbled it, and that is the last I saw of her."

"Did n't you tie her up, after it?" Nathalie inquired.

For her only answer, Peggy held up an empty collar.

"Slipped it again? I thought she was broken off that trick," Kingsley remarked.

"She was, till the other day on the street. I stopped to talk to Mrs. Andersen, and she backed out of her collar and went off home."

"Most reprehensible behavior on the part of a woman as old as Mrs. Andersen!"

"No. Sophia backed."

"Then Sophia is a genius worthy of her great

name," he returned gravely. "I have often wondered how I could get away from Mrs. Andersen; but it never would have occurred to me to back out of my collar. Next time, I'll try the same tactics, Peggy Ann."

But Peggy had dropped down into a chair, where she sat scowling forlornly at the floor.

"How can I find her?" she lamented.

"Let her find herself. She is too big to be overlooked, and too homely to be stolen."

"Rex!"

Then he relented.

"Honestly, Peggy, I am no end sorry for you. I only wish I could get out and help you hunt. But I would n't worry too much. Sophia is known from Don to Bathsheba, and somebody will be sure to come lugging her home before bedtime."

She smiled across at him gratefully.

"You're a good sort of creature, Rex. Let's hope you'll be a true prophet," she said, as she rose. "If I only knew where to look for her! But she goes at such a rate, when once she gets started, that there's no telling what county she may be in by now. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"A turkey needle, then," Nathalie corrected

her. "But don't worry, Peggy. She will probably come strolling home before long."

Nathalie's accent, sympathetic, yet hopeful, was inexpressibly soothing to her young sister.

"I'm so glad you are n't cross at me, Nathalie," she said slowly. "I was so afraid you would scold me for losing your dog."

"But you were n't to blame, dear. Besides, Sophia really ought to belong to you, for you have taken all the care of her, this summer."

"But she does n't. Of course, I love her like one of my own children," Peggy answered pensively, from between her clasped fingers.

Over her bowed head, Nathalie and Kingsley exchanged a glance of amusement. Then Nathalie turned to her sister once more.

"Peggy dear, I think Sophia will come home again."

"But maybe not till after I have gone. I did want to kiss her good-by," Peggy wailed, in a sudden outburst of woe over the dog who, in some canine fashion, had wormed her way into the very core of Peggy's heart.

"Perhaps not. But, Peggy, I'm going to tell you something else, even if it does spoil our surprise. Mac and I have talked the matter over, and we both feel that Sophia wants to

have you for her mistress. We were going to wait till you were in Northford, to-morrow night. Then we planned to send her to you by the next day's express. As soon as she comes home, dear, she will be your own dog, not mine."

"Nathalie! Rex! Truly? Sophia mine? Oh you dear girl!" Peggy cast herself on Nathalie's neck in a strangling embrace. Then, without another word, she turned to the door.

"Whither?" Kingsley called after her.

"To find my dog, my own dog," she answered over her shoulder. "And then, oh then, won't we go out in a blaze of glory?"

And Sophia, meanwhile, was sleeping the sleep of the just, behind the library sofa at The Savins.

Huge as she was, nevertheless Sophia was a dog of but two dimensions. She possessed much length and height. In thickness she was totally lacking. And so it came about that, when one of the maids left a screen door slightly ajar, Sophia squirmed her way into the house and went on a tour of discovery. Her conscience and her memory both assured her that she had no business inside the house, and that assurance led her to avoid the dining-room where the

family were at the table, and to conduct her explorations noiselessly and upon the points of her toes. Twice she made the round of the hall and parlor; then she moved on to the library where, overcome by drowsiness, she suddenly decided to put herself to bed in the kennel-like corner behind the leather sofa.

The fatigue of her long walk, followed by her generous meal, caused Sophia Smith to sleep soundly. Once she stirred a little and opened one eye, when the maid came in to light the lamps. Then she drifted off again into puppy dreamland.

An hour later, Sophia wakened to find herself still the sole occupant of the room. Crawling out from her improvised kennel, she yawned drowsily, stretched herself to her fullest length, and then sat down on her haunches to meditate upon the situation. Peggy and Nathalie were still at Mrs. Barrett's, and the others were on Mrs. Farrington's veranda. For this reason, Sophia was free to amuse herself according to her own pleasure; and, with her tongue dangling limply from one corner of her mouth, she pondered how best to attain that pleasure.

After mature deliberation, it seemed to her that the sofa pillows presented the best point

of attack, and she attacked them accordingly. Two Persian rugs were next added to the heap of ruins, and then Sophia pounced for the red velvet cushion in Dr. McAlister's favorite willow chair. It proved to be heavier than she had anticipated; and, her teeth still shut on one of its corners, she paused to reflect. That instant of reflection saved the cushion, but it wrecked the room. Sophia's thoughtful eye caught sight of a moth hovering about the piano lamp. The next minute, she let go the cushion and made a spring for her diminutive prey. She missed her aim; but the room echoed with the clash of broken glass, just as Peggy, white-faced and full of alarm, appeared upon the threshold.

To the terrified girl, it seemed but a second before the floor was covered with the blazing oil. It trickled here and there in little flaming streams, now finding a chair-leg in its pathway, now a pile of books. Out in the hall, Sophia stood looking back over her shoulder at the ruin she had wrought. On the opposite side of the room, three long windows with full white curtains offered a tempting connection between floor and ceiling.

Peggy felt an overpowering desire to sit down

on the hall floor and cry. Instead, she shut her teeth hard and with one hand fell to tearing off her fluffy muslin skirt, while with the other she pressed the button of the front door bell. It was her only means of calling help. She dared not leave the fire for a moment; she could only trust that the long, broken clamor would bring the maids to the rescue. The last pin gave way, and her thin skirt dropped to the floor. Using all the strength at her command, she bundled Sophia out of the house and into safety. Then, gathering up her remaining skirts, she bounded across the floor, dragged a table to the side of the room and fell to pulling down the long lace curtains, just as the frightened maids appeared upon the scene.

“By Jove, Peggy, you’ve got grit!” Kingsley said admiringly, that night.

It was long past midnight and, for the moment, the two were left alone. Peggy, defiant of her burns, defiant, too, of the general tendency to make a heroine of her, had been pacing the floor nervously, while they all talked at once.

By some miracle, the fire had been confined entirely to the library. Hubert McAlister had rushed over, in answer to the shriek of the

maids; and the fire extinguishers in the hall had done the rest. Four black walls, some hundreds of charred books and a dozen ruined chairs marked the extent of the damage.

“And yet,” Dr. McAlister said, with an odd little quaver in his voice; “if this good child had n’t kept her head, The Savins would have been nothing but a pile of ashes.”

As he spoke, he bent over the chair where the girl was sitting. She received his caress as if it had been a benediction.

But now they had all gone home, and Peggy was escorted to the Barretts’ where Mrs. Barrett decreed quiet and a soothing drink for both Peggy and Kingsley who was in a state of collapse after the excitement of the evening. She departed to concoct her draught, and Peggy and Kingsley were left alone.

She laughed a little, in answer to his words.

“But you have saved the house,” Kingsley urged. “Everybody, Grandpa and Uncle Hu and Uncle Billy, all say nothing could have kept the fire down, once it had caught those curtains.” He hesitated; then he added slowly, “Peggy Ann, does it ever occur to you that we McAlisters owe you a good deal for this summer? And my debt is the greatest of all.”

She halted beside him and stood looking down into his clear gray eyes.

“Our debts would about balance each other, Rex,” she answered gently. Then her voice took on the old, mocking ring, as she added, “It is long past midnight, so this is my last day here. Did n’t I tell you I’d go out in a blaze of glory?”

The sleeping draught proved to be a potent one, and Peggy who, girl-fashion, had named the corners of the strange room, fell asleep, as her head touched the pillow, only to dream, not of the burning oil, but of a pair of dark gray eyes, merry, tender and altogether winning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NORTHFORD was blazing with scarlet and gold. The patches of pine on the mountain sides only served to heighten the flaming tints of maple and hickory, and the sunlight lay dazzling over all. Peggy, with Sophia at her heels, came in from an early-morning walk, and halted on the threshold to look back over the glory she was leaving behind her. A strident voice hailed her from within.

“Land alive, Peggy! What sent you out so early?”

“I wanted a walk.”

“Well, you got it, to judge from the looks of that dog. She’s completely tuckered.”

“She stopped to chase squirrels,” Peggy explained briefly, as Sophia turned and trotted away towards the back door, where experience had taught her to look for her very own tin plate.

The small boy seated at the table suspended his operations on the oatmeal, and twisted himself about in his chair.

"Did she get 'em?" he inquired eagerly.

"Oh, Fizzums, you here?"

"Yes, I'm here. It's brexfast time, an' I'm hungry," he responded thickly, for his mouth was once more filled to its utmost limit. "Why did n't you an' Sophia Smith be to brexfast, Peggy?"

"Because we wanted some fresh air," she answered, while she seated herself opposite her little brother.

"You look as if you 'd had it. Your cheeks are the color of a porter apple."

Again Fizzums detached himself from his oatmeal.

"I think they look most like a purple cabbage," he announced unflatteringly. "Cousin Vedora, Peggy wants some mush."

"Oh, Fizzums, don't call it that horrid name," Peggy protested.

"Why not? It is mush, all mushy. See!" He proved his statement by means of certain evolutions with his spoon. It was conclusive, rather than appetizing, and Peggy turned her eyes towards the frill of curl papers which sur-

mounted the parchment-hued brow of her elderly cousin.

"It was lovely on the hill, this morning, Cousin Eudora."

"But there was such a heavy dew that I should have thought 't would be sopping wet," Miss Eudora responded prosaically.

"No; not so very. We went down the lane to Blowmedowne, and back by the path through the upper pasture."

"Did you go to the Pool?" Fizzums asked with interest for, since the summer day when he had been under suspicion of being drowned there, the Pool had been forbidden ground to him.

"No; we only went as far as the pine grove."

"What you got on your church dress for?" Miss Eudora interrupted.

Peggy glanced down at the blue cloth gown she was wearing.

"Because I wanted to," she said calmly.

Miss Eudora clattered the spoon with which she was filling Fizzums's empty saucer.

"But it's your best dress," she reiterated.

"Well."

"And it's altogether too good for every day," she pursued.

Peggy looked up, half amused, half angry.

"It is n't every day," she answered; "it's my sixteenth birthday."

Miss Eudora deliberately went on with her breakfast, and there was a perceptible pause. Then she said indifferently, —

"Oh, is it? I'd forgotten."

For an instant, the girl bit her lip sharply, and the tears glittered in her eyes, as she recalled the merry-making which had celebrated Ursula's birthday, three days after her arrival at The Savins, that very summer. The drops still hung heavy on her lashes, when Fizzums pushed back his chair, trudged around the table and clambered up into his sister's lap.

"Ven I must give you sixteen kisses," he announced a little grudgingly. "It will take a good while to do such a whole lot, so maybe I'd better begin now."

And Peggy's arms shut upon her small brother, with a grateful sense of having at least one person who cared to mark the day.

Peggy was undeniably homesick, that fall. Heretofore, she had accepted Northford and Cousin Eudora as necessary parts of her life, no more to be questioned than the succession of snow and rain. Her one year in New York had

faded from active memory; and she had lacked any basis for comparison. Now, after her summer at The Savins and in the pleasant family life of the McAlisters, her surroundings at Northford had seemed to her as succulent as the raw salt codfish which formed the foundation of many of Miss Eudora's meals. She mourned for Hubert McAlister; she pined for her brother, and most of all she longed for Kingsley, for the grip of his strong hand and the ring of his hearty voice.

From the breakfast table, she betook herself in search of Sophia, and together they vanished from sight. When they reappeared, Peggy's cheeks were scarlet, her lids swollen. She had told Sophia all her woes, and she was convinced that Sophia had understood. Accordingly, she felt herself somewhat consoled.

School dragged perceptibly, that Friday morning; but at length it was over, and Peggy dashed away to the post office, whence she emerged with her hands full of letters and packages. Neither New York nor The Savins had forgotten the day, and Peggy's noon intermission was blissful enough to atone for her birthday dinner which showed no sign of being prepared for a festal occasion.

The afternoon mail left an empty box, and Peggy sauntered homeward, fully convinced that her birthday pleasures were all in the past. Her step lacked its usual alertness, and her head was drooping, as she turned in at the gate. The next instant, she sprang up the steps and cast herself upon the tall man who sat there, with Sophia Smith stretched across his feet.

“ Oh, Hal! ”

Bending over the dog, he had caught no glimpse of her coming; and he fairly quailed at her onslaught, as he received her in his arms.

“ Peggy dear, many happy returns! Why, what's the matter, dear? ” For she clung to him, sobbing and laughing in the same breath.

“ Oh, Hal, you dear thing! ” she exclaimed incoherently. “ I was so lonesome! And Cousin Eudora forgot 't was my birthday! And we had fried salt pork for dinner! And now you 've come! ”

“ Glad to see me, Peggy? ”

Her face burrowed into his sleeve.

“ Glad? It's heavenly. Where did you come from? ”

“ New York. ”

“ Yes; but what brought you? ”

"Your birthday," he answered quietly.

Raising her head, she stared straight into his blue eyes.

"Harry Arterburn, truthfully and honestly did you come all this journey up here, just because I happened to have a birthday?"

"I did."

Her head went down again, and her voice broke.

"Oh, Hal!" she said for the third time; but her accent was enough.

"Now tell me everything," she said, a little later, when she and her brother were settled together on the smallest possible surface of the veranda seat. "How long can you stay?"

"Till Monday night."

She drew a deep breath of content.

"Three whole days! And how is Rex?"

"Better. He is beginning to get out again now; and Mac wants him to go up to The Savins for November."

"What for?"

"He will be quieter there. He has set his heart on going back to college, just after Thanksgiving; and Mac is working hard to get him ready."

Peggy's keen eyes grew soft.

“Poor old Rex! What a hard time he has had! Did he ever tell you how I shot him?”

“No. What was that? He never told.”

“Just like Rex!” Peggy commented. “Well, it was this way.” She told the tale of the episode, and then added, “I was a bad guest for The Savins, Hal. I shot Rex, and my dog nearly burned up the house.”

He smiled.

“But they say you saved it, Peggy; and Rex declares that, without you, he’d have yielded up the ghost, last summer. Nathalie is still laughing about the way she hung around in the background, whenever you were in sight.”

Peggy’s brown cheeks dimpled and grew rosy.

“Dear old Rex!” she said, with a girlish frankness of affection which delighted her brother’s heart. “We used to squabble, the whole time; but now I can’t see how I ever was able to get on without him for a friend. You and he and Mr. Hubert, Hal, have just about made over my whole life.”

His hand patted the shoulder on which it had been resting.

“Something has made over my young sister,” he responded. “Peggy, I wanted to spend this birthday with you, for it’s the beginning of

things for us, dear. I've never really known you till now; and now I find that I'm a good deal pleased with my little sister."

"I only hope you'll be more so, some day, Hal," she answered, with sudden grave humility.

"Did you know that Mr. Hubert is n't at all well?" he asked, after a pause.

She started up in alarm.

"Harry! Anything serious?"

"No. He is over-tired, and has a bit of malaria. Mrs. Barrett told me. He has been working hard over this Thomas case. Now, as soon as it is over, he is going to run across to London for a few weeks."

"How long has he been ill?" she asked.

"It is n't enough really to call ill. Mrs. Barrett only chanced to speak of it, last Sunday night, while she was talking of Rex's going there, next month."

Peggy drew a long breath.

"When pesky people are ill, I don't worry," she observed. "Mr. Hubert is so utterly sanctified that he is almost too good to be true. When such men as that get ill, I am afraid of what may happen to them."

"Superstitious, Peggy?"

She laughed a little.

"Yes, mortally. Come and hunt four-leaf clovers, Hal. It's lovely in the sunshine, and they will serve for an omen for us all."

They were still straying about the sunny orchard, picking an occasional clover and munching the bright red apples, when Miss Eudora's head appeared above the wall.

"Peggy!" she called.

"Yes."

"Here's a telegram for you. I paid fifteen cents delivery charges on it, too."

She tossed the yellow envelope over the wall, and Peggy pounced upon it eagerly.

"More congratulations?" she exclaimed gleefully. "I know it's from Rex. He knew you were coming up here, and he timed it so it would find us together."

She tore it open. Then her face blanched, and she held it out to her brother.

"Read it, Hal. Read it aloud," she urged. "I can't seem to understand."

He took the slip from her shaking fingers, and passed his arm around her as he read it.

"Margaret Arterburn,

"Hubert has typhoid. Come at once. Office needs you.

"John McAlister."

“ But people don't always die of typhoid, Peggy,” he reasoned at length.

But she only persisted, —

“ He will, I know; he 's so good.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NEVERTHELESS, in spite of his goodness, Hubert McAlister did not die, nor did he come near dying.

The next night brought Peggy and Harry Arterburn to The Savins, where Mrs. Farrington, heavy-eyed but smiling, met them with good tidings from the invalid. Mac had come up, the night before, bringing the best nurse to be found in New York, and already the fever was under control.

"He has been asking for you, Peggy," she added, as she took the girl's cold hand into her firm clasp. "From the first hour that he gave out and went to bed, he began to speak of your being sent for. Yesterday, my father decided that it was the best thing for us to do. I'll tell him you have come."

She returned, in a moment, and beckoned to Peggy to follow her.

"Just stop a minute, and then slip away again," she warned her. "If he tries to talk,

tell him you must have your supper now, and that you will discuss business with him in the morning."

Peggy nodded in comprehension. Then she walked into the invalid's room with a noiseless ease which won the instant liking of the nurse. The liking was increased by the girl's quiet, bright voice, and by the simple way in which she made her escape from Hubert's detaining hand. Out in the hall, however, her quiet vanished. She sank down on the broad old sofa, and looked up at Mrs. Farrington through her tears.

"Oh, I never supposed it would be so bad as that," she wailed in a whisper.

"He is better, dear. Mac says so," Mrs. Farrington said consolingly, as she sat down at Peggy's side and put her arm around the girl's shoulders.

"But he's so white and sick, not a bit as he generally is. I never saw anybody like that before, Mrs. Farrington."

"We hope that he won't be like that long, Peggy."

The girl clinched her hands with sudden energy.

"I should die, if he were. Mrs. Farrington,

your brother is the best man I ever saw, the best without being a bit of a prig. Not even Hal is quite like him; he sees through things so quickly, and he is always so just and so true."

Mrs. Farrington's smile was very gentle.

"Peggy dear, you are just finding out something that I learned, years ago. Hu and I are twins, you know, and I was always with him, always took him as a matter of course. Then, all at once, I discovered that he was n't at all a matter of course. My girl friends had brothers who were n't at all like him. Peggy, in all my whole lifetime, Hubert has never given me a sorry minute. I was always happy with him, always proud of him."

With a sudden motion, Peggy slid to the floor and rested her clasped arms in Mrs. Farrington's lap.

"May I, just this only once, call you Aunt Teddy?" she asked abruptly.

"Always, dear."

"No; it's only for this once. If you are n't too busy, I want to tell you a little bit about things," the girl said slowly. "I sha'n't say it easily, or very well; I'm a dumb thing, and a cross-grained. But this summer has been so different, you all have been so good to me. Aunt

Ted, — if you 're going to let me call you that — it's the first time I've known what it was to have people care about me."

"Why, Peggy dear —"

"Wait," Peggy interrupted. "That is n't all. Of course, Hal and Nathalie did; they were related to me, and they could n't help it. But I only spent a year with them, and they did n't really know me. And, the rest of the time, I did n't belong anywhere. People were good to me; but I won't cuddle, and I don't see much sense in kissing, so they all thought I did n't care about them. I used to wish, wish, wish that somebody would come along and love me in spite of my crankiness, love me a great, great deal, enough to give me the benefit of the doubt and think maybe I was n't as hateful as I seemed."

Her voice broke into a little sob. Bending down, Mrs. Farrington drew the brown head over into her lap.

"Peggy dear, I suspected something of the sort," she said gently.

"I knew you did; you showed it, Aunt Ted. That's the reason I'm telling you all about it now. I was so homesick when I first came here, so forlorn. Then, all of a sudden, you and Mr.

Hubert began treating me as if I were n't so hopeless, after all. Of course, Hal was dear as could be; but he was related to me, and felt responsible for me." She hesitated; then she lifted her head and faced her companion. "I don't know as you know it, Aunt Ted; but it did make a difference."

"The difference showed, Peggy."

"I'm glad, even if it was n't much. But you three, you and Mr. Hubert and Hal, all treated me as if in time I might amount to something, and it made me determined that I would n't disappoint you. I don't know yet what it will be, Aunt Teddy; but I am bound it shall be something worth while. And, if the day ever does come that you're proud of me, remember that you were the ones who gave me my first start."

"Billy," Mrs. Farrington said to her husband, that night; "there are some things that count for more than writing books."

"I found that out, a good many years ago," he answered contentedly, as he looked up at the stately woman by his side. Then he added, "Ted, your eyes have just the look they used to have, when I was a mere bundle of aches, and you used to make me forget all about them."

“Those were good old days, Billy; but the present is better.”

“And the future shall be better still,” he predicted, with a truthfulness which as yet he could not realize.

From the breakfast table, the next morning, Peggy was called directly to Mr. McAlister's room. She found him propped up against his pillows and, in the clearer light of day, he looked far more like himself than he had done on the previous evening. He held out his hand to her in eager greeting.

“At last, my clerk! I was afraid you would n't come.”

“Of course I should come, if you wanted me.”

“Good girl! Now, Margaret, sit down here and let me talk to you. Mac has told me I can have fifteen minutes; but that is n't long, so we must be about it.”

“Are you sure it won't tire you?” she asked, as she seated herself beside the bed.

“I can't help it, if it does,” he answered quickly. “Margaret, the Thomas case comes up for trial, this week.”

“Yes, I know,” she assented quietly.

“And I can't be there.”

"No," she assented again.

"It is very important. You know how I have worked on the case; it is too bad to lose it now."

"Perhaps Mac can pull you up, in time for you to be there," she suggested consolingly, for as yet she had no idea whither his hopes were tending.

He shook his head.

"No; that is out of the question."

A sudden light dawned in Peggy's eyes.

"Could— Might— At least, why couldn't I be of some use?"

He met question with question.

"Margaret, do you remember the day in the park when I told you that you knew more of the case than anyone but myself?"

She took his hand into her cool, firm one, and spoke slowly.

"Mr. Hubert, I said then that, if you should ever need me, I would be on hand. Here I am."

His eyes rested long on her smooth brown head, on her eager, loving young face.

"Thank you, Margaret."

There was a little pause. Then he said, —

"Tell me over, as shortly as you can, what you remember of the case."

The heightening color in his cheeks made her uneasy; but the uneasiness only acted as a stimulus. Again she followed the case from end to end, clearly, tersely, accurately.

“That is right. Could you tell that again in court?”

She bit her lip.

“If it would help you, I would try my best,” she answered, with a quiet she was far from feeling.

“It may be best. It is probably the only thing that can save the case for me. I am sorry to ask this of you, Peggy; but Mac will be with you, and perhaps my father. Will it be very hard for you?”

Again she laid her hand on his.

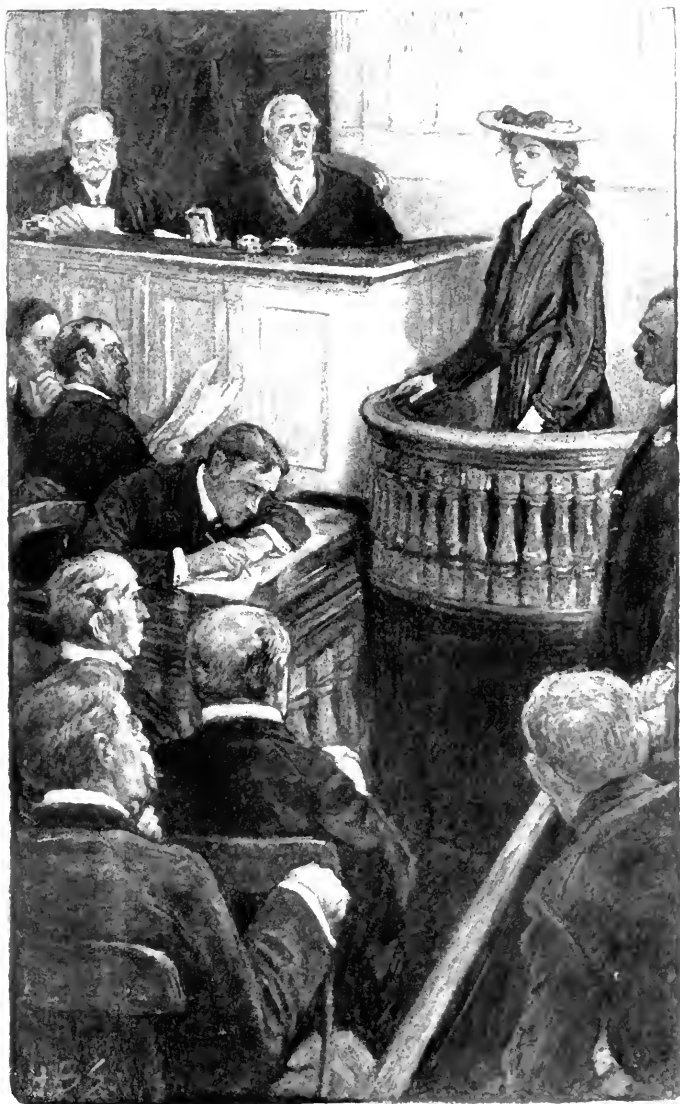
“Mr. Hubert, nothing in this world would be too hard for me to do for somebody that has been as good to me as you have.”

“Why, Peggy child, what have I done?” he asked in surprise.

Her smile was enigmatical, as she rose.

“Given me the benefit of the doubt,” she answered, as the nurse and Mac came back into the room.

“But, truly, I did n’t mind it, Hal,” she protested.



It was the next Saturday evening, a week after their arrival at The Savins in response to Dr. McAlister's telegram. All the Wednesday before, the Thomas case had dragged out from hour to hour, while the chain of evidence had swung this way and that. Early on Thursday morning, Peggy, a little pale and very determined, had been put upon the stand by the lawyer who, during Hubert's illness, had been handling the case in court. She had answered the questions clearly and briefly; once or twice, she had had obvious difficulty in keeping her temper; once she had replied with a crisp phrase which had sent a ripple of laughter sweeping over the room and caused the ear-tips of the prosecuting attorney to grow rosy red. Then she had been dismissed, and there had followed the perfunctory examination of a few other witnesses. However, when the jury left the room, it was tacitly understood that Peggy Arterburn's testimony had carried the day, that her identification of the man she had trapped in the safe, taken quite by itself, would have had sufficient weight to imperil the cause of the opposing side.

Two days later, Harry Arterburn came back to The Savins in order to escort his young sister to Northford. To his surprise, no one of the

McAlister clan would listen to the suggestion of her going.

“Really, Harry, it is an impossible idea, for we can’t spare the child,” Mrs. Farrington said to him, the night he arrived. “Hubert needs her help. He says she is worth a dozen ordinary clerks, and he wants her to stay here for the present. Besides, Rex is coming, next week, and she will be good company for him. We all hope you can let her stay.”

Harry had protested, then given his consent, and Peggy had gone to bed, too happy to sleep. Life for her was singularly full of happiness just then, so full, indeed, that it left her neither time nor thought to pay much heed to the congratulations that fell upon her ears. Moreover, to Peggy’s healthy mind, there was nothing so very remarkable about remembering a long story and telling it over in public. Self-consciousness was among the least of Peggy Arterburn’s vices.

“No,” she reiterated; “I didn’t mind it a bit. Those queer, pompous lawyers were great fun, only I did want to talk back to them now and then. But, Hal?”

“Yes?”

“Is it really true that I helped Mr. Hubert save his case?”

"I suppose it is."

She drew a long breath of sheer content.

"Then, after all, it must have been worth while, my being born."

Harry laughed.

"Have you had serious doubts about it, Peggy?"

"Sometimes." Then, of a sudden, she turned to him impulsively. "Perhaps, Hal, the day may come when I can do something of the sort for you."

His answering voice was very gentle.

"It came a good while ago, Peggy; and it has come again and again. I could n't get on very well now without my dear old Peggy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE SAVINS, lying in the sunshine, was enveloped in a mist of savory odors. It was Thanksgiving morning, and the house was filled as never before. In the parlor, Mrs. McAlister was whisking away a couple of improvised beds; on the veranda, Kingsley and his two brothers basked in the sun, exchanging stories of Yale and California ranch life; and, in the library, Dr. McAlister was calling the roll of his four children.

"Hope, Teddy and Hu, and Babe," he said contentedly.

"*Adsumus*," Hubert answered.

"Yes, here with me, all happy, all successful, all strong. The old man has a great deal to be thankful for."

"If only Allyn and Cis were here!" Mrs. Farrington said, with a regretful thought for her younger brother.

"Paris is too far away. Still, I think they

will cable. Allyn never forgets things," Mrs. Holden added.

"What a record he has made!" Mrs. Barrett said reflectively. "Who ever supposed that Allyn would be a famous inventor, and add laurels to the family name? I wish my Lyn would take after him."

"Don't be in a hurry, Babe," her father advised her, with a smile. "Paul and Lyn are making a success of their ranching, and wild oats seem to be the one crop that they don't raise."

Mrs. Holden shook her head.

"Your grandsons appear to have escaped that danger," she said serenely. "It is four years since I had seen Harold, and an engineer's life is full of dangers. And yet, when he came, last night, I found I could look just as far down into his eyes as I do into Mac's."

"You can say no better word than that, Hope," Mrs. Farrington added. "All the boys are turning out well; but my one girl is a match for them all."

"You need n't put on airs because you are the only grandmother of the lot, Teddy," Mrs. Barrett rebuked her, laughing, for it was an open secret in the family that Mrs. Farrington

regarded the world as centering in the tawny-haired baby whom the Ainslees had brought with them to the family festival.

"I don't. Still, it is a comfort not to have to adopt children from outside the family," Mrs. Farrington returned.

Mrs. Barrett laughed again.

"Don't be too sure it is a comfort. Ask Hope what she thinks of my choice. And I have an idea that, before ten years are over, Rex may follow the example of Mac, and adopt an Arterburn on his own account. As for Jack and Ursula, when they were here, all summer long, it did seem too bad not to ask them up here for the day. It makes somebody for Rex and Peggy to play with."

Her father patted the strong, slim hand that lay on the arm of his chair.

"You're all right, Babe. The Savins is large enough to hold us all, and these children have contrived to tangle themselves up into our lives. Where are they now?"

From outside on the lawn, a sudden babel of laughing and chatter answered his question.

"Whence and whither?" Kingsley called, as the gay group drew near the veranda.

"We've walked four miles in search of an

appetite, and now we are going up-stairs to beautify ourselves," Peggy answered, as she detached herself from the others and, with Sophia at her heels, came to sit on the step at Kingsley's side.

He surveyed her bright face and wind-tossed hair with obvious approval.

"I doubt if you can improve on nature."

She smiled blissfully.

"Wait till you see my new clothes that your mother brought me," she advised him. "They're all green, and they have a silk lining that swishes, and you never will know me, when I get them on."

"Peggy," he admonished her; "are you a thing of vanity, after all?"

"Certainly. Don't I look it?"

"Not a bit."

"Thank you," she said, with sudden iciness.

He looked down at her in laughing rebuke.

"Wait," he added; "I had n't finished. I was only going to say that you always look as if you had on the only thing that it was proper or possible for you to wear."

She blushed with frank pleasure.

"Rex, that is the first real compliment I have ever had in my life. I think I like it, too."

“Make the most of it, then, for you may never have another,” he warned her. “Where did you go?”

“Over Skeleton Hill, as Mr. Hubert calls it.” He laughed at the name.

“Where mother had her adventure?”

“Yes, and where Sophia capsized us. That hill marks the beginning of all my good times.”

“Only half,” he objected. “I did n’t come into that party.”

“Nor into this, to-day. I had a horrid time without you, Rex.”

“Wait till Christmas, and I’ll walk up an appetite with you. But where was Hal?”

She made a little grimace of disgust.

“Ask Ursula. And they did n’t keep up, either. Sophia and I spent half our time sitting on rocks and waiting. Mac and Nathalie were about as bad, and Jack hates Sophia, so he stuck to them.” She rose to her feet; but she halted and stood smiling down at him. “But who ever would have thought, Rex Barrett, that I could reach the point of mourning over your absence?” she added saucily. Then she vanished inside the house.

All day long, the groups shifted and changed. All day long, Dr. McAlister’s snow-white head

was in the midst of the festivities. The late afternoon was given up to games which ended in a reel. Dr. McAlister led the reel, hand in hand with Peggy who chanced to be the youngest woman present, while Gifford Barrett, seated at the piano, pounded out a rag-time melody with infinite zest. Mrs. Farrington was the mistress of ceremonies, that day, and she had ordained that all the old-time customs of their childhood should be followed to the letter.

The reel ended in a general romp, the lilt of the rag-time died away, and there came a breathless pause. The next moment, there was a yelp of welcome from Sophia Smith, the rolling of wheels on the drive, a clatter on the steps and the whirr of the bell, followed instantly by the slam of the heavy front door. Before anyone could stir, the parlor door flew open, and a tall man and a beaming woman appeared upon the threshold, demanding, —

“Are we in time for dinner?”

Mrs. Farrington was at the farther side of the room. She crossed it with a rush, and cast herself into the arms of her brother.

“Allyn!”

“Teddy, dear old girl! Yes, Billy, Cicely is here.” And, one arm still about his sister, he

stretched out his other hand and drew his wife forward.

"But we thought you were in Paris," Mrs. Barrett said, while Mrs. Farrington made way for her father.

"So we were."

"Then what brought you here?"

"Homesickness, and the North-German-Lloyd people. Your letter, Ted, telling that Hope and Archie were coming, was too much for us. I wired for passage, that night, and we left Paris, the next morning. It has been a race to get here. We had headwinds and did n't land till eleven, to-day. I am afraid the cabby who took us across the city will be on a spree for a week. Still, we were bound we'd make it, and we have." And Allyn filled his lungs with a deep breath of content. "How long is it, papa, since Cis and I have been here on a high day like this?"

It was good to hear the stalwart, bronzed man address Dr. McAlister by the old title; it was good to see the famous inventor give place to the boy as, brushing Hubert to one side, he led his mother to the table and appropriated the chair next to her own.

As a matter of necessity, the dining-room had

been abandoned, that night. The long table, with its twenty-three guests, stretched through the library and back parlor, while Sophia, strolling at will about the rooms, seriously impeded the course of the serving.

For three long hours, the talk ran on, merry and earnest, mocking and tender, now forecasting future work and plans, now going over the record of the years since they had met, and ever and anon turning reminiscent, as Mrs. Farrington and her twin brother led them backward to the days when the old house was still young.

Unnoticed by them all, the tall clock in the library struck and struck again. The candles were burning low, and the busy murmur grew still; but yet they lingered, loath to end the day. Then, when the silence had quite fallen, slowly Dr. McAlister rose and stood before them, glass in hand. White-haired and full of years, yet still erect and vigorous, his eyes moved up and down over the group. They were all there: wife, children, grandchildren, and the tawny-haired great-granddaughter asleep up-stairs, together with the four young people whose happy summer had been spent with them there. They all were facing him, all looking up to him

with the love which his life had compelled. He lifted his glass. The next instant, Kingsley bowed and rose to his feet, and the others followed his leading.

There was an almost imperceptible pause; then Dr. McAlister proposed the toast, time-honored and dear to them all in its simplicity,—

“To all we love!”

The murmur of assent passed about the table and died away into silence. At length, Dr. McAlister smiled back at the waiting faces.

“My dear children,” he said slowly; “it is time for us to say good night. And may God bless you!”

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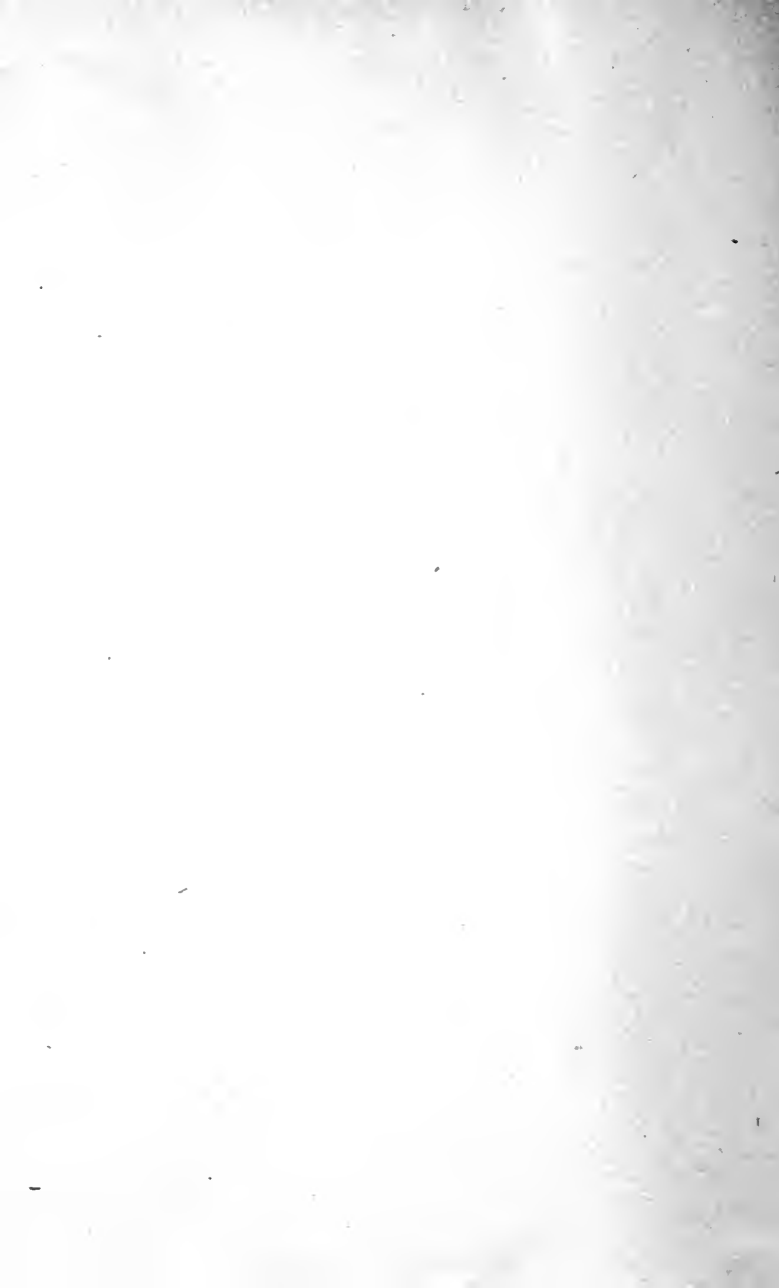
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