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MISS MERIVALE'S MISTAKE

By

MRS. HENRY CLARKE, M.A.

[Illustration: PAULINE SAT DOWN IN THE LOW CHAIR BY THE WINDOW AND TOOK UP THE PHOTOGRAPH FRAME.]

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PAULINE SAT DOWN IN THE LOW CHAIR BY THE WINDOW AND TOOK UP THE PHOTOGRAPH FRAME.

PAULINE LEANT AGAINST THE DRESSER AND WATCHED HER.

HE STARED AT HER, NOT COMPREHENDING.

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

Miss Merivale had not been paying much heed to the eager talk that was going on between Rose and Pauline Smythe at the window.

The long drive from Woodcote had made her head ache, and she was drowsily wishing that Miss Smythe would get her the cup of tea she had promised, when the sound of a name made her suddenly sit bolt upright, her kind old face full of anxious curiosity.

"Rhoda Sampson, the creature calls herself," Pauline was saying in her clear, high-pitched voice. "Her people live in Kentish Town, or somewhere in the dim wilds about there. You would know it by just looking at her."

"Does she come from Kentish Town every day?" asked Rose.

"Three times a week. On the top of an omnibus, one may be sure. And she imbibes facts from *The Civil Service Geography* all the way. I found the book in her bag yesterday. I believe she wants to get into the Post Office eventually. It is a worthy ambition."

"Whom are you talking of, my dears?" asked Miss Merivale from her seat by the fire. Pauline turned round with a little stare. Miss Merivale was so quiet and unassuming a personage that she had got into the habit of ignoring her. "Of Clare's new amusement, Miss Merivale," she said, with a laugh. Her laugh, like her voice, was a trifle hard. "It was scientific dressmaking when I was at Woodcote last, you remember, Rose dear. Now it is a society. Clare is secretary."

"But you spoke of some girl who came here," persisted Miss Merivale.

Pauline lifted her delicately-pencilled eyebrows. "Oh, that is Clare's typewriter. She is part of the joke. If you saw Clare and her together over their letters, you would think they were reforming the universe. It hasn't dawned on poor Sampson yet that Clare will get tired of the whole business in a month. It is lucky she has the Post Office to fall back on. Clare is exactly what she used to be at school, Rose, 'everything by starts and nothing long.' It amuses me to watch her."

"She doesn't tire of you, Pauline," said Rose fondly.

Pauline frowned a little. She did not care to be reminded, even by foolish, flattering little Rose, that she was, in sober fact, nothing more nor less than Clare's paid companion.

"Oh, we get on," she said coolly. "We each leave the other to go her own way in peace. And it suits Lady Desborough in Rome to say that Clare is living with her old governess. People think of me as a spectacled lady of an uncertain age, and everybody is satisfied. But you would like some tea. I wish Clare was in. She isn't afraid of that gas stove. I am ashamed to confess that I am. Come out with me while I light it, Rosamunda mia. And you shall make the tea. I never can remember how many spoonfuls to put in. How pretty you look in blue! I wish I was eighteen, with hair the colour of ripe wheat, then I would wear blue too."

She went off, laughing, with Rose to the tiny kitchen on the other side of the passage. The sitting-room was the largest room in the little Chelsea flat, and that was smaller than any of the rooms at Woodcote; but the diminutive dimensions of the place only added to the fascinations of it in Rose's eyes.

As she took the cups and saucers down from the toy-like dresser and put

them on the lilliputian table between the gas stove and the door, she felt a thrill of ineffable pleasure.

"Oh, Pauline, I wish I lived here with you. It's so dull at Woodcote. And it seems to get duller every day."

"Poor little Rose, it must be dull for you. Clare and I often talk of you with pity. Clare pities you the most. A fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind, you know. She will have to go back to Desborough Park when her mother returns, I suppose. The flat is only rented for six months. I wish"--She stopped to take off the lid of the tea-kettle and peer earnestly in. "When a kettle boils, little bubbles come to the top, don't they? I have got a notebook where I write down interesting little details of that sort. They will come useful by and by, if I have to live in a flat by myself. I shouldn't be able to keep a regular servant."

"But a regular servant would spoil it all, even if you could afford it," said Rose, with sparkling eyes. "We couldn't come out here and get tea like this, if you had a servant, Pauline."

"She would have to stand in the passage, wouldn't she?" said Pauline, looking round the tiny kitchen, with a laugh. "But how would you like to get tea for yourself every day, little Rose? Clare seems to like it, though. Her mother wanted Mrs. Richards to stay with us all day, but Clare begged that she might go at three o'clock. And Clare is maid-of-all-work after that. It seems to come natural to her to know what kitchen things are meant for. Now, if you will make the tea, we will go back to your aunt. This kettle is certainly boiling at last."

Rose carefully measured the tea into the pretty Japanese teapot. Pauline leant against the dresser and watched her with her hands clasped at the back of her head. Pauline was not pretty,--her features were badly cut and her skin was sallow,--but she made a pretty picture standing there. Her dress of ruddy brown was made in a graceful, artistic fashion, and was just the right colour to set off her dark eyes and dark, wavy hair. Rose thought her friend beautiful. She had adored her from the first day they met, when Pauline was junior English governess at Miss Jephson's Collegiate School for Young Ladies at Brighton, and Rose was a frightened, lonely, homesick child of fourteen, tasting her first experience of boarding-school.

Pauline had had many adorers among the younger girls, and a holiday rarely passed without her receiving some delightful invitations. It was spitefully noticed by the senior English governess that she was very rarely invited twice to the same house; but after Rose came to the school, it became a matter of course that Pauline should spend her holidays at Woodcote. She had no home of her own, as she often sadly told the girls. She very seldom said more than that, but it was understood in the school that the seal ring she wore at her watch-chain belonged to her father, one of the Norfolk Smythes; and the beautiful woman with powdered hair, whose miniature hung in her bedroom, was her great-grandmother, the Marquise de Villeroy, who perished on the scaffold during the Reign of Terror.

It was considered a high privilege by Pauline's band of worshippers to be allowed to hold this miniature in their hands; but on Rose a still higher privilege had been once conferred. She had worn the miniature tied round her neck by a blue ribbon when she acted a part in the French play Miss Jephson's pupils produced every Christmas. That was in Rose's last year at school. She left at the end of the next term, as her aunt was in failing health and wanted her at home.

Soon Pauline left too, and after a brief experience as a private governess, commenced to give visiting lessons in London. She lived at first with a cousin of Miss Jephson's, a clergyman's widow; but the arrangement did not somehow prove a satisfactory one, and it was a relief to them both when Clare Desborough, whose old admiration for Pauline had revived on meeting her in London, had begged her to share the little flat her mother had consented to rent for her, while the family spent the winter in Italy.

Pauline found the freedom of a flat delightful, and looked forward with a sinking heart to the day of Lady Desborough's return. Her only hope was that Rose might be induced to entreat her aunt to let her live in London, so that she might study music at the Royal Academy. Pauline was sure that Miss Merivale would consent, if only Rose's pleading was urgent enough. Rose had had her own way all her life.

[Illustration: PAULINE LEANT AGAINST THE DRESSER AND WATCHED HER.]

"There, it is quite ready now," Rose said, as she finished cutting the bread and butter. "If you will move a little, Pauline, I will carry the tray in."

"I ought to do that," said Pauline lazily. "What will your aunt think, Rosie? I am not treating you like a visitor, am I?"

"I wish I wasn't a visitor," said Rose, with a faint little sigh. "I envy Clare more than I ever envied anybody. She must be having a lovely time." "It will soon be over, poor dear. I wish"--Pauline stopped again, and began a fresh sentence. "You and I would get on better than Clare and I do, Rose. We like the same things. She does not care a bit for music, but I can't live without it. What delightful times we could have together, Rose! But I don't suppose your aunt would hear of it. She is more old-fashioned in her ideas than Lady Desborough."

Rose had clasped her hands together. "Oh, Pauline, it would be too delightful! Would you really like to have me? Aunt Lucy might let me come, though I'm afraid she could not get on without me. And there's Tom!"

Pauline's dark eyes grew quizzical "I didn't know you were afraid of Tom, Rose. Doesn't he think everything you do is right? Was there ever a little girl so spoiled by a big brother?"

"But he thinks I ought always to be at home to wait on him. You said the other day that he was selfish, Pauline."

"All brothers are, my dear," returned Pauline oracularly, "and it is sisters who make them so. Come, strike a blow for your liberty, Rose. You are not really wanted at home, and you are wasting your days in that dull little country place. Wouldn't you like to live here with me?"

Rose's face was answer enough. She drew a deep breath before she spoke. "If only Aunt Lucy wouldn't miss me too much, Pauline! But she's not strong. I don't think she could do without me."

"She would be better if she came up to London oftener and had a fuller life," returned Pauline, with decision. "Her ill health has always been mainly imaginary, Rose. When people have nothing else to do, they sink into invalidism. But you are making me lose my character as a hostess altogether. Let us take in the tea. Your aunt will wonder what we have been doing."

But Miss Merivale had not noticed that the tea was a long time in making its appearance. She was still absorbed in anxious thought when the girls came in, and after a little while she managed to lead the conversation back to Clare and her typewriter.

"Mr. Powell suggested that we should have the programmes for the concert typewritten, Rose. He said it would be cheaper. Could you give me the address of Miss Sampson, Miss Smythe?"

"I shouldn't advise you to employ her, Miss Merivale," returned Pauline in a voice that had a sharp edge to it. For some reason or other, Clare's assistant was evidently not a favourite of hers. "I don't believe she knows her business properly. Lady Desborough's sister picked her up for Clare."

"I might try her. Could you give me her address, my dear?"

Pauline opened her eyes. It was utterly unlike Miss Merivale to be so persistent. "I am afraid I can't, Miss Merivale. I know nothing whatever about her, except that she has just come from Australia with some relations who kept a small shop out there. It was foolish of Mrs. Metcalfe to send us such a person. There are so many ladies who would be glad to do the work."

Miss Merivale had caught her breath sharply as Pauline mentioned Australia, but neither of the girls noticed her agitation. Rose had wandered to the window, and was looking with delight at the vast expanse of chimney-tops, and the little glimpse of the river, grey under the cold March sky. And Pauline was slowly stirring her tea, with her eyes cast down. She was thinking whether it would be wise to drop a hint about Rose's unhappiness at Woodcote. She had just made up her mind to say a guarded word or two, when she found, to her sharp annoyance, that Miss Merivale's mind was still running on Rhoda Sampson.

"She comes here three times a week, I think you said, my dear?" asked Miss Merivale in her gentle voice. "Does she come in the mornings? She has her meals here, perhaps?"

Pauline laughed. "We haven't invited her yet. I told Clare she must draw the line somewhere. There is a Lockhart's Coffee House round the corner, and she goes there. What makes you interested in her, Miss Merivale? If you want some typewriting done, I can easily get a proper person for you. Mrs. Metcalfe got Sampson because she is so cheap. She comes to Clare, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, for some ridiculous sum. If she knew her work, she would have wanted more. In fact, she told Clare that she knew very little. Rose, what are you looking at? Do you find the company of chimney-tops exhilarating? I wish our flat was in the front of the building. Then we could have a good view of the river."

"You have a delightful glimpse of it here," Rose said, without turning her head.

Pauline smiled and looked at Miss Merivale. "Rose is in the mood to find even London smuts fascinating," she said. "Could you spare her to us for a night or two next week, Miss Merivale? Joachim is playing at St. James's Hall, and I want Rose to hear him."

Miss Merivale started from a deep reverie. "Tom talked of bringing her up for Joachim's concert," she said. "But if Rose would like to stay a day or two--But have you room for a visitor?"

Rose had come from the window, her eyes sparkling at Pauline's suggestion that she should stay with her and Clare. She now broke merrily in. "Clare's two cousins stayed with them for a night last week, Aunt Lucy. You don't know how elastic a flat is. Does she, Pauline? Oh, do let me!"

If Rose had been pleading to be let out of prison she could not have spoken more earnestly. Another time Miss Merivale might have been hurt, but just then she was hardly able to attend to what Rose was saying.

"We must ask Tom about the concert," she said. "You can write to Miss Smythe to-morrow. Would any day next week be convenient, my dear?"

"Any day," said Pauline smilingly. "But the sooner the better. Be sure and bring your violin, Rose. I want Mrs. Metcalfe to hear you play. She is a brilliant performer herself. We must have a musical afternoon while you are here. Don't you think you could spare her for a week, Miss Merivale? We shall have so much to do."

"We will see, my dear," said Miss Merivale, getting up. "A week sounds a long time. But we will see. We must go now, Rosie. The carriage will be waiting. You and Miss Desborough must come and see us, my dear. I am sure even a day in the country would be good for you. Don't you pine for the country now the spring is coming?"

WOODCOTE.

The drive home to Woodcote was a very silent one. Miss Merivale and Rose were both absorbed in their own thoughts, and neither of them even dimly divined the thoughts of the other.

It had never entered Miss Merivale's head that Rose, her pet and darling, her little nurse and helper, could be longing to live with Pauline in London; and how could Rose have guessed that her aunt's thoughts were fixed on Rhoda Sampson, the girl Pauline had spoken of in such contemptuous terms? She supposed her aunt was asleep, she sat so still in the corner of the carriage with her eyes closed, and she took good care not to disturb her. She was glad to be free to dwell on the delightful visions Pauline had called up for her.

Miss Merivale roused herself as the carriage turned in at the gates of the drive. The March twilight had gathered thickly, and lights were shining from the windows of the low, irregular house. They could see them twinkling through the trees.

"I wonder if Tom is back from Guilford yet, Rosie. He will scold us for being late. Oh, how sweet and fresh the air is here! Don't you pity those girls cooped up in that stuffy little flat? You must not promise to stay a week with them, Rosie. You would find two days quite long enough."

Rose was saved from attempting to answer this by the carriage stopping before the wide porch. A short, fair-haired young man, with a pleasant face and merry blue eyes, was waiting to open the door.

"Auntie, you have no business to be out as late as this and an east wind blowing," he said, in a playful scolding tone. "Rose, you should not have allowed it. But come in. There is a jolly fire in the dining-room, and tea is quite ready. Next time you go to London, I mean to go with you."

The dining-room looked a picture of comfort, with the curtains drawn, and the table laid for tea. Miss Merivale never had late dinner except when she gave a dinner party. She liked the simple, old-fashioned ways she had been accustomed to in her youth. But the table was laid with dainty care; the swinging lamps shone upon shining silver that had been in the family for two hundred years, on an old Worcester tea-set that had been bought by Miss Merivale's grandmother, on bowls of early spring flowers gathered by Rose that morning from the beautiful old garden at the back of the house. Everything in the room spoke of long years of quiet prosperity. As Miss Merivale took her accustomed seat at the tea-table and looked about her, and then at Tom sitting opposite her, all unwitting of the terrible blow that might be about to fall on him, she could scarcely keep back the sob that rose to her lips.

Tom met her glance without seeing the trouble in it, and he smiled cheerfully back at her.

"Well, how did the shopping get on?" he asked, "Did you remember the

seeds, Rose?"

Rose gave him a guilty look. "Oh, Tom, I quite forgot. Did you want them?"

He looked vexed for a moment, but only for a moment. "It does not matter. I can write. I promised Jackson he should have them this week. Cousin Ann has a wonderful show of anemones this year, Aunt Lucy. The square bed in the back garden is brilliant with them. We must try them here again next year. I don't intend to be satisfied till we have beaten Cousin Ann."

"She says the soil here doesn't suit anemones; they are fanciful flowers," returned Miss Merivale. "Then you went to Broadhurst, Tom?"

"Yes, I just managed it. Old Mrs. Harding was there. She is failing very fast, poor old soul. Part of the time she thought I was Cousin James, Aunt Lucy. She wanted to know when I heard last from my sister Lydia."

Miss Merivale put her cup down with a little clatter. Her hand had begun to tremble. "You are very much like James, Tom," she said, glancing at the portrait that hung on the wainscoted wall just above him, "and you get more like him every day."

It was the portrait of her only brother she was looking at. Tom and Rose were her cousin's children, though they called her aunt. She had adopted them when Rose was a baby and Tom a sturdy lad of five. Woodcote had been their home ever since. Tom had grown up knowing that the estate was to be his at Miss Merivale's death. James Merivale had died young, ten years before his father; and Lydia, Miss Merivale's only sister, had married against her father's wishes, and had been disowned by him. After vainly trying to gain his forgiveness, she and her husband emigrated to Australia, and for some years nothing was heard of them. Then Lydia wrote to her father, telling him that she was a widow, and begging him to send her money that she might come home. The stern old man burnt the letter without answering it and without showing it to his daughter Lucy, and the next news came in a letter written by Lydia to her sister.

She had married again, her husband's partner, James Sampson, and had a little daughter, whom she had named Rhoda, after her mother. The letter asked for money, and Miss Merivale sent what she could, though she had little to send, for her father demanded a strict account of all she spent.

She gave him the letter to read, and he returned it to her without a word; but his heart must have relented towards his disobedient daughter at the last, for by a codicil to his will it was provided that at Miss Merivale's death Woodcote was to pass to Lydia, or, in the event of her not surviving her sister, to her daughter Rhoda.

But poor Lydia never knew that her father had forgiven her. She died three days before him; and when her sister's letter reached Australia, James Sampson had broken up his home in Melbourne and started with his little daughter for a distant settlement. He never reached the settlement, and all Miss Merivale's efforts to trace him proved fruitless. She at last accepted the belief of the lawyers that he had lost his way, and, like so

many other hapless wanderers, had perished in the bush.

When Tom had become dear as a son to her, fears would sometimes rise that his claim to Woodcote might one day be disputed; but as the quiet years went on these fears ceased to present themselves, and when Pauline mentioned Rhoda Sampson the name had gone through her like a knife. She tried--she had been trying ever since--to tell herself that it was impossible it could be James Sampson's child, but the terror had laid fast hold of her, and she could not shake it off. It was as James Sampson's child she had always thought of her niece. Her heart had refused to give her the place Lydia's little girl had a right to claim. She could not think of her as Lydia's.

Tom had not noticed his aunt's agitation at the mention of her sister's name. He went on speaking of his visit to Broadhurst.

"They want you to spend a day or two there next week, Rosie. Mr. Powell has asked Laura to sing at the concert, and she wants to practise with you."

Rose's pretty face clouded over. "But I am going to stay with Pauline next week. And I wish people wouldn't ask Laura to sing in public. She can't sing."

"It's a pleasure to listen to her, though," returned Tom sturdily. "We aren't all as critical as you, Rosie; and our Parish Room isn't the Albert Hall. You had much better go to Broadhurst than to Chelsea. Miss Smythe and Miss Desborough live in two cupboards up among the clouds, don't they?"

"It isn't quite as bad as that, my dear," broke in Miss Merivale, as she saw Rose's vexed expression. "I promised that Rose should stay with them for a day or two. I thought that if you went up to Joachim's concert you might leave Rose behind, and fetch her next day."

"But, Aunt Lucy, Pauline said a week!" exclaimed Rose in dismay. "We could do nothing in a day. And we want to do so much. Time always flies so fast in London. One lives there."

"We only vegetate here, eh, Rosie?" said Tom in a tone of good-humoured banter. "Was Wordsworth a vegetable too? He lived in the country, you know."

But Rose refused to answer this. "Aunt Lucy, I may stay longer than a day, may I not?"

"Yes, dear, of course. Don't mind Tom's teasing. I must go up to town again to-morrow, I find, and I will call at Cadogan Mansions and see Miss Smythe for you. And I can get your seeds, Tom."

Both Rose and Tom stared in surprise at this. "Aunt Lucy, you will tire yourself out if you go off shopping again to-morrow," exclaimed Tom. "Can't I go for you?"

"No; I must go, my dear. I shall go by train, I think. You shall drive me to the station, and I can take a hansom at Victoria. No, you must not come with me, Tom. I want to see Mr. Thomson."

"You won't be able to find your way to Lincoln's Inn by yourself," said Tom teasingly. "We can't let her go alone, can we, Rose?"

"Don't be such foolish children," returned Miss Merivale, getting up from the table. "I have a matter of business to talk over with Mr. Thomson, Tom. And I would rather go alone, please."

She spoke with such unwonted decision Tom could say no more. But he was both hurt and surprised. Miss Merivale was accustomed to ask his opinion on every business matter. He practically managed the estate for her. It seemed very strange to him that she should be so bent on going to see Mr. Thomson alone. He felt as if he must have proved himself in some way unworthy of her confidence.

Miss Merivale saw that he was hurt, though he tried his best to hide it. But it was impossible for her to explain. She had determined to be silent till she had seen Rhoda Sampson and found out who she was.

Rose was as much surprised as Tom at her aunt's determination to go alone to London next day. She talked of it to Tom in the drawing-room when Miss Merivale had gone up to her room.

"You don't think it is about her will, do you?" she said, in a hushed tone.

Tom gave her a look of strong disgust. "I don't think anything about it. But she isn't fit to go by herself. Get her to take Maitland, if she won't take one of us. She was looking quite ill this evening, didn't you notice? I wouldn't stay away a week, Rosie, if I were you. She misses you dreadfully if you are away only a day."

"But it is so dull here, doing nothing day after day but wait on Aunt Lucy, and pick the flowers, and look after the old people in the village," said Rose, moved to a sudden burst of confidence. "It's different for you, Tom. You have your shooting and fishing, and the estate to look after, and all the rest of it. But I'm at home all day"--

"That's where a girl ought to be, my dear," returned Tom good-humouredly. "I'm not going to pity you. If you are dull, it's your own fault. Laura isn't dull."

"I don't suppose an oyster is dull," was Rose's disdainful retort. "But it's no good to talk to you, Tom."

"I don't say Laura is as clever as you, my dear," returned Tom, with undiminished good humour. "But it is no good grumbling about your lot. Aunt Lucy couldn't do without you, and you wouldn't leave her if you could. So what's the use of talking? And as to your being dull, I don't

believe it. You only imagine you are. That's where your cleverness comes in, you see. We stupid people aren't ashamed to be contented."

Rose could not help laughing at this, though she felt very cross. But she felt Tom was right in saying that her aunt could not do without her for very long. And she told herself sorrowfully that she must give up all hope of sharing Pauline's flat when Clare went back to dull captivity at Desborough Park. She could not be spared. It seemed doubtful if she would be able to persuade her aunt and Tom to let her stay more than a day or two when she made her promised visit in the following week.

She went up to her aunt's room to bid her good-night, feeling herself a martyr, but determined to bear her hard lot with decent cheerfulness.

Miss Merivale was sitting at the old bureau where she kept her most private papers. She had been reading over again the letter in which Lydia told her of the birth of her little dark-eyed girl.

Many tears had fallen on the yellow pages before she put them away, and she turned such a white, worn face to Rose as she entered, Rose felt horribly ashamed at having ever thought of sharing Pauline's flat. And the good-night embrace she gave Miss Merivale before going into the little white room that opened from her aunt's had compunction in it as well as warm affection.

"Aunt Lucy, do let Tom go with you to-morrow," she begged. "But must you go to-morrow?"

"Yes, I must, dear. And I want to go alone," Miss Merivale answered. Then she pinched Rose's cheek, trying to speak playfully. "You silly children, am I not to be trusted to go anywhere alone? I shall start early, and get back early. It is business I cannot put off, Rose. Perhaps to-morrow I shall be able to tell you all about it."

CHAPTER III.

A VISIT TO KENTISH TOWN.

It was just before twelve o'clock next morning when Miss Merivale reached Cadogan Mansions. She told the cabman to wait, and walked slowly up the long flights of stone steps.

About half-way up, she met a girl coming down, with light springing steps, buttoning a pair of shabby dogskin gloves. Her dress was shabby too, and the little black straw hat had seen long service; but Miss Merivale only noticed her bonnie face. It brightened the dreary staircase like a gleam of sunshine.

It never struck her that this was the girl she had come to see. From

Pauline's words the day before, she had pictured Rhoda Sampson as a very different sort of girl.

The flat was at the top of the high buildings, and Miss Merivale was out of breath by the time she reached the neat front door with the electric bell. She had not long to wait before her ring was answered by Mrs. Richards, a thin, careworn woman, who ushered her into the sitting-room where Miss Desborough sat at her writing-table.

She jumped up, with her pen in her hand. "Miss Merivale, what a delightful surprise! Is Rose with you? I was so sorry to miss you yesterday, but I had to go to a committee meeting. I have more work on my hands just now than I can do. Would you mind my just finishing this letter for the post? It is very important. I shall not be five minutes."

Miss Merivale, who had seen Clare running about the garden at Woodcote three summers before with her hair flying, was considerably taken aback by her extremely "grown-up" manner. She sat meekly down on the sofa and waited for the letter to be finished.

"There, it's done!" Clare exclaimed, after a moment or two. "Now I will just give it to Mrs. Richards, and we can have a little talk. Pauline will be back in half an hour," She glanced as she spoke at a tiny clock on the writing-table. "Then after lunch I must rush off to Southwark. I shall find a big mothers' meeting waiting for me. The women bring their needlework, and I talk to them. Last week we considered Food Stuffs in reference to young children, and this afternoon I am going to discuss Herbert Spencer's Theory of Education."

"Dear me! these sound very difficult subjects for you, my dear," said Miss Merivale, trying to repress a laugh as she looked at Clare's serious young face. "They must need a great deal of preparation."

"Yes, that is the worst of it. I haven't time for any study. We workers lead very busy lives, Miss Merivale. I am rushing all day from one thing to another, feeling all the time that I ought to be doing something else."

It suggested itself to Miss Merivale that work undertaken in that hurried fashion must do more harm than good; but she was too eager to speak of Rhoda Sampson to think much of anything else. "You have someone to help you, Miss Smythe told us yesterday," she said. "Someone who typewrites your letters."

"Oh, Miss Sampson? Yes, she is an energetic little thing. But she has vexed me to-day. I particularly wanted her this afternoon, and she has asked for a holiday. Her little cousin is ill, and she wants to take him into the country somewhere. She has just gone. You must have met her on the stairs."

Miss Merivale started. "Yes, I met someone coming down. Was that Miss Sampson? Then she is not coming back to-day? I wanted some programmes typewritten. Could you give me her address?"

"Yes, I have it here somewhere. But she will be here on Monday. I will speak to her, if you like I shall be glad to get her some work; for after next week I shall not want her, though I have not told her so yet. Mother is coming home rather sooner than we expected, and I am going back to Desborough with her."

"Indeed? You will be sorry to give up your work, won't you, my dear?" asked Miss Merivale mechanically, as she watched Clare turning over her address-book.

"Mother has promised that I shall come back later on and stay with Aunt Metcalfe. I shall like that better than this. One gets tired of a flat after a time. But here is Miss Sampson's address. Will you write to her, or shall I tell her what you want?"

"I will go there now," Miss Merivale said, her hand closing eagerly on the slip of paper Clare gave her. "She has just come from Australia, Miss Smythe said."

"Yes; they have been in England a few months only. I know nothing more of her. But she is a good little thing. Pauline does not like her, but Pauline is too critical sometimes. I notice that she is strangely lacking in sympathy towards girls of Miss Sampson's class."

It was a long drive from Chelsea to Acacia Road, Kentish Town. Miss Merivale knew London very little, though she had lived near it all her life, and the dreary, respectable streets she drove through after leaving Oxford Street behind her oppressed her even more than Whitechapel had done in her one visit to it with Tom, the year before, to see a loan collection of pictures. Street after street of blank, drab-faced houses--dull, unsmiling houses! She thought of children growing up there, wan and joyless, like plants kept out of the sun. And then two happy-eyed boys came running by with their satchels under their arms, while a door opened and a woman with a smiling mother-face came out to welcome them. And Miss Merivale confessed to herself the mistake she had been making. Where love is, even a dull London street has its sunshine.

Acacia Road was reached at last, and the cab drew up before a small bow-windowed house that had a card, "Apartments to Let," over the hall door. A little servant with a dirty apron and a merry face opened the door, and two boys with bright red pinafores came rushing from the sitting-room behind her.

Miss Sampson wasn't in, but her aunt, Mrs. M'Alister, was, the smiling servant-maid told Miss Merivale, and led the way into the front sitting-room. The boys ran upstairs. Miss Merivale heard them shouting to their mother that a lady wanted her, and she sat down on a chair near the door, trembling all over.

The room was the ordinary lodging-house sitting-room; but though there was a litter of toys on the worn carpet, it had evidently been carefully swept and dusted that morning, and there was a brown jug filled with fresh daffodils on the centre table. On the side table near Miss Merivale there

was a pile of books. She looked at the titles as she waited for a step on the stairs--_The Civil Service Geography, Hamblin Smith's Arithmetic_, one or two French Readers, a novel by George MacDonald, and a worn edition of Longfellow's Poems. Miss Merivale wondered if they all belonged to Rhoda.

She was not kept waiting very long. Almost before she had finished looking at the books she heard someone coming down the stairs, and the door opened to admit a tall, angular woman, whose brown hair was thickly streaked with grey. Miss Merivale found herself unable to begin at once to make the inquiries she had come to make, and fell back on the programmes she wanted typewritten. Mrs. M'Alister eagerly promised that Rhoda would undertake the work. She had not a typewriter of her own, but a friend would lend the use of hers, and Miss Merivale might rely on the work being done punctually.

"It is very kind of Miss Desborough to recommend Rhoda," she said in her anxious voice. "It is difficult to get work in London, we find."

"You have lately come from Australia, have you not?" asked Miss Merivale gently.

Mrs. M'Alister was too simple-minded to discern the profound agitation that lay beneath Miss Merivale's quiet manner. And the kind voice and kind, gentle face of her visitor led her to be more confidential than was her wont with strangers.

"Yes, we came back just before Christmas. When my husband died, I felt I must come home. My brothers offered to help me with the boys. Rhoda has taken the youngest down to one of his uncles to-day. But it's only in Essex; she will be back to-night."

She said the last words hurriedly, as if afraid of wearying her visitor. She little knew how Miss Merivale was hanging on her words.

"Your niece must be a great comfort to you," Miss Merivale said, after a moment's pause. "Has she always lived with you?"

"As good as always. She wasn't five when we had her first. Her father was our nearest neighbour; we were living up in the hills then, fifty miles from a town. She used to stay with us for days together while her father went off after cattle. And when he died we brought her home for good. I haven't a girl of my own, but I've never known what it is to miss one. Rhoda's no kith or kin to us, but she has been a daughter to me, all the same, and a sister to the boys. We've had a hard fight since we came home, for my brothers have been unfortunate lately, and are not able to help us as they wanted to; but Rhoda hasn't lost heart for a moment."

Mrs. M'Alister had been drawn into making this long speech by the eager look of interest she saw in Miss Merivale's face; but now she stopped short, her pale face flushing a little. She felt afraid lest Miss Merivale might think she was asking for help.

"Then I suppose she had no relatives of her own?" asked Miss Merivale,

after a pause, in which she had been struggling for her voice.

"She had some on her mother's side. I never heard their names. But her father seemed certain that they would be unkind to the child, and he was thankful when we promised to keep her. He was a queer, silent sort of man. We never knew much about him, except that he had lived in Adelaide. But he was mother and father both to Rhoda. He was just wrapped up in her. It was a pretty sight to see them together."

There were many questions Miss Merivale would have liked to ask, but she had not the courage to. She was afraid of betraying herself. She no longer felt any doubt about Rhoda's parentage. James Sampson had not perished in the bush, but had hidden himself in that lonely spot up among the hills, where either no news of the will had reached him, or he had deliberately refrained from communicating with England. Perhaps he thought that his girl would be happier with the kind M'Alisters than with her rich English relatives.

But the most probable supposition was that he had never heard of the will. Mrs. M'Alister had said that they were living fifty miles from a town. How easily it might have happened that the advertisements they put in the Melbourne papers had never been seen by him.

As soon as she could she got away, after arranging that Rhoda should bring the programmes to Woodcote one day in the following week, so that she might talk over with her the details of some other work she wanted done. Miss Merivale marvelled at herself for the calmness with which she settled all this.

But when once she was in the cab her strength left her. After telling the man to drive her to Victoria, she sank back faint and trembling. The alternatives that lay before her seemed equally impossible. If Rhoda was Lydia's child, her own niece, her successor to Woodcote, how could she leave her unacknowledged? How could she be silent about the discovery she had made, even for a day? And as Miss Merivale thought this she stretched her hand to the check-string, determining to drive at once to Lincoln's Inn to see her lawyer.

But her hand dropped at her side. All his life Tom had thought of Woodcote as his inheritance; every stone, every blade of grass, was dear to him. He would have to leave it, to go out into the world to fight for his living. How could she let him go? If she was silent, no one would be likely to guess that Rhoda was Lydia's child. She was not mentioned by name in the will. And she should not suffer. Ways and means of providing for her could be found. But she could not have Woodcote. That was Tom's. It would break Tom's heart to give it up.

As Miss Merivale thought of Tom her heart grew hard against Rhoda. She who had never hated anyone felt herself in danger of hating Lydia's little girl. Tears burst from her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. She did not think of wiping them away. She sat with her hands clasped on her lap, staring miserably in front of her. What she was to do she did not know.

CHAPTER IV.

TOM AND RHODA MEET.

On the day of the Joachim concert Tom and Rose went up to London soon after breakfast. Tom was not going to the concert. After taking Rose to Cadogan Mansions he meant to hurry back.

He was anxious about his aunt. She had been so unlike herself during the last few days, he feared she must be ill. And he felt sure he must have offended her in some way, for she had seemed anxious to avoid him, and he had hardly spoken to her since she came back from London.

Did she think he was taking too much on himself? He had got into the habit lately of settling matters of minor importance without consulting her, so as to save her trouble. Perhaps he had annoyed her by doing so. At any rate, he would ask her if this was so. Tom's nature was so simple and straightforward that this was the natural course for him to take. He believed half the difficulties of life arose from the want of a little plain speaking.

Miss Merivale had said little about her journey to town. She left Tom and Rose under the impression that she had called at the lawyer's, and it was not till the next day that she casually mentioned her visit to Mrs. M'Alister.

"I have asked Miss Sampson to come and see me," she added, after telling them that Rhoda was to do some typewriting for her. "I am interested in her, Rose. Did you know that poor Lydia's second husband was named Sampson? It is not at all certain that this girl is of the same family, as she comes from quite a different part of Australia. But I should like to see her."

Miss Merivale had had this speech carefully prepared ever since she came home, and she uttered it so carelessly that neither Rose nor Tom suspected how her heart beat as she said it. Their cousin Lydia was a faint, shadowy figure to them, and the suggestion that Miss Sampson might prove to be related to her husband aroused no interest in their minds. Tom never thought of it again till Rose mentioned Miss Sampson as they were travelling up to Victoria.

"I wish Aunt Lucy hadn't taken her up like this," she said impatiently. "Pauline will be vexed, for she advised Aunt Lucy to have nothing to do with her."

"But if she is our cousin," suggested Tom, with a twinkle in his blue eyes, "don't you think we are bound to patronise our relations?"

"How could she be our cousin? Don't be so foolish, Tom," Rose answered

sharply.

"A family connection, then," returned Tom. "But perhaps you had better not mention the possibility to Miss Smythe. It would shock her too much. All her relations are in Debrett, aren't they?"

Rose looked doubtfully at him. "I never know whether you like Pauline or not, Tom," she said. "But I am sure you never heard her boast of her relations."

"No, I never did, my dear; but I have somehow gathered the fact that they are very fine people indeed. I always feel I ought to be ashamed that we did not come over at the Conquest when I am talking to Miss Smythe."

"Now you are laughing at her," returned Rose, with some indignation in her voice. "I believe you are always laughing at her, Tom. And it is just because she is clever. Men always like stupid girls best, who think everything they say is wonderful."

At this Tom laughed outright. "There is one clever little girl I am very fond of," he said, "and it is going to be dull at Woodcote without her. When will you come back, Rosie? Don't stay very long. I am sure Aunt Lucy is not well."

"I must stay till Thursday. Pauline and Clare are going to have a musical At Home on Thursday. But I will come back on Friday, Tom. I must, I suppose." And Rose tried to suppress a sigh.

"Do you really want to stay longer?" said Tom, with a wondering look at her. "I daresay Laura would spend a day or two with Aunt Lucy. I don't think she ought to be alone, Rose."

"Laura fidgets Aunt Lucy to death," Rose answered quickly. "You know she does, Tom. Of course I shall come back on Friday. I promised Aunt Lucy I would."

While Tom and Rose were talking thus, Miss Merivale was waiting anxiously for Rhoda. She had arranged that she should come to Woodcote that morning while Tom and Rose were away. The station was only half a mile from the house, and she did not send to meet her; but she sat by the drawing-room window, looking with painful eagerness down the drive for the first glimpse of the slim figure she remembered.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Rhoda came up the quiet country road and turned in at the iron gates. It was a delightful day, the first real day of spring. Though no leaves were yet on the trees, ruddy brown buds just ready for bursting clothed every branch. And the grass along the hedges was starred with celandines and daisies, while yellow catkins sprinkled the bushes above them. A blackbird was singing loudly as Rhoda passed the big chestnut trees by the gate, and a squirrel darted down from a fir and scurried across the drive to hide himself in the little wood. Rhoda waited a moment, hoping for another glimpse of the bright-eyed little fellow. She was a child still in her delight in small animals, and this visit to

Woodcote was a great treat to her. She loved the country as only country-bred people forced to live in a big town can love it. And this sweet English countryside, with its breezy uplands and smiling pastures, seemed more beautiful to her than even her dear Australia.

She drew a breath of delighted admiration when she came out on the lawn and saw the old house with its beds of tulips before it flaming in the sun. It was such a house as she had read of but had never seen, a haunt of ancient peace, time-worn, yet smiling still, its walls mellowed by the sunshine of many a hundred summers. She would have stood a moment to notice the delightful lines the gables made against the sky, but a figure at one of the deep, narrow-paned windows to the right of the porch caught her attention, and remembering that she had come on sober business, she walked briskly up to the heavy iron-studded door within the porch and pulled the twisted bell rope.

By Miss Merivale's orders she was shown into the library, a delightful room looking out on the garden at the back of the house. She had ample time to notice what a dear old garden it was, for Miss Merivale kept her waiting quite a quarter of an hour.

More than once Miss Merivale went across the narrow hall and put her hand on the door, and then went back to the drawing-room, finding her courage fail her. And when at last she entered, she was so deadly pale, Rhoda lost all her nervousness in pity for her; she felt sure that she must be ill.

"Yes, that will do very nicely," Miss Merivale said, after giving the typewritten programmes a cursory glance and pushing them from her. Her eyes went back to Rhoda's face. She saw now that the fleeting glimpse she had got of her on the staircase had somewhat deceived her. Rhoda was not as pretty as she had thought. Her mouth was a little too wide, and her nose had too blunt a tip for beauty. But it was a charming face, nevertheless, full of heart-sunshine; and the dark brown, darkly-fringed eyes would have redeemed a plainer face.

Miss Merivale remembered with a sharp pang how Lydia had written of her dark-eyed girl. She spoke of her sister, after a moment or two.

"It has struck me that your father might have been related to her second husband," she said. She had determined after leaving Acacia Road to mention this as possible both to Rhoda and to Tom and Rose.

Many people knew that Lydia had been Mrs. Sampson when she died, though Miss Merivale believed that she herself was the only person who was aware that her child had been named Rhoda.

But she soon found that Rhoda knew very little of her father. She had lived so long with the M'Alisters that she had come to identify herself with them, and had never desired to learn more of her own people. She could scarcely remember her father, and could not remember his Christian name. "J. Sampson is written in my little Bible," she said. "It is the only book I have which belonged to him. Our house was burnt down when I was about two years old, and all his books and papers were burnt with it.

Uncle Tom and Mr. Harding used to call him Jack, I have heard Aunt Mary say."

"Who was Mr. Harding?" asked Miss Merivale quickly.

"He was father's partner for a little while. I don't remember him at all. He is a rich man now, and lives in Adelaide."

"Your father came from Adelaide, Mrs. M'Alister told me. My sister lived in Melbourne. Then you can tell me nothing else?"

Rhoda hesitated a moment. Miss Merivale's voice had been cold and constrained, but there was a beseeching eagerness in her glance. She unclasped a little locket from her watch-chain and passed it across the table. "That and my little Bible is all I have. It must have been my mother's, I think."

Miss Merivale caught up the little locket with trembling fingers. She rose and went to the window, and stood with her back to Rhoda, apparently examining it.

But her eyes were too full of tears for her to see it plainly. She knew the little locket well. She herself had given it to Lydia one birthday. It was her own hair under the glass, with the ring of tiny pearls round it. All doubt vanished from her mind. She was certain now that Rhoda was her niece.

She came back to the side of the table where Rhoda was sitting, and put her hand on her shoulder as she gave her back the locket.

"Thank you for letting me see it, my dear," she said in a voice that trembled a good deal in spite of the intense effort she was making to hide her agitation. "And now can you make yourself happy in the garden for a little while? I want you to stay to luncheon with me. I will talk to you afterwards of the work I want you to do for me. And you must tell me more about yourself. Try and think of me as a friend, my dear."

She hurried away, not trusting herself to say more just then, and Rhoda gladly went into the garden. Her heart was very light as she wandered up and down the turf paths. Miss Merivale's sudden interest in her and the great kindness with which she spoke when she gave her back the locket did not surprise her as it might have surprised a girl more versed in the world's ways. But she was eagerly grateful. She felt it would be easy to tell Miss Merivale of the hard struggle she and Aunt Mary had had to keep the younger boys at school and pay the premium for Ned's apprenticeship to that big engineering firm.

She was sure Miss Merivale would not suppose she wanted money help. She had talked of giving her work, and it was work that Rhoda was pining for. Her strong young hands and willing brain were eager to be employed to the utmost.

It had been a hard blow to hear that she was to lose her post with Miss

Desborough. But perhaps Miss Merivale would be able to help her to get something better. If she could earn a pound a week, there would be no need for Aunt Mary to tire her eyes out over that weary needlework. A pound a week would be riches added to the weekly wages Ned brought home and the interest from the money they had laid by for a rainy day. There would be no need for Aunt Mary to work for those hard shop-people any more. And Rhoda's eyes sparkled as she thought of packing up the last parcel of fine needle-work and taking it back with the message that no more was wanted.

She had been in the garden about ten minutes when Tom, after vainly looking for his aunt in the house, came through the glass door of the library to seek for her out of doors. It startled him for a moment to see a strange young lady in the garden, but before she turned and saw him he had remembered who she must be, and he went forward quickly, taking off his hat, to introduce himself.

No touch of awkwardness marred their first words to each other. Tom's frank face and pleasant greeting won Rhoda's confidence at once, and in a few moments they were chatting like old acquaintances. Tom soon found that she loved a garden as much as he did, though this was the first large English garden she had seen. He was eagerly questioning her about Australian flowers when Miss Merivale entered the library and caught sight of them through the window.

The colour flowed into her pale face as she watched them talking to each other. For the first time she saw how Woodcote might be Tom's and yet be Rhoda's too.

CHAPTER V.

"A MERRY HEART GOES ALL THE WAY."

Dusk had fallen before Rhoda got back to Acacia Road. The omnibus stopped at the corner, and as she went down the dreary street carrying a big bunch of flowers from the old garden, she might have come straight from Arcady, so bright her face was. Mrs. M'Alister was watching for her from the window with the boys, and they were all at the door to meet her.

"My dear, I was getting anxious about you," said Mrs. M'Alister, as they went into the sitting-room, Rhoda holding little Willie in her arms. "You are much later than you expected."

"Miss Merivale begged me to stay. Oh, Aunt Mary, she has been so kind! But I will tell you all about it presently. How tired you look, Aunt Mary! Jack and Willie, I hope you have been good?"

"They have been very good," said Mrs. M'Alister hastily. "I have been trying to get my work finished. Give me your hat and jacket, darling; Jack shall take them upstairs for you. You have had a long day. How beautiful

those flowers are! They scent the room already. English flowers are sweeter than our flowers used to be. But we had a lovely garden, hadn't we?" She was speaking very nervously, and she kissed Rhoda again as she took her hat and jacket from her. "I am so glad Miss Merivale was so kind, dear."

"Oh, she was wonderfully kind. And she has given me some more programmes to do. I am to take them to her on Thursday."

"That will be another nice change for you, dear. You look all the better for a breath of country air," was Mrs. M'Alister's nervously-spoken answer.

"Uncle James says we are all to live in the country with him," broke in Jack, who had been watching for an opportunity to make his voice heard. "And we shall have cream every day, and see the pigs fed."

"Uncle James?" said Rhoda, looking at Mrs. M'Alister. A little shadow had fallen on her face. Mrs. M'Alister's elder brother had been the only person who had ever made her feel that she was an outsider and had no real claim to the place she held in the family.

Mrs. M'Alister's anxious face had clouded over too. "My dear, I did not want to speak of it till after tea. James is coming in again this evening, when Ned is home. Jack and Willie, run and ask Mrs. Ellis if the kettle is boiling yet. Rhoda will want some tea."

"I had tea before I came away," Rhoda said, as the boys ran off. "When did Uncle James come, Aunt Mary?"

"This afternoon, dear. He got to London last night. And he went down to the works this morning, and saw Ned and Mr. Howard. Oh, Rhoda, they want Ned to go to Plymouth!"

Rhoda looked at her aunt. She understood now what those new lines of anxiety in her face meant which she had noticed the moment she came in. "To Plymouth, Aunt Mary? But that is a long way off."

"They have a branch there, and they want Ned to go. James says it is a splendid thing for him. And he wants me to go down there and live with him, Rhoda. His farm is only three miles from Plymouth."

She did not look at Rhoda as she spoke, but kept fingering the tablecloth nervously, with her eyes cast down. For a few seconds Rhoda was silent. Then her voice was very cheerful. "Why, you will be quite close to Ned, Aunt Mary. And the country air will be so good for the boys. I think it is a splendid plan."

Mrs. M'Alister gave her a piteous glance. "If only you could go too, Rhoda darling. But James says"--

"How could I get work in the country, Aunt Mary? And Miss Merivale has promised that she will get me plenty of work." Rhoda's lips quivered a

little as she thought of her day-dreams as she came home--how if she got plenty of work they might take a little house and have a little garden of their own. But she went bravely on. "It would be foolish of me to think of leaving London, Aunt Mary. And of course you must go with Ned. Is he pleased about it? They must think a good deal of him to promote him like this."

"Yes, it is a promotion," said the mother eagerly. She was very fond of Rhoda, but her eldest boy was her heart's darling. "James said Mr. Howard spoke so highly of him. And James is very anxious I should go to Coombe. His old housekeeper is leaving him, and he wants me. If only"--

But Rhoda again interrupted her. She knew perfectly well how reasonably and firmly the shrewd, hard-headed farmer had spoken that afternoon. He was both anxious and willing that his sister and her boys should make their home with him, but he did not want her. He considered her old enough to fight the battle of life for herself. And she was determined that her aunt should not guess how hard the parting would be to her.

"It is a delightful plan, Aunt Mary. You would not have come to London if Ned wasn't here. I know how you have hated it. And you must not trouble about me. There are heaps of places now where girls can live comfortably for very little. I will ask Miss Desborough to-morrow. And if I can pass the Post Office examination, I might get appointed to Plymouth. Aunt Mary, don't cry. I can't bear it."

"You don't feel it as I shall," sobbed Mrs. M'Alister, without looking up. "But I couldn't let Ned go to Plymouth alone, Rhoda. I couldn't be parted from him."

"Of course not," Rhoda answered cheerily. She was glad her aunt did not look up, for she knew her face had turned very white, and slow hot tears had forced themselves into her eyes. But her voice was cheery. "And you will be quite close to him at Coombe."

"He will be able to live with us. There is a station quite close," said Mrs. M'Alister, drying her tears. Now that Rhoda seemed to bear the news so well, she was able to think of the bright side of things. "And you must spend a long month with us in the summer, Rhoda darling. James means to insist on that. He does mean to be kind, dear."

"I am sure he does. And when he hears about Miss Merivale he will make you see that it would be foolish of me to think of leaving London. But here comes the tea at last. I will run up and wash my hands first. Don't wait for me, Aunt Mary."

No one could have guessed, when Rhoda came down, with her hair freshly done, and a new pink ribbon round the neck of her brown dress, what bitter tears she had been shedding upstairs. And when Mr. Price came in, he was pleasantly surprised at the sensible view she took of things, and his invitation to her to spend the August holidays at Coombe was far heartier than Mrs. M'Alister had dared to hope for.

"And you will be able to run down to Leyton for a Sunday every now and then," he said, regarding her approvingly out of his hard grey eyes.

"Mary, here, seems to think you're a baby still, but I know better. Girls aren't what they used to be, Mary--silly creatures who couldn't look after themselves. They don't want to stay at home by the chimney corner all the time."

"I want to work," said Rhoda, speaking rather proudly. She could have added that she might have got work at Plymouth and come home every night, as Ned was going to do, but she knew that it would be no use to say it. He had plainly made up his mind that she must shift for herself. And the only excuse she could make for him was that he did not know how hard it was for her to be suddenly deprived of a home. Shabby and uncomfortable as their lodgings were, not even beautiful Woodcote could have been a dearer home. And a deadly chill seized her heart as she thought of living alone or with strangers. Rhoda was a thorough woman in her need of a home to fill her life. She had never felt Rose's desire to be free from home ties; she could not have understood it.

"Rhoda means to ask Miss Desborough's advice, James," said Mrs. M'Alister, putting down her sewing. "She knows a great many girls who get their living in London and board out somewhere. I shan't feel happy till I see Rhoda comfortably settled."

"Oh, we'll manage that for her," returned the farmer briskly. "And now this Miss Merivale has taken her up she'll get plenty of work, never fear."

"How would it do for you to live with Miss Smythe?" suggested Mrs. M'Alister, looking anxiously at Rhoda. "Now Miss Desborough is going away, she will want somebody, won't she?"

A smile broke over Rhoda's face. She had never spoken of Pauline's contemptuous rudeness to her aunt. She had felt too indifferent to her to be hurt by her behaviour; and since her visit to Leyton, the week before, she had a special reason for being amused at it. But this she had not mentioned.

"Miss Smythe would think me very bold if I suggested living with her, Aunt Mary," she said, in a voice that had a ripple of laughter in it. "But don't be anxious about me. I can stay here with Mrs. Ellis if I can't hear of anything I like better. But I will speak to Miss Desborough to-morrow."

As it happened, however, Rhoda did not see Clare next day. When she arrived at the flat, she found that Lady Desborough had reached town the day before, and had taken her daughter for a day's shopping with her, preparatory to their journey into Lincolnshire.

It was Rose who told Rhoda this. Mrs. Richards had gone out to buy some chops for dinner, and Rose opened the door. Rhoda thought her the prettiest creature she had ever seen in her life. She had a blue dress on and a white cooking apron, and her yellow hair was brushed loosely back from her face and fastened in a loose knot.

"Miss Desborough has left some letters for you to answer," she said to Rhoda pleasantly. "Can you do them at the side table? I am cooking in the sitting-room this morning. It was so hot in the kitchen. Miss Smythe will be in presently. She has a message for you from Clare."

It was rather difficult to work at the side table, which was small and decidedly rickety; but Rhoda made no objection. She found her eyes wandering now and then to Rose, who had gone back to her pastry, and was spending many puzzled glances on the cookery book that was propped open before her.

"I mean to write a cookery book one day," she exclaimed presently, in a tone of deep disgust. "And I mean to use simple language, and explain everything. I can't understand this book a bit."

Rhoda was on the point of offering her help, when the door was hastily opened and Pauline came in, with a bunch of daffodils in her hand. She raised her eyebrows at the sight of the pastry board.

"My darling Rose! Suppose Lady Desborough were to come back with Clare, what would she think?"

"It was so hot in the kitchen, Pauline," Rose answered meekly. "And I do so want to learn how to cook. Mrs. Richards' pastry is like leather. Just look here. This book says"--

But Pauline laughingly put it from her. "My dear child, it is worse than Greek to me. And I really do object to see lumps of raw dough about. Please take them away. I never like to think of my food till I see it on the table. Good-morning, Miss Sampson. When you have finished those letters you will not be required any more. I will pay you before you go. Miss Desborough has gone out with Lady Desborough."

Clare had left a kind message for Rhoda, and when Pauline went into the next room to take off her hat, Rose hastened to give it.

"She was so sorry not to be here to say good-bye to you, Miss Sampson. She feels that you have been such a help to her."

Rhoda had listened to Pauline with a smile faintly lurking at the corner of her firm lips, but now the smile flashed brightly out at Rose.

"It has been very pleasant work," she said. "I am sorry it is over. But your aunt has promised me some more work, Miss Merivale. I am to go down to Woodcote again on Thursday."

Rose was surprised, and she could not help showing it. "You went yesterday, didn't you?" she said rather stiffly. "It is a long way for you to go."

"I am very glad to go," Rhoda answered. She did not tell Rose she had spent the day at Woodcote; something in Rose's manner checked her. But she

did not begin her writing at once. Rose had taken up the cookery book again, and was bending puzzled brows over it. Rhoda watched her for a moment, her eyes full of admiration. Miss Desborough was pretty, but there was not a soft line in her face. Rose looked a child still for all her womanly height. Rhoda said to herself that she must be much younger than her brother. It was easy to see that they were brother and sister. Rose had just the same straight brow she had noticed in him yesterday, and her eyebrows, like his, were a shade or two darker than her hair.

"Would you let me see if I could help you, Miss Merivale?" Rhoda said, after a moment. "I did all the cooking at home before we came to England."

But Rose shut up her book. "Pauline will scold again if I don't carry all this away," she said, with a laugh. "And I mean to have some cookery lessons, if I can get them. But Woodcote is so far from everywhere. It is like being buried alive."

Rhoda, who had known what it was to live for years fifty miles from a town, did not know how to answer this. And Rose, angry with herself for saying so much to Miss Sampson, caught up the pastry board and rolling-pin and retreated to the kitchen. She came back in a few moments with her apron off, and found Rhoda busy at work, and Pauline in a low chair by the fire with her hands clasped round her knees. Pauline had changed her outdoor dress for an odd, picturesque frock of sage green Liberty serge, touched with yellow. She had fastened some daffodils in her belt, and looked like an aesthetic picture of Spring.

"Arrange my daffodils for me, there is a good little Rose," she said, smiling lazily at Rose as she entered. "The brown pots, not the blue ones. Now Clare is going to her native fens, I mean this room to be a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. How good it will be to get rid of the click of that typewriter!"

"Don't say that to Clare," laughed Rose, as she brought the brown pots to the table. "She was telling me this morning it was the thing she would miss most."

Pauline lifted her dark eyebrows. "Did she really say that? But it is exactly like Clare; she is more a machine herself than a human being. I was very fond of her once, but I have found her trying to live with. They say you never know a woman till you have lived six months with her. Don't put too many daffodils in one pot, my Rose; they want plenty of room to show themselves."

Rhoda had finished the work Clare had left for her. She carefully put her papers together, and rose from the table. Pauline looked carelessly round at her. "Ah, are you going, Miss Sampson? Here is the money Miss Desborough left for you. Just write a receipt and leave it on the table, please. You understand that you are not wanted any more, don't you?"

"I knew this was to be my last day, thank you," said Rhoda composedly. She smiled to herself as she wrote her receipt. She half thought of mentioning her visit to Leyton, but she refrained. There was not a touch of

spitefulness in Rhoda's nature, and she had no wish to humiliate Pauline; but the humorous side of the situation was thoroughly enjoyed by her.

Rose went on arranging her flowers in silence for a minute or two after Rhoda went away; then she spoke rather constrainedly.

"Why do you dislike poor Miss Sampson so, Pauline? Do you know that you were quite unkind to her?"

"Was I? It is necessary to keep that sort of girl at arm's length; she would become intolerable if you didn't. Thank goodness, we have seen the last of her. Now, come and sit down here and have a talk. What shall we do this afternoon, Rose? Only two more days! What do you want to do most?"

"Clare and Lady Desborough are coming back to tea," suggested Rose, with a laugh. "You are not very hospitable, Pauline. And to-morrow we shall be busy all day. My time will soon be over, won't it? Do you know, Aunt Lucy has asked Miss Sampson down to Woodcote again to-morrow, Pauline? I wonder if she has found out that she is related to Cousin Lydia's husband. I don't see what Aunt Lucy can want her for."

"Poor relations are a great nuisance," said Pauline sharply. "It is foolish of your aunt to have anything to do with her. But don't let us talk of Sampson, Rosie; let us talk of ourselves. Suppose for a moment that you were going to stay with me through the summer, just let us plan what we would do."

Rose shook her head.

"It would be too tantalising, Pauline. I shall spend the summer at Woodcote. I know exactly what I shall be doing every hour of the day, and every day of the week, and every week of the month. But don't let us talk of it. Let us talk of the concert last night. Wasn't it wonderful? I wish Tom had been there; he would have understood better why Laura's singing irritates me. Pauline, I must get some good music lessons somehow. Do speak to Aunt Lucy about it on Friday. You are quite right; I am wasting my time as it is."

CHAPTER VI.

PAULINE'S DIPLOMACY.

When Rhoda got home that morning, she found that Mrs. M'Alister had already begun to pack. Ned was to go to Plymouth almost at once, and Mr. Price was anxious that his sister and the younger boys should return with him on the following Saturday. Little Hugh was to stay at Leyton for the present; Rhoda was to bring him down when she came for her holiday in August.

Mrs. M'Alister did not guess how hard Rhoda found it to be cheerful as she helped with the packing. A great load was lifted off her heart by the ready way in which the girl had acquiesced in the new arrangements. Much as it grieved her to part with Rhoda, she could not help looking forward with delight to going back to the dear old farmhouse in which her childhood had been spent. And Rhoda understood exactly how she felt. There was no bitterness in her heart; but, brave and cheery as she was, she dreaded to think of the lonely days that lay before her.

She did not go down to Woodcote till Thursday afternoon. Miss Merivale had asked her to come early and spend the day, but she had written to explain how it was that she could not spare the time; her aunt wanted her help in packing.

The old house looked more beautiful and peaceful than ever, steeped in the golden afternoon sunlight. Rhoda thought with a thrill of wonder of Rose's words about her home. How could she have spoken so!

Miss Merivale was in the library, with all the windows open to the garden. Rhoda was tremulously surprised at her greeting. She kissed her, and even when they sat down she did not leave her hand go, but held it tight, looking anxiously at her.

"I want you to tell me more about your aunt," she said. "I did not quite understand your letter. You are not going to Devonshire?"

"Oh no; I am going on with my work here," Rhoda said hastily. And after a pause she added, impelled by the yearning kindness in Miss Merivale's eyes, "Mr. Price wishes me to stay here. It is not as if I was his own niece, you see. And I am nearly twenty; I am quite able to earn my own living."

Miss Merivale dropped her hand suddenly, and rose and went to the window. The quiver in Rhoda's voice was more than she could bear. She spoke without turning round. "I see they are carrying the tea into the garden. Let us go out. I thought it would be pleasanter to have it out of doors. And afterwards you shall tell me what you mean to do. I should like"--

But she checked herself. She wanted to say that she would like Rhoda to come to Woodcote; but she saw how strange such a wish would seem, both to Rhoda and to Tom and Rose. She must wait a little. She must content herself with helping her in other ways.

Tom had been obliged to go to Guilford that day on farm business; but somehow he had managed to get back early, and he strolled into the garden just as they sat down to tea, not looking in the least as if he had just ridden twelve miles at headlong speed.

A faint smile crossed Miss Merivale's pale face as she saw him. It was what she had been hoping for.

She left the talk during tea-time to him and Rhoda, who had plenty to say to each other. They were both enthusiasts about a garden, and found it

intensely interesting to compare notes. After tea, Tom was eager to show Rhoda some white violets in the wood close by. He found she had never seen any.

They went off together, and Miss Merivale could hear their eager, happy voices as they searched about the wood looking for the violets, just like two children. She leant back in her chair, closing her eyes. For the moment the ache at her heart was stilled. She was hoping that all might yet come right.

Rhoda went home that evening feeling like a different creature. Mrs. M'Alister had a jealous pang or two as she listened to her account of the happy time she had had.

"Don't you trust too much to her promises, child," she said anxiously. "She's taken a sudden fancy to you, that's clear enough; but it mightn't last. She might take a fancy to somebody else next week, and forget all about you. I have heard of people like that."

"I don't think Miss Merivale is a bit like that," returned Rhoda stoutly. "Hasn't she a sweet, kind face, Aunt Mary? I wish she didn't look so ill."

"Don't rest your hopes on her too much," repeated Mrs. M'Alister, shaking her head gloomily. "James will be in again to-night, and you will hear what he says. He has heard of a firm that wants a lady-clerk. We think you'd better try for it, Rhoda. I'd like to see you settled before we go away. I've been wishing and wishing this afternoon that you could go with us."

"You mustn't say that to Mr. Price, Aunt Mary," Rhoda said quickly. "You know how it vexes him. And he is very kind. You heard him tell me that I was to ask him for any money I wanted. But I don't think I shall want any. Miss Merivale said again this afternoon that she would be able to get me as much work as I could do. She is going to write to me on Monday. I am quite sure she meant it. And I don't want to try for work in an office if I can help it. I should feel in prison."

Miss Merivale had spoken very vaguely of the work she was going to give Rhoda. She had, in truth, made up her mind that Rhoda must come to Woodcote. She was only waiting till Rose came home to arrange it. However much she surprised Rose and Tom, however difficult it would be to explain why she wanted Rhoda, Rhoda must come to her. She could not leave Lydia's girl alone in London. And Tom's surprise, at least, would have no element of annoyance in it. It was quite plain already that Rhoda's company was delightful to him.

It had been arranged that Tom should go and fetch his sister on Friday, but by the first post on Friday morning Miss Merivale got a letter from Rose, saying that Pauline would return with her that afternoon, and that there was no need for Tom to come to London. It was at Pauline's instigation Rose had written the letter. Those few charmed days in the little flat had made Rose more passionately desirous than ever to get away from Woodcote, and Pauline had suggested that she should go home with Rose

and beg her aunt to allow her to pay a longer visit a little later in the year.

"May is the best month of the year in London, Rose. You shall spend May with me. The flat will have to be given up then, if I cannot get anyone to share it with me. Lady Desborough only took it till the end of April. But we will have a lovely May together. I am sure your aunt will not refuse to let you come."

"I couldn't possibly stay away for a month," Rose said firmly, but with the air of a martyr. "Aunt Lucy looked heartbroken when I asked for a week this time. She has got to depend on me for everything."

"Just so. But if you were away she would do things for herself, and it would be a thousand times better for her. She won't have missed you this time as much as you fear, Rosie. And won't you think of me a little bit? Just think how lonely I shall be!"

"Oh, I know. And I want to come again," Rose said piteously. "I might get away for a week in May. If you spoke to Aunt Lucy"--

"Trust it to me entirely, dear. I know exactly what to say. And I feel sure your aunt will let you be free when she understands how much you want it. For a week or so, I mean," she added hastily, as she saw Rose's anxious look. "I mustn't ask for more, I suppose."

"It wouldn't be a bit of good to ask," sighed Rose. "If Aunt Lucy said I might stay longer, she would look so miserable about it I should not like to take her at her word. But I might be spared for a week, I should think. That will be something to look forward to."

They reached Woodcote early in the afternoon, and Pauline was soon furnished with an opportunity to plead Rose's cause with Miss Merivale. Tom had bought a new pony which he wanted Rose to see, and they went away to the stables, leaving their aunt and Pauline alone. Pauline had laughingly refused to accompany them.

"I am going to tell Miss Merivale what Mrs. Metcalfe said about your music, Rose," she said. "It would make you vain if you were to hear it."

"Who is Mrs. Metcalfe?" asked Tom, when they got outside. "Is she a great authority, Rose?"

"She is Lady Desborough's sister," returned Rose, with dignity. "Pauline and I went to tea there yesterday. She lives in Grosvenor Square."

"Ah, I understand now why Miss Smythe spoke of her with bated breath," returned Tom in the light, bantering tone which so often irritated Rose. "I might have known she lived in Grosvenor Square."

Rose refused to take notice of his raillery. "It was Mrs. Metcalfe who got Miss Sampson for Clare. She heard of her through some agency. What has made Aunt Lucy take such an interest in her, Tom? She was down here again

yesterday, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Have you seen her, Rosie?"

"For a moment or two. She looked nice, I thought. But I can't imagine what Aunt Lucy can find for her to do."

"Aunt Lucy is sure that she must be related to Cousin Lydia's husband. It is natural that she should take a great interest in her. She is coming down again next week to stay for a day or two. Aunt Lucy told me this morning that she meant to ask her. I am sure you will like her, Rosie."

Tom spoke without looking at his sister, and hurried forward to open the gate of the stable yard for her without waiting to get an answer. But Rose had no answer ready. The tone in which Tom had spoken took her breath away. He seemed to think it was a matter of importance whether she liked Miss Sampson or not.

When they got back to the house, Tom went off to his own den, and when Rose entered the drawing-room she found Pauline alone.

The latter ran towards her and caught her by both hands. Her eyes were sparkling joyfully. "My Rose, I have delightful news for you. Now, confess that I am the cleverest person in the world! I have made your aunt as anxious as you are about your music. She wants you to spend two months with me in London. Two whole long, lovely months! Think of it, Rosamunda mia! And you can come next week. It is far, far more than I ever hoped for. And, who knows, you might get an extension of leave after that. We may spend the whole summer together in the flat. Well, why don't you say something? Aren't you pleased?"

"But, Pauline, I can't go. Aunt Lucy couldn't do without me. I"--

"My dear, she wants you to go," returned Pauline impatiently. "Go up and speak to her, and you will find it is so. Miss Sampson is to come here as her companion. She isn't the person I should choose for a companion, but _chacun à son goût_."

"Did you suggest that she should come here?" asked Rose. "Oh, Pauline, don't look at me like that! It is so sudden. And Aunt Lucy can't bear strangers. I don't think it is a good plan at all"

Pauline dropped her hands with one look, and turned away. Her lips were quivering; her face had the stricken look of one who has received a cruel blow. She did not speak, but Rose was full of remorse instantly.

"Oh, Pauline, you know I want to come to you. It would be too lovely. But it is so sudden. I can't believe Aunt Lucy would like to have Miss Sampson with her."

"You had better speak to your aunt," returned Pauline in an icy voice. "I wash my hands of the matter altogether. I did my best for you; but I see I was mistaken in thinking that you really cared about our being together."

It does not matter I can give up the flat and go back to Mrs. Jephson's."

"Pauline, don't speak like that," begged Rose, with tears in her eyes.

"You know how I love being with you. If I could be certain Aunt Lucy would not fret for me, I should be only too delighted to get away. I never feel more than half-alive here. But Miss Sampson could not do for her what I do."

"Don't you think you may exaggerate your usefulness to your aunt, dear?"

Pauline returned, with a sneer. But with an effort she controlled her temper, and spoke the next words in a different tone. "Miss Merivale seems really anxious for you to have a change, Rose. I think she understands that you are bored and unhappy here."

"Oh, Pauline, you did not say that to her?" cried Rose, the blood rushing, up into her face.

"Of course not, darling. It was your music I spoke most of. But she does want you to come to me. Go up and speak to her; you will see that she really wants it. You won't make difficulties, Rose? Can't you see it is best for both of you to be apart for a time? Your aunt will learn to do without you. When you come back you will be able to lead a much freer life. And think of the happy time we shall have!"

But Rose's face did not light up as Pauline had expected, and it was with a very sober step that she went up to her aunt's room. She had made up her mind to tell her aunt that she did not want to go and stay with Pauline--that she had never really thought of leaving her. She expected to be clasped and fondly kissed for being so ready to give up her visit; but she found, to her hurt surprise, that Pauline had been right, and that her aunt was bent on her going away for a time.

"It is a chance that may not happen again, Rosie," she said, tenderly stroking her bright hair. "I have wanted you to have some really good music lessons for a long time, and Pauline and Mrs. Metcalfe will be able to see that you get the best. And you have been looking pale lately. You want a change; I know it has been dull for you. And I should like to have Rhoda here for a time. I have just been talking to Tom about it. He thinks it an excellent plan. You would like to go next week, wouldn't you, darling? Pauline is very anxious to have you. Before she goes away we must settle how long you are to stay. Two months, I thought of. I can't spare you longer than that, Rosie."

But, affectionate as these words were, and loving the kiss that accompanied them, Rose went downstairs again with a sore heart. She was like those who pluck Dead Sea apples, and find the fruit that looked so fair when out of reach turning to ashes in their hands.

APPLES OF SODOM.

One warm, beautiful morning, early in April, Rose was toiling rather wearily up the long flight of stone steps leading to the flat. She had her violin, and she found it heavy. She was wishing she had Tom with her to carry it.

Though Rose had not yet confessed it to herself, she was beginning to be a little homesick. She missed the delicious freshness of Woodcote, its wide rooms and sunny gardens, the thousand and one little comforts she had been too accustomed to to notice; but more, far, far more, she missed the protecting fondness that had surrounded her all her life. It was only a fortnight since she joined Pauline, but it seemed much longer. And June seemed a very long way off.

But she was looking forward to a great treat that afternoon. Paderewski was playing at St. James's Hall, and she and Pauline were going early to get seats. They would have to wait two hours or so, and might have to stand after all, but to Rose that was part of the afternoon's enjoyment. She had quite agreed with Pauline that it would be foolish to go to the expense of taking their tickets beforehand. She opened the door with her latch-key--that latch-key still gave her a thrill of proud delight when she used it--and went in.

Pauline called to her from her room.

"Rosie, is that you, dearest? I want to speak to you."

Rose put down her violin and crossed the tiny entry. Pauline was standing before her looking-glass doing her hair. She wore a soiled pink dressing-jacket elaborately trimmed with lace, and Rose observed with a little shock that there were holes in the heels of her stockings. It was not quite such a shock as it would have been a fortnight ago. Rose had discovered that Pauline was very careless about little matters of this sort. On the bed was spread out her last new dress--a charming combination of brown and gold, to be worn with a brown hat lined with yellow.

"Why, Pauline, you won't wear that dress this afternoon, will you?" asked Rose, glancing at it. "It will get so crushed."

"My Rose, shall you be very disappointed? Madame Verney has asked me to go with her. She had two tickets sent her, and Monsieur Verney had to go to Paris this morning. I am going there to lunch. How I wish you were going with me, darling! But I could not refuse when Madame Verney asked me, could I? I might have offended her."

The tears had rushed into Rose's eyes, but she drove them back. "I daresay Paderewski will play again before I go," she said. "And it was kind of Madame Verney to ask you."

"Oh, as to kindness, she would have found it dull enough to go by herself, and she knows nobody in London yet. But what do you mean about Paderewski

playing again, Rosie? You'll go and hear him this afternoon, won't you? I never thought of your staying at home."

"I promised Aunt Lucy I would not go to a concert by myself," Rose answered hastily. "I couldn't go, Pauline."

"But she meant in the evening, Rosie. She couldn't mind your going this afternoon. Don't be a silly child. You'll spoil my pleasure if you stay at home. Of course you must go."

"Oh, I couldn't," returned Rose. "I promised Aunt Lucy. Besides"--

"You little country mouse!" laughed Pauline. "I believe you are afraid to go. Who do you think would eat you? Never mind, there is 'The Golden Legend' at the Albert Hall on Thursday. We'll go to that. But I must be quick; I promised to be there early. Rosie, be my good angel, and clean my shoes for me. You'll find the stuff in that box. I can't trust Mrs. Richards with my kid shoes. No, not that box, darling, the one below it."

Rose, who was delicately fastidious about all her own belongings, could never understand how Pauline allowed her room to be so untidy, and as she opened the box and took out the pot of polish she blushed to find herself thinking of Aunt Dinah and her kitchen drawers in Uncle Tom's Cabin. She took the boots away and cleaned them, and brought them back.

"Mrs. Richards isn't in the kitchen, Pauline. She hasn't gone, has she?"

"Poor dear little Rosie! Was she afraid she was going to be left all alone?" laughed Pauline. "She has only gone to get me a hansom, dear. I shall spoil my dress if I go by omnibus, and it is too far to walk. Have you five shillings in your purse you can lend me? I am hard up till the end of the term."

Rose produced the five shillings, which was not by any means the first loan Pauline had asked for. She hated herself for feeling so hurt and angry with her friend, and she was glad to lend her the money she wanted. Life would become quite intolerable in the flat if she was going to lose her belief in Pauline.

"Won't you think better of it and go to the concert?" Pauline said, when she was ready to start. "It is really silly of you to stay at home, dearest. I wouldn't have accepted Madame Verney's invitation if I had thought you would not go. But you see how it is, don't you? Her cousin is at the French Embassy, and she is sure to get to know a lot of people. She may introduce me to a great many pupils."

This sounded reasonable, and Pauline's voice was most kind and caressing, yet somehow the hurt feeling remained in Rose's heart. She saw that Pauline was delighted to go. She did not really care in the least about her disappointment. "He will be sure to play again," she answered, "I shall go for a walk in the Park. What time shall you be back, Pauline?"

Pauline hesitated. "Don't expect me till the evening, darling. Madame

Verney spoke about my going back with her to tea. Shall you be very lonely? I never used to trouble about Clare. She went her way, and I went mine. And"--

"You need not trouble about me," Rose flashed out, her colour rising. "I should be sorry to spoil your afternoon, Pauline."

Pauline looked at her with grieved eyes. "It will make me most miserable if I leave you angry with me. Don't you know that I would far, far rather have gone with you? Rosie, you know that, don't you?"

But Rose had a stubborn love of truth, which prevented her from responding to this appeal as Pauline wished.

"It would have been a pity for you to refuse Madame Verney," she said. "And I shall have a nice afternoon. I will make some cakes, I think. I want to astonish Aunt Lucy and Wilmot when I go home. I shall make Wilmot let me make Tom's birthday cake."

Pauline patted her cheek. "What a child you are still, Rosie! When you have been a month or two in London, you will find yourself growing up. But I must start. How does this dress suit me? Do you think there is just a little too much yellow about it?"

Rose could frankly say that the dress was perfect. She had never seen Pauline look better. But she could not help hoping that she had changed her stockings as she watched her run lightly down the stairs to the hansom.

She felt very downhearted as she closed the door and went back to the sitting-room. The room was sweet with the primroses and white violets they had sent her from Woodcote the day before. Rose felt herself pitying the flowers for being taken from the woods and sent to wither in that stifling air. For it was stifling this afternoon. Even when she threw open the window, no breath of coolness came to fan her burning face. The sky was cloudless, but yellow with smoke, and a dull haze hung over the river.

Rose thought of Woodcote, where the great chestnuts were already in full leaf, and the gorse common beyond the wood was a sheet of gold. An intense longing took hold of her to go home, if only for an hour or two. She looked at her watch and saw that it was not yet one o'clock. There was plenty of time to go to Woodcote and get back before Pauline returned. And how joyfully surprised her aunt would be! She wondered she had not thought of it before.

An hour later she was in the train, speeding countrywards. She sat close to the window, looking eagerly at the green fields and the budding trees. She no longer felt disappointed about the concert. She was glad Madame Verney had invited Pauline to go with her.

Just outside the station for Woodcote the train came to a standstill. Rose from the window had a full view of the white road down the hillside, and as she looked along it she caught sight of an approaching carriage. It was

a moment before she recognised the brown horses and the broad figure of old Harris, her aunt's coachman. But directly afterwards she saw her aunt and Rhoda Sampson, and Tom seated opposite to them.

The road passed close to the high embankment on which the train was standing. If they had looked up, they must have seen her at the window. But they were too intent on their conversation. Rose heard Tom laugh at something Rhoda said, and saw him turn to Miss Merivale as if she too was enjoying the joke.

Rose could not see her aunt's face, her parasol shaded it; but she was not leaning back against the cushions, as she usually did. She was bending a little forward, with her face turned towards Rhoda. It was quite plain to Rose that it was Miss Sampson who was absorbing the attention both of Tom and her aunt.

She stared after the carriage with angry, mystified eyes. It was her place Rhoda was sitting in! She forgot how the long drives her aunt loved used to bore her. She felt that Rhoda Sampson had no right to be sitting there, and it seemed to her positively cruel of her aunt and Tom to be so happy when she was away.

She was half inclined to go back by the next train when she heard from the stationmaster that they were gone to Guilford and would not be back till late. But on second thoughts she determined to go on to Woodcote. Wilmot would be there, at any rate. She would be able to find out how her aunt was.

She had the warmest of greetings from the old cook and housekeeper, whom she found at the linen press upstairs, carefully examining her store of lavender-scented linen.

"Your aunt will be dreadfully disappointed, Miss Rosie. What a pity you didn't come a little earlier! You could ha' gone to Guilford with them. They've gone about the new greenhouse Mr. Tom is going to build. But come down to the dining-room, my dearie, and I'll get you some tea."

"No, no; finish what you were about," returned Rose, settling herself in the window-seat. The linen press stood on a wide landing that had a window looking on the garden. It had always been a favourite spot with Rose; in the deep-cushioned window-seat she had spent many a happy afternoon. The linen press was of old oak, almost as old as the house. And opposite it stood a finely-carved dower-chest with the date 1511 carved upon it. The landing-floor, like the stairs, was of polished oak, and the wainscoted walls had one or two old pictures on them.

Rose looked round her, feeling as she had never felt before the beauty of her home. How fresh it was, and roomy! And what a delicious scent of lavender came from the old linen press! "What are you doing, Wilmot? I wish you would let me help you."

"No, thank you, my dearie. I've got what I wanted. It's this tablecloth Miss Sampson is going to darn for me. She's the cleverest young lady with

her needle I ever came across, and that anxious to be useful."

"Then you like her?" asked Rose. She could not help a certain stiffness getting into her voice when she mentioned Rhoda, though she was ready to laugh at herself for being jealous of her aunt's companion.

"Nobody could help liking her, Miss Rosie. It's just like having a bit o' sunshine in the house. The mistress would ha' missed you bad enough if she hadn't had Miss Sampson to cheer her up. But nobody could feel lonely with her about. And it's wonderful what she knows about a garden."

"Do they have gardens in Australia?" asked Rose. It was the sort of remark Pauline might have made. But Rose was feeling very cross.

Wilmot did not notice the spitefulness in her voice. "They seem to have lovely gardens out there, my dearie. Miss Sampson was telling me of the different flowering trees they've got when she was in the kitchen on Tuesday. I'd promised to show her how to make those drop cakes you're so fond of, Miss Rosie. But I'll go and see about your tea. I wish you'd come this morning. The mistress was saying only yesterday that she was longing to see you."

Rose went up to her room while tea was being made ready for her. It was all in perfect order, as if ready for her to take possession of it at any moment. There was even a vase of fresh primroses on the little table by the window. The room that had been prepared for Rhoda was next to it. The door stood partly open, and Rose could not forbear taking one look. It was only one look. She hurried on, feeling ashamed of her curiosity. But she got an impression of exquisite neatness and freshness, and by some odd working of the law of contrast it was Pauline's room she thought of as she ran downstairs.

In the dining-room she noticed with jealous eyes how carefully the plants in the flower-stands before the windows had been tended, and with what care and skill the flowers on the table had been arranged. Wilmot hung round her at tea, pressing her to eat all sorts of dainties, and she could have easily learnt a great deal about Rhoda. The old servant seemed anxious to speak of her, anxious to impress Rose with her sweetness and goodness.

But Rose cut her short. She refused to interest herself in the stranger who in a few weeks' time would pass out of their lives again. And she grew cross at last at Wilmot's continual praises of her.

She went back by an earlier train than she had intended. She found that her aunt and the others would not return till dark; it was no good to wait for them.

She walked from Victoria to Chelsea along the Embankment, trying to convince herself that it was good to be in London. But her step flagged as she went up the stone stairs, and when she got to the flat and found that Pauline had not returned, a great flood of loneliness rushed over her. She put her flowers down on the table, and, covering her face with her hands,

she burst into tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INVITATION.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Pauline returned. Madame Verney had begged her so hard to stay and keep her company that she had not been able to refuse, she told Rose, with many caresses.

"I have been thinking of you all the time, you poor darling. But what could I do? Følicie--she begged me this evening to call her Følicie--was so bent on my staying. I am going to take you to see her tomorrow. I talked so much about my little English Rose. And what have you been doing with yourself? What a pity you did not go to the concert! It was glorious. We had delightful seats. I never enjoyed a concert so much before."

"I have been to Woodcote," Rose broke in. "It was such a lovely afternoon I could not stay indoors."

Pauline looked dismayed. "To Woodcote?" she said sharply. "What a strange idea, Rose! I thought you were going into the Park. Was not Miss Merivale surprised to see you alone? I fancy she thinks we are like the Siamese Twins--always together."

"I did not see Aunt Lucy. They had all gone to Guilford. I only saw Wilmot."

"Wilmot? That's the cook, isn't it? I never can remember servants' names. Well, did she condole with you about the concert, and think me a wretch for deserting you? I am afraid Miss Merivale will think so."

"I didn't say anything about the concert," returned Rose. "She talked about Miss Sampson chiefly. She seems to think her perfect."

"I daresay," returned Pauline, with a yawn. "Those sort of people always hang together. She's more of Wilmot's class than ours, you know. I wonder what your aunt thinks of her."

"Oh, Aunt Lucy thinks her perfect too," returned Rose, no longer able to keep her jealousy out of her voice. "And so does Tom. I don't believe they miss me one little bit, Pauline."

"Did Wilmot tell you that?"

"No, but I am sure they don't. Little things she said made me think so."

"You silly child!" laughed Pauline. "Did you want your aunt to fret herself to death because you weren't there to run her errands? You ought

to be glad she finds Miss Sampson so useful. She may be willing to let you stay on with me all the summer. Wouldn't that be delightful? Why, what a gloomy little face! Rose, I believe you are angry because I accepted Følicie's invitation. But I am not going to leave you alone again. I must remember you are not like Clare. You are vexed with me, now confess it."

"I see you could not help it," Rose answered wearily. "And I was glad to go home. I shall go again on Saturday. You must come with me, Pauline."

"Don't tell your aunt that I wanted you to go to the concert alone, then," said Pauline, with a laugh. "She is such a dear old-fashioned thing, she might be shocked at me. And I believe you were shocked, just a little. How Clare would have laughed at you!"

There was an expression of alarm in Pauline's eyes as she watched Rose. She began to fear that she had really offended her by her behaviour. She had been so sure of her influence that she had not thought it necessary to consider her, but she told herself now that she had been distinctly foolish. And she tried her best to make Rose forget that she had been deserted for a new friend. But she could not chase away the shadow from Rose's face. It was not her disappointment about the concert which had brought it there. It was the feeling that she was not being missed at home.

Next morning she was practising her scales in the sitting-room, after Pauline had gone to give some lessons, when Tom was ushered in by Mrs. Richards. Rose ran to meet him with a glad cry.

"Oh, Tom, this is nice! Has Aunt Lucy come with you?"

"No; she sent me. She wants you and Miss Smythe to spend Saturday to Monday with us. Why didn't you let us know you were coming yesterday, Rosie? Aunt Lucy was so disappointed when she found you had come down."

"I didn't think of it till the middle of the day. You had gone to Guilford, they told me. Wasn't that too far for Aunt Lucy?"

"Why should it be?" asked Tom in a surprised tone. "She has often driven as far as that. She seemed to enjoy it. She is certainly stronger, Rosie. But you will see on Saturday. You look rather pale. Come out with me. If you'll ask me to lunch, I can stay."

Rose hesitated. "I don't think you would like Mrs. Richards' cooking, Tom. I would rather you wouldn't stay."

"You inhospitable sister! Well, I'll ask you to lunch with me. Run and put your hat on and let us go out. It is a glorious morning."

He watched her rather impatiently as she got the case and began to put her violin away. He was anxious to get her out into the open air. It distressed him to see how pale she was. And he had an uneasy feeling that he had been neglecting his little sister lately. For days he had hardly thought of her.

"You aren't practising too hard, I hope, Rosie?" he said kindly. "You mustn't overdo it, you know."

"Oh, I don't practise too much," Rose returned. She did not tell him that she found it impossible to practise except when Pauline was out. Pauline's neuralgia came on directly she began to play. "And how does Miss Sampson suit, Tom? I hope she looks after Aunt Lucy properly?"

Tom flushed up. "You will see for yourself on Saturday, Rosie. Aunt Lucy is very fond of her."

"Yes, Wilmot told me that."

Tom gave his sister a hasty glance, was on the point of saying something, but checked himself. And there was a moment's silence before he spoke. "I wish you had not settled to stay here till June, Rosie. We want you at home."

It was in a choked voice Rose answered him. "I don't believe you do want me. Aunt Lucy has got Miss Sampson. She doesn't want me."

Tom again paused a moment before he spoke. Each time Rose mentioned Rhoda in that slighting tone it roused his anger against her. But he told himself that Rose did not know Rhoda yet, and he must wait till they had seen something of each other before he could expect Rose's sympathy. He spoke very calmly and reasonably after the pause.

"Did you wish Aunt Lucy to be miserable while you were away, Rose? It was your own wish to go. Surely you ought to be glad that she has found someone to fill your place."

He felt he had said the wrong thing before Rose turned on him, her eyes flashing. "How could Miss Sampson, a stranger, fill my place? Tom, you are horrid!"

"Not at all," he said stoutly, bent on defending the position he had taken up. "I don't want to hurt you, Rosie; but look at the thing reasonably. Remember that you told me you were bored to death at home, that you would give anything to live in London all the year round. I didn't believe you. But suppose you had really wanted it? You couldn't have expected to keep your place at home and yet have the freedom of a life like this. If a girl gives up her home duties, she must take the consequences."

"I have only been away a fortnight," said Rose, with a trembling lip, "and I shall feel nothing but a visitor when I go back on Saturday. You--you only ask me because I went home yesterday and found you gone. I don't believe you want me a bit." And, to Tom's distress and amazement, Rose, poor little homesick Rose, burst into tears.

"I wish you would go back with me this minute and you'd find out whether we wanted you," he exclaimed, drawing her hands down from her face. "You silly child, what would Aunt Lucy say if she heard you talking such

nonsense? Rosie, just listen to me a moment. I am going to tell you something I haven't even told Aunt Lucy yet, though I believe she guesses. Don't cry any more. Just listen to me."

The quiver in Tom's voice made Rose look wonderingly at him. It was very unlike him to show any emotion. His cool, matter-of-fact way of looking at things had often irritated her. But she saw now that he was deeply moved. And the reason of his agitation suddenly flashed upon her.

"Oh, Tom!" she faltered out.

"Rosie, you'll try to like her?" he said eagerly. "I'm not sure--I'm sure of nothing, except that I shall never be happy again unless--Rosie, you will be nice to her? You don't know her. There is nobody like her. You won't be able to help liking her, I'm sure of that."

Rose was still looking at him with wide-open, wondering eyes.

"But, Tom, is she--is she a lady?" she faltered.

He frowned. "She hasn't sixteen quarterings on her shield, if you mean that. But you won't ask the question again when you have seen her, Rose."

Rose did not remind him that she had seen her. She was trying to recall her as she sat at the side table busy over her typewriting. Her jealousy of Rhoda had somehow vanished in the light of Tom's wonderful confession. She was eager to see the girl again who might one day be her sister.

"Do you really think Aunt Lucy knows, Tom?" she asked in a doubtful voice. Tom's future wife had been often a subject for conversation between Miss Merivale and Rose. And of the two, Miss Merivale had been the more ambitious in her wishes. She had seemed to think that hardly anyone could be good enough for Tom.

"I'm sure she knows," returned Tom, with conviction. "But don't say anything to her, Rosie. I shouldn't have told you unless"--

"I'm glad you told me, Tom," said Rose, drawing a deep breath. "And I'm sure I shall like her. I'm sure she must be nice."

Tom beamed at her. "But you did see her for a moment, Rosie. She came here while you were staying with Miss Smythe last month."

"Yes; she sat at that table, and wrote the letters," Rose said, nodding towards the little side table in the corner. "She had a brown dress on, I remember. Tom, am I expected to say that I thought her very pretty? I hardly looked at her."

"Well, you will see her on Saturday," Tom said.

Rose noticed that his voice sounded quite different when he spoke of Rhoda. And there came a look into his face she had never seen there before. It was impossible for her to cherish any jealous feelings in face

of the great fact that Tom was in love. It thrilled her to think of it.

That evening, when Tom was gone, and she and Pauline were sitting together in their little sitting-room, she let her book lie unheeded on her lap, while she looked forward dreamily into the future. She took it for granted that Tom and Rhoda would marry. It seemed quite out of the question that Tom could be refused. How strange it would be to have a sister! She had so often wished for a sister. She hoped Rhoda would soon learn to love her. She thought of her quite naturally as Rhoda now, and was tremulously eager to see her again. She was sure that the girl Tom loved must be worthy of his love. And the fact that he had made her his confidante had taken all bitterness out of her heart. She was proud that he had trusted her.

"Rosie, whatever is your little head full of?" asked Pauline suddenly. She had been watching her for some moments, unable to interpret the shining, far-off look in her blue eyes.

Rose gave a start and looked hastily round. "I was thinking of Tom," she said, feeling her colour rise.

"Tom ought to be flattered," laughed Pauline. "I believe you had forgotten my existence. How you started when I spoke! Where were you? At Woodcote?"

"I fancy so," said Rose, getting up and stretching her hands above her head. "Shall we have supper now, Pauline? I wonder why that lamp smells so. Ours never do at home. I must ask Wilmot how to clean it. I am sure Mrs. Richards can't do it properly."

"I don't suppose she does, my dear. I believe Sampson tried to teach her. She's a domestic genius, isn't she? I am beginning to feel grateful to Sampson. If your aunt had not heard of her you wouldn't have come to me."

"Pauline, I wish you would not speak of her like that," said Rose, with a note of irritation in her voice. "Why do you?"

"Why shouldn't I? It isn't as if she was a lady. One of her uncles is a butcher; she told Clare so."

"I don't see why she should be ashamed of it," returned Rose, answering Pauline's tone rather than her words. "It's what people are in themselves that matters, not what trade their relations belong to. But Miss Sampson has no relations of her very own. The M'Alisters adopted her. And Aunt Lucy thinks that her uncle might have been Cousin Lydia's husband. It is that which made Aunt Lucy so interested in her at first. For, you know, if Cousin Lydia's little girl had lived, she would have had Woodcote, and not Tom. And she and her father would have come to England when Uncle James died."

Pauline was watching Rose's face curiously. She did not feel any interest in Cousin Lydia and her husband, but she could not understand Rose's change of attitude towards Rhoda Sampson. One explanation occurred to her--a delightful one. Had Rose made up her mind to spend the summer in London with her? Was this the reason she felt glad that her aunt had

someone she liked to take her place?

"Well, as I said before, Rosie, I am grateful to Miss Rhoda Sampson," she said laughingly. "If she was not at Woodcote, you would not be here. And I shall get more and more grateful to her as the weeks go on. I may get to love her in time, if she enables us to spend the summer together. You are quite happy about your aunt now, aren't you, my Rose?"

Rose looked aghast at the prospect of spending the whole summer in the flat. She hardly knew how she was to endure it till June.

"I must go home in June, Pauline," she said hastily. "I couldn't stay longer than that."

"Well, we shall see," said Pauline gaily. "You won't talk so lightly about going back when you have had a few more weeks of freedom, Rose. And if your aunt is so well provided for, there will be no need for you to go back. You won't be wanted."

"Oh yes, I shall be," Rose answered, with a swelling heart. Tom had made her feel sure of that. "Pauline, please don't think about my staying here after June. I can't stay. I want to go home."

"You haven't forgiven me for that wretched concert!" Pauline exclaimed.

"I haven't thought of it again. It isn't that, Pauline. How could it be? But I want to go home."

"You will be miserable, just as you were before. Remember how you talked to me. You were bored to death."

Rose flushed scarlet. "I wasn't. Or if I was, I don't mean to be so silly again."

Pauline looked at her with an angry glance. "You are a homesick baby, Rose, that is the long and short of it. I gave you credit for being grown-up. It was a mistake you coming here at all. Clare didn't get homesick."

"Clare had her work," answered Rose, knitting her pretty brows and looking miserably at Pauline's angry face. "I am doing nothing I couldn't do as well at home. I could come up once a week for lessons. Pauline, don't be angry. You didn't really think I should stay on after June, did you?"

"I gave you credit for meaning what you said," returned Pauline harshly. "And what you said was true. You were not happy at home. If you go back, you will get bored and unhappy again."

Rose shook her head. She had had a sharp lesson. She knew what the freedom was worth that Pauline had offered her. She longed to take up again the little daily cares that had filled her life at home. And she longed to get away from Pauline. She was beginning to feel that she had never really known her till now.

Pauline waited a moment for her to speak, and then turned sharply away. "Well, I shall not press you to stay with me. Madame Verney would be glad if I could live with her. I said it was impossible yesterday, as I was bound to you. Now I shall feel quite free to make my own arrangements. But you have disappointed me, Rose. I must tell you so quite frankly."

And Rose felt quite crushed for the moment by the judicial air with which Pauline pronounced this judgment on her.

CHAPTER IX.

PAULINE HAS HER SUSPICIONS.

Pauline and Rose went down to Woodcote on Friday evening.

Pauline had apparently recovered her spirits, and was in her brightest mood. She had been very sweet and caressing to Rose ever since their talk on the evening of Tom's visit to the flat. Rose inwardly chafed at this show of affection; she had ceased to believe in Pauline's sincerity.

Miss Merivale was waiting at the station for them with the pony carriage. The groom had driven her down, but Rose begged to be allowed to drive back. It was the first time she had driven the new pony, which was a pretty, gentle, timid creature, obedient to the lightest touch on the reins.

"We must take Miss Smythe to Bingley woods to-morrow, Rose dear," Miss Merivale said, as they drove slowly up the long hill from the station. "The primroses are very plentiful this year. Tom says the ground is carpeted with them."

Rose did not answer. The pony had started aside at the sight of a railway train that had just come out of the tunnel, and she was engaged in soothing it.

"Rose, you had better let me drive," Pauline suggested. "I drove a great deal when I was staying with the Warehams. You are not firm enough."

"It is only trains and traction engines Bob is frightened of," Miss Merivale said. "And coaxing is best, I am sure. There, we shall have no more trouble with him now. He is a dear little fellow."

Pauline said nothing, but she had some difficulty in keeping herself from shrugging her shoulders. She thought both Miss Merivale and Rose deplorably weak and silly. A smart stroke with the whip was what the pony wanted. But she had come down determined to be on her best behaviour, and she made some smiling remark on the beauty of the country.

"Rose has been pining for fresh air like a lark in a cage," she said. "Are you content now, Rosie?"

"Tom said she looked pale," Miss Merivale said, giving Rose an anxious, loving glance. "I wish you would come down again next week, dear. I can't let a fortnight pass again without seeing you; it is much too long."

"Time goes faster in London," said Pauline, without allowing Rose to answer. "It seems only yesterday that Rose came to me. How quiet it is here! Don't you miss the roar of London, Rosie? I do. Not the clatter of cabs and carts, but that deep, low roar we hear when we open the window. It is like the voice of the great city. There is no music like it."

"I would rather hear the birds," Miss Merivale said gently; but she gave Rosie another anxious look. She was wondering if the time had gone as quickly with her as with Pauline.

Rose did not speak. She was waiting till they got home to pour her heart out to her aunt. She could not speak before Pauline.

"I am afraid I haven't many rustic tastes," Pauline said in a cool, superior voice. "But it is certainly lovely here. What a delightful change it must be for that little Miss Sampson! I hear you find her very useful, Miss Merivale. Clare will be pleased to hear it."

For the first time in her life Pauline saw Miss Merivale look angry. Her mild blue eyes actually flashed as she answered in a voice that trembled a little, "I don't think you can have heard that Rhoda is related to us, Miss Smythe. She is staying with me as my visitor. Rose, my dear, I want you to be very good to her."

Pauline stole a look at Rose, expecting to see a cloud of jealousy on her pretty face; but she saw instead a tender, happy smile lurking in the corners of her lips. She was distinctly mystified.

"Yes, I remember now that Rose spoke of some distant family connection," she said carelessly to Miss Merivale. "How very good of you to acknowledge it, dear Miss Merivale! Some people wouldn't, I know. They think poor relations should be kept out of sight as much as possible. But Miss Sampson is hardly to be called a relation, is she? I forget the exact link between you, though Rose told me."

"She is related to poor Cousin Lydia's second husband," Rose said, as Miss Merivale did not answer. "He and his little girl were lost in the bush, weren't they, Aunt Lucy?"

"Yes, dear," said Miss Merivale in a low voice. Her face had become very white.

"If she had lived, we might never have come to Woodcote," Rose went on, her glance resting lovingly on the old house, which had just come into sight. "How strange it seems to think of that! How old was she, Aunt Lucy? It is only lately I have thought of her at all."

"She was about two years old, dear," Miss Merivale answered in the same low voice. Pauline, who was watching her in some wonder, could see that she was profoundly agitated.

"Then she would have been about twenty now," Rose went on, not noticing her aunt's disinclination to talk of her niece. "How old is Miss Sampson, Aunt Lucy? I wonder if they ever saw each other."

"She is nearly twenty; I remember Clare telling me so," said Pauline, answering for Miss Merivale. "But she looks much older. It is the kind of life she has lived, I suppose."

Rose was intent on turning the curve of the drive in a masterly manner, and did not answer this. And Pauline, after another glance at Miss Merivale's face, was silent about Rhoda. It was plain to her that, for some reason or another, the subject was intensely painful to Miss Merivale.

Rhoda came shyly across the hall as they entered. She had on a new brown dress that Miss Merivale had given her. It was brown cashmere, made very simply, but it was a prettier dress than Pauline had ever seen her wearing, and she stared undisguisedly at her as they shook hands.

"I hardly knew you, Miss Sampson," she said. "How very well you are looking! But you must be having quite a holiday."

The condescending tone did not appear to irritate Rhoda. She answered pleasantly; there was even a twinkle deep down in her dark eyes as she met Pauline's glance.

It was Rose who felt irritated. Now that she saw Rhoda's face in the full light, with no hat to shade it, she recognised what a frank, sweet face it was. She did not wonder that Tom loved her, or that her aunt smiled upon his wooing. And Pauline's assumption of superiority vexed her intensely.

Miss Merivale asked Rhoda to show Pauline the room that had been prepared for her, and they went upstairs together. Rose cast an anxious glance after them.

"I had better go too, Aunt Lucy."

"No, wait a moment, darling. I want to have a good look at you. Tom gave me a bad account. And you are looking pale. You are not working too hard?"

"Not a bit of it," laughed Rose. "And I am quite well. But I shall be glad when June comes, Aunt Lucy. I am beginning to count the days. But don't tell Pauline that."

A delighted look flashed into Miss Merivale's face. "My darling, it is so sweet to hear you say that. I was afraid you would find it dull here when you came back. I have missed you more than I could tell you."

"Really?" asked Rose half wistfully, half teasingly. "You've had Miss Sampson, you know, Aunt Lucy."

"I want you both," Miss Merivale said in an eager voice. "Rose, you will try to love her, won't you? She is so lonely. Mrs. M'Alister and her children have gone to Devonshire, and Rhoda was left behind. She has nobody but us. You won't treat her like a stranger, will you, dearest?"

Rose felt chilled and hurt by her aunt's strange eagerness. It was all very well for Tom to speak so, but her aunt was different. Why should she plead for Rhoda like that?

"You'll see how sweet I mean to be to her, Aunt Lucy," she said gaily; and Miss Merivale did not notice that the gaiety was forced. "I'll go up now and send her down to you. I wonder why Pauline is keeping her."

She hastened away, and Miss Merivale sat down in the porch and put her hand on the head of Bruno, Tom's black Newfoundland, who had come to her side with an inquiring glance in his beautiful eyes.

"Your master will be home soon, Bruno," she said. The dog wagged his tail, but still kept looking at her. She went on speaking to him. "And everything is coming right, Bruno," she said. "I am glad I was silent. It's all coming right. We shall all be happy together."

She looked round as she spoke, and saw Rhoda coming down the broad shallow stairs into the wainscoted hall. A tender smile brightened her face as she watched her. She had lost the feeling that she was doing her an injustice by not acknowledging her as her niece. As Tom's wife she would be as a daughter to her. She would have everything that was hers by right.

Rhoda stepped rather slowly down, her head bent, a line of anxiety showing between her clearly pencilled dark brows. She knew something about Pauline that she was beginning to feel Miss Merivale should know. Yet she had no wish to disclose the secret she had accidentally learnt. At first it had amused her, it amused her still. In the brief, decidedly unpleasant tete-a-tete which Rose had just put an end to, she had found it easy to bear Pauline's half-veiled taunts. Ever since her visit to Leyton she had understood the bitter animosity which Miss Smythe had shown her from the first. It was not altogether a personal dislike. Rhoda was sure that she would have treated in the same manner any girl who was poor and yet was not ashamed of her poverty or of her friends.

"Rhoda."

Miss Merivale's gentle call made her hurry her footsteps. Her face had a wonderfully sweet look on it as she approached Miss Merivale. Miss Merivale's kindness had completely won the girl's heart. She was so happy at Woodcote that sometimes she felt as if it must be a dream from which she would awake to find herself in the lonely bedroom in Acacia Road with the boys' cots empty, and a long London day of searching for work to look forward to.

"Sit down here beside me, dear," Miss Merivale said, taking her hand and drawing her down on the seat. "Just look at Bruno. He has been asking me when Tom is coming back. I tell him he will be back in a few moments."

Rhoda had turned her head quickly away to look at the dog, but Miss Merivale saw how her colour rose, making even the little ear pink. And she smiled to herself.

"I hope Tom will be able to go with us to-morrow," she went on, without giving Rhoda time to speak. "I want to take Miss Smythe to Bingley woods. It is too early for a picnic, but we could drive over there directly after lunch. Ah, there is Tom."

Bruno had heard the click of the wicket gate leading to the stables before Miss Merivale spoke. So had Rhoda. She started up. "I promised Wilmot I would light the lamps, Miss Merivale, as Ann is out. We shall want them for tea."

Miss Merivale let her go, smiling softly again to herself. "Rose and Miss Smythe have come, Tom," she called to him, as he crossed the lawn, swinging his stick, and walking with a free, happy step.

"I'm glad of that. Where is Rosie? I'm afraid I shall not be able to see much of her to-morrow, Aunt Lucy. I must go to Croydon, after all. But I'll get back early. How do you think Rose is looking?"

"She is pale, Tom; but she says she is very well. I don't think she likes it as much as she expected. She is anxious to come home in June."

Tom's eyes twinkled. "Yes, I gathered that on Tuesday. I am glad you let her go, Aunt Lucy. But there is no need for her to stay till June if she does not like it, is there? Why should she go back at all?"

"I don't think it would be quite fair to Miss Smythe for her to leave her now, dear," said Miss Merivale gently. "I am sure Rose would rather go back."

Their talk was interrupted by Rose herself, who came flying across the hall at the sight of Tom, followed more slowly by Pauline. "Oh, Tom, have you come back? I drove Bob from the station. Did Aunt Lucy tell you?"

"She hasn't had time. I have only just come in. How do you do, Miss Smythe? I hope Rose has been a good little girl since Tuesday?"

"Have you, Rose?" said Pauline, with a lazy smile.

Rose did not hear the question. She had caught sight of Rhoda entering the hall through the swing doors that led to Wilmot's pantry, and she stepped back to speak to her. They stood talking together by the wide stone hearth, filled now with green fir boughs. Pauline noticed how Tom's eyes kept wandering to them as he made disjointed remarks to her and his aunt, and he presently moved across the hall to join them.

Miss Merivale got up from her seat in the porch. "It is getting chilly, my dear," she said to Pauline. "Shall we go into the dining-room? Tea will be ready in a few moments."

But Pauline lingered in the hall. Though the twilight had begun to gather, enough light streamed through the great west window to make the portraits on the wainscoted walls clearly visible. Pauline went from one to the other, asking Miss Merivale a question now and then, but really far more intent on studying the group at the fireplace than the pictures she appeared to be interested in.

Over the fireplace hung the portrait of Miss Merivale's mother, a sweet, gentle-eyed woman, very much like Miss Merivale, except that her eyes were a soft brown instead of a soft blue.

Pauline remarked on the likeness at once. "Except for the dark eyes, it might be your portrait, Miss Merivale."

Rose had been glancing from the portrait to Rhoda. "Aunt Lucy, your mother's eyes are exactly the same colour as Miss Sampson's."

Pauline, who was standing by Miss Merivale, felt her start violently. "I had not noticed, dear," she said, without looking at Rhoda.

"Oh, but they are," Rose went on. "Only Miss Sampson's are shaped a little differently. And she was named Rhoda, wasn't she, Aunt Lucy? Tom, don't you see the likeness?"

"I can't say I do, Rosie," said Tom, who considered in his heart of hearts that Rhoda's long-lashed, sparkling dark eyes were far more beautiful than the mild brown ones in the portrait. As he spoke he moved quickly towards his aunt. "Aunt Lucy, it is too cold for you here. Come in by the dining-room fire. Why, you are trembling with the cold. The evening is very chilly for April."

Pauline stood still for a moment gazing intently up at the picture, and then followed the others into the dining-room. Before Tom had spoken to his aunt she had seen how white and strange her face was--as white as if she was about to faint. And a sudden idea had flashed upon Pauline, making her heart beat fast.

That night, when Rhoda was brushing her hair, she heard a soft tap at the door. To her surprise, it was Pauline who entered.

"I have come to borrow some matches," she said. "I find my box is empty. How pretty your room is! So is mine. It is a charming house altogether. May I sit down and talk to you a little? I want you and Miss Merivale to spend a long day with us next week. Do you think you could persuade her to come?"

The change in Pauline's manner was so extraordinary that Rhoda found it difficult to speak. But Pauline did not appear to notice her constrained answer. She sat down in the low chair by the window and took up the

photograph frame that stood there by Rhoda's little writing case and a saucer filled with white violets and moss.

"May I look at this? It is your aunt and cousins, isn't it? What a dear little fellow that is on your aunt's lap! Is that the little boy who was ill? You took him into the country, didn't you?"

An irrepressible glimmer of fun came into Rhoda's dark eyes. "Yes, into Essex," she said demurely.

"They have all gone into the country now, haven't they? How fortunate it was that Miss Merivale heard me mention you, Miss Sampson! She noticed the name at once. It is quite certain, isn't it, that you are related to her through her sister's marriage?"

"Miss Merivale insists on thinking so," said Rhoda quietly. "But I cannot be sure of it."

"Don't you remember your own people at all? I can feel for you, if that is so. My father and mother died while I was a baby. Can you remember your mother? I wish I could."

"No, I cannot remember her."

"And your father?"

"Just a little."

Rhoda's cold, brief replies checked Pauline. She did not find it so easy to pump Rhoda as she had expected. She put the photograph down, and got up with a yawn. "I am keeping you up," she said. "May I have the matches? Thank you. Good-night." She gave Rhoda one of her most charming smiles as she spoke; but Rhoda's good-night was studiously cold. She had no desire to accept the olive branch Pauline was holding out to her.

CHAPTER X.

A CONFESSION.

The more Pauline thought of it the more she felt convinced that she had solved the mystery of Miss Merivale's sudden interest in Rhoda. And she spent a long time in considering what was the best use she could make of her discovery.

Her first idea had been to disclose the truth to Rhoda herself, and thus establish a claim to her gratitude. But something in Rhoda's manner the night before made her hesitate. And she felt half inclined to believe that her best plan would be to speak to Miss Merivale and assure her that she could be trusted to keep silent.

She was still undecided when she went into the garden next morning to help Rose pick the flowers for the table.

Rhoda was already in the garden. Old Jackson, the gardener, had come to the house to seek her directly after breakfast.

"Jackson expects Rhoda to spend half the day in his company," Miss Merivale said, with a laugh. "He won't sow a seed without asking her opinion first. My opinions he has always laughed to scorn."

"And mine too," said Rose, with a merry glance at Rhoda. "He has always been a regular despot about the garden. How have you managed to subdue him, Miss Sampson?"

"I expect he has found out that Miss Sampson knows more than he does," said Pauline smilingly. "I want you to teach me something about flowers while I am here, Miss Sampson. I have schemes for a flower-box outside our windows at the flat. Don't you think that would be a delightful plan, Rosie?"

Rhoda made some fitting response, but Pauline discerned the coldness in her voice. She said angrily to herself that Rhoda did not deserve to know what she could tell her. And ten minutes later she had fully made up her mind to speak to Miss Merivale. It was another discovery which had led her to a decision. She had wandered on before Rose towards the end of the garden, where an archway through a clipped yew hedge led to the stables and farm buildings. Her steps made no sound on the turf path, and she suddenly came in sight of Tom and Rhoda standing close to the archway. Rhoda had her gardening gloves and apron on, and a trowel in her hand. She had just been sowing seeds in the bed that ran along the yew hedge. Tom had come through the archway to bid her good-bye before starting on his long ride.

"I wish I was going to Bingley woods with you," he said. "You will have a lovely day."

"Yes, it will be beautiful," Rhoda answered, finding it just as difficult as Tom did to speak these ordinary words in an ordinary tone. A blush came over her face, and she dropped her eyes. She could not meet his eager glance. For one moment Tom was silent--a moment that was eloquent to them both. Then, "Rhoda!" he said, almost below his breath.

It was at that moment Pauline turned the corner by the great lilac bushes and caught sight of them. Rhoda came towards her instantly, showing no sign of discomposure except a controlled quivering at the corners of her firm lips; but Pauline was not deceived by her calmness. Her only doubt was as to whether Tom shared Miss Merivale's knowledge as to Rhoda's parentage. And after a moment or two's consideration she decided that he did not. It was impossible to look at Tom and doubt his perfect honesty.

After a short talk, he went through the archway to start on his ride, and Pauline returned to Rose, leaving Rhoda to her gardening.

"Rose, why didn't you warn me?" she said in a tone of laughing reproach when she joined her. "I am afraid your brother will never forgive me. I have just interrupted a _tCete-àtCete_."

"What do you mean, Pauline?" asked Rose, jarred through and through by her friend's tone.

"Is it possible you don't guess, you blind girl? But perhaps you would rather I did not speak of it? I thought I could say anything to you, Rosie."

"You spoke of Tom," Rose answered. "Of course I know what you mean, Pauline."

"Ah, you are jealous, Rosie."

Rose flashed a glance at her. "I am not jealous. I am not so horrid as that. But don't make a joke of it, Pauline, please don't."

Pauline burst into a loud laugh. "Oh, Rosie, what a solemn little face! But, seriously, do you think the course of true love is likely to run smooth? Surely your aunt will object. We are not all so unworldly and sentimental as you."

"Aunt Lucy is glad, I am sure of it. And so am I," said Rose stoutly, "I am beginning to see what Rhoda is."

"You think Miss Merivale will be glad? Well, you are odd people. I shall begin to think Miss Sampson must have a fairy godmother. It's a new version of Cinderella, isn't it?"

This made Rose too angry to answer, and she walked away to the next flower-bed to put an end to the conversation. Pauline did not attempt to follow her. After standing in deep thought for a moment, she returned to the house.

Miss Merivale was sitting in the drawing-room busy with her embroidery. She looked up with a smile as Pauline entered. "I was just wishing you or Rose would come in, Miss Smythe," she said. "I am not sure whether blue or green would be best for the centre of this flower."

Pauline gravely examined the embroidery, and gave her opinion. Then she took up the basket of silks. "May I sort these for you, Miss Merivale?"

"Oh, do, my dear. The kittens got hold of the basket just now and made sad work with it."

Pauline seated herself at a little distance and began quickly and skilfully to arrange the basket, glancing once or twice at her companion. Miss Merivale looked very composed and cheerful. She was intent on her embroidery, and seemed in no hurry to talk.

It was Pauline who began the conversation.

"I have just been talking to Miss Sampson in the garden, Miss Merivale. How very happy she seems here!"

"Yes, I think she is happy, my dear."

"And if you and Rosie had not come to the flat that afternoon, you might never have heard of her. How strangely things come about, don't they, dear Miss Merivale?"

"I am very glad we came," Miss Merivale answered. "What colour shall I use for this leaf, my dear? My eyes are not what they used to be, and I like to take advice."

Pauline bent forward to look, and patiently discussed the question; but she spoke of Rhoda again directly it was decided. "But something still more strange might have happened, Miss Merivale," she went on lightly. "Suppose Miss Sampson had been your own niece? She might have been. People who are supposed to be lost in the bush aren't always lost, and--Oh, Miss Merivale, what have I said?"

Miss Merivale had dropped her work, and was staring at Pauline with wide-open, terrified eyes. She made no effort to answer her. She was incapable of speech.

"What have I said?" repeated Pauline. She got up and came close to Miss Merivale, kneeling down beside her. "You are angry with me. I have hurt you. Is it possible that Rhoda is your niece, and that you do not want her to know it? But you must trust me. Please trust me, Miss Merivale."

Miss Merivale put her hand up to her eyes. She spoke in a stunned voice. Pauline's words had suddenly torn away the veil which had hidden the meaning of her own conduct from her.

"Yes, Rhoda is my niece," she said. "She is my sister Lydia's little girl. What made you guess it?"

Pauline was slightly taken aback at this speech of Miss Merivale's. She had not expected her to admit the truth so readily. "Miss Merivale, you must trust me," she said in a low, eager voice. "I understand exactly why you want it to be a secret. No one shall ever know from me."

Miss Merivale pushed her chair back, freeing herself from the touch of Pauline's hands. A shock of repulsion had gone through her.

"It will be no secret after to-day," she said in the same stunned, heavy voice. "I shall tell Tom this afternoon. I ought to have told him before."

Tom came home late in the afternoon. He expected to find that his aunt and the girls had all gone to Bingley woods, and he only went to the house to change his riding boots before going to meet them. He passed through the archway in the yew hedge, marking with tender, happy eyes the exact spot

where Rhoda had stood that morning while they talked together. His feet lingered a little as he went down the turf path to the house. Everything in the garden spoke to him of Rhoda, and it was in the garden he had seen her first.

He went through the open window of the library and across the hall. As he reached the foot of the stairs he was surprised to hear his aunt's voice.

She was standing at the drawing-room door, with her hand resting heavily on the jamb. It was with difficulty she had crossed the room to call him on hearing his step. Her limbs were trembling under her.

"I thought you had all gone to Bingley woods," Tom exclaimed. "Have the others gone?"

"Yes; I would not let them stay at home. I was feeling too tired to go."

"You caught cold yesterday in the porch," Tom said in a playful scolding voice. "You do want a lot of looking after, Aunt Lucy. Have you a fire? The wind is keen, though the sun is so bright. Here, let me make a better fire than this."

He knelt down on the rug, stirring the logs into a cheerful blaze. Miss Merivale sank down on the sofa and watched him in silence. If Tom had looked attentively at her, he would have seen that her face was grey with pain. She had spent some bitter hours since Pauline had spoken to her that morning. Though she had done it for Tom's sake, she feared that he would find it very hard to forgive her. And looking back over the last few weeks, she found it almost impossible to understand how she could have been happy for a moment while keeping such a secret from him.

The knowledge that Pauline shared the secret had been like a light brought into a dark room. Her shock of repulsion at Pauline's eagerness to convince her that she would be silent had been followed by the sad reflection that she had no right to blame Pauline for being willing to do what she herself had done for a month past.

"There, that is better," Tom said, getting up. "Let me draw your sofa close up to the fire. Where is your knitting, Aunt Lucy? I know you can't have your afternoon nap without it."

But Miss Merivale did not laugh at the old joke that she pretended to be knitting when she was really fast asleep. "Tom, sit down," she said. "I want to speak to you."

Tom hesitated. She had spoken in so low a tone he had not noticed how her voice trembled. "I thought I would go to meet them, Aunt Lucy. They will be coming back by this time."

"Sit down," she repeated more urgently. "I want to speak to you. I must tell you before they come home."

He was thoroughly startled now. "Has anything happened?" he said. "What is

it?" He drew a chair close to her and sat down, his square, honest face full of concern. "What is it, Aunt Lucy?"

She turned away from him. It was more difficult to speak than she had expected, though she had known it would be very difficult. "Tom, it is about Rhoda," she said in a choked voice.

He straightened himself in his chair. "About Rhoda?" he echoed. She heard the challenge in his grave voice.

"Yes, about Rhoda. I want to tell you why I asked her here. You know that I love her, Tom. You know how happy it has made me to see that you"--

"Dear Aunt Lucy, I was sure you had guessed," Tom said in an eager voice. "And"--

"Tom, wait," she said breathlessly. "You don't understand me yet. Has it never struck you as strange that I should have asked Rhoda to live here, that I should have treated her as a child of my own?"

No, Tom was not able to say that he had thought it strange. Rhoda being Rhoda, it had seemed to him most natural that his aunt should have loved her at first sight, just as he had done. But his voice was anxious as he answered, "Aunt Lucy, I don't understand in the least what you are driving at. What is it you want to tell me?"

She turned towards him, clasping her hands together. "Tom, Rhoda is Lydia's little girl. She is my own niece. I have known it ever since the first day she came to see me."

He stared at her, not comprehending. "How can she be Cousin Lydia's child?" he asked. "She would have known you were her aunt."

"She does not. She knows nothing. But, Tom, she is Lydia's daughter. I know it. I have known it all these weeks."

"But why"--he began, and then stopped, a dark flush rising in his face. He knew why his aunt had been silent.

"Tom, at first I tried to persuade myself I was mistaken," she faltered. "And then, when I saw"--

He made a quick gesture that was full of pain. The flush in his face had faded, leaving it very white. "Aunt Lucy, do not speak of that," he said, turning his face aside.

[Illustration: HE STARED AT HER, NOT COMPREHENDING.]

She drew closer to him, putting her hand on his arm. "Tom, what do you mean?"

"Don't you see?" he returned, just glancing at her and then looking away again. "You have made it impossible, Aunt Lucy. I could never ask her to

marry me now."

The bitterness in his voice overwhelmed her. "Tom, you don't suppose she would believe that you--Oh, what have I done? Tom, you will never forgive me!"

At the sound of the quick sob that choked her voice he turned quickly to her. "Aunt Lucy, do not talk like that. What is done can't be undone. But let me understand. What proofs have you that Rhoda is your niece? You must write to Mr. Thomson and tell him all you know. But he will want proofs."

He spoke so quietly, she took courage. And she was able to speak fully to him. He listened with grave intentness, asking a question now and then.

"We must write to this Mr. Harding," he said, when she had finished. "Mrs. M'Alister will be sure to know his address. Shall I go up and see Mr. Thomson for you to-morrow, Aunt Lucy? I think the first step is to tell him."

"And Rhoda, Tom?"

"Wait till I have seen Thomson. Though there seems no room for doubt. Aunt Lucy, I wish you had told me at first."

How she wished it she tried to tell him, but her tears prevented her. She sobbed hysterically, while he did his best to soothe her, forgetting his own pain at the sight of hers. When she could speak, her first words were of Rhoda.

"Tom, you won't let this come between you? Tom dear, I know she loves you."

His face quivered all over. "I have no right to speak to her yet," he said. "Perhaps--but I must wait. Can't you see it must be so? I shall have my own way to make in the world." He squared his shoulders as he said it, as if eager to begin the struggle.

"Tom, I don't see it," his aunt burst out. But he would not let her go on. He could not bear it. He felt that it was utterly impossible for him to ask Rhoda to marry him if she was heiress of Woodcote and he without a penny he could call his own. If they had met knowing their relative positions, it might have been different. But now he could make no claim on her. His aunt's conduct had raised a barrier between them that could not be broken down till he had won an independent position for himself.

Miss Merivale's heart ached as she looked at him, but she was far from understanding the full bitterness of the blow she had inflicted on him.

Tom felt as if he had suddenly grown old. He left his aunt presently and went out into the open air. He no longer felt inclined to go and meet the pony carriage, but he went through the wood to the furzy common beyond. From there he could see the high road stretching like a white ribbon across the downs.

No pony carriage was in sight, but a traction engine was lumbering heavily upwards, with a man walking before it carrying a red flag. Tom was glad to see it disappear over the dip of the hill. The lane from Bingley woods entered the high road lower down the hill. There was no danger of Bob's nerves being shaken by the sight of the fiery-throated monster.

The road lay white and silent in the sunshine now. Tom sat down on a turf hillock, fixing his eyes drearily upon it. He felt intensely miserable.

CHAPTER XI.

POLLY SMITH.

The expedition to Bingley woods was not a success. Pauline was in one of her worst tempers, and treated Rose so rudely that the poor girl was more ashamed of her chosen friend than angry with her.

To Rhoda, Pauline was all that was sweet and flattering. She had promised Miss Merivale to say nothing to her; but she was eager to ingratiate herself with the girl whom she now knew to be an heiress, and to make her forget how she had treated her while she was Clare's assistant.

Rhoda was strongly irritated by her advances. Pauline's snubs had never wounded her very deeply. Rhoda only valued the good opinion of those whom she respected. But Pauline's eagerness to make friends turned her indifference to something like violent dislike. She found it hardly possible to speak civilly to her.

She went off at last into the depths of the wood, leaving Rose and Pauline together. Her irritation soon passed away when she was alone. The basket she had brought to fill with primroses remained empty in her hands. She wandered on, her eyes drinking in the beauty round her. Only the lower boughs of the trees were in leaf as yet, and the wood was full of golden light. Primroses were everywhere, and in the more open spaces celandines starred the ground with deeper yellow. In a month the glades between the trees would be carpeted by bluebells. But there were no bluebells yet. Spring was still in its infancy. The great oaks that skirted the wood stretched bare wintry boughs over the flowers beneath them.

It was a time of hope, of delicate, exquisite promise; and Rhoda's lips curved with a happy, dreamy smile, as she listened to the story the woods whispered to her that April day.

The deep voice of the clock in Bingley church tower recalled her to the necessity of going back to her companions. It was four o'clock, the time they had fixed for starting homewards. It was not with any pleasure that she thought of the long drive. She suspected that Pauline and Rose had had a serious quarrel, and that Pauline's politeness to her arose from a wish

to vex Rose.

All the way to the woods Pauline had criticised Rose's driving, speaking with authority, as if she had driven a pony carriage all her life. Rhoda could have laughed outright if she had not been so angry.

She found the two girls ready to start for the village when she got back to the spot where she had left them.

"Pauline wants to go round by the high road," Rose said, looking appealingly at Rhoda. "It will make us much later at home. You can see the Abbey another day, Pauline. There isn't much to see; is there, Miss Sampson?"

"It will not take us half an hour longer. How obstinate you are, Rosie!" exclaimed Pauline irritably. "I will drive, and make Bob understand that he must hurry a little. Why should we walk up that long tiresome lane to save his legs? There is no hill to speak of the other way, you say. I am too tired to walk a step. I am not so strong as you are. Miss Sampson, don't you agree with me that the high road will be much the better way for us?"

"We promised Miss Merivale that we would be back early," Rhoda said coldly. "I think it is a pity to go out of our way."

"But we should be at home just as soon. Rose insists that we must all walk up the lane. I am sure you are too tired to do it, Miss Sampson, if I was not. But Bob is to be considered before either of us, eh, Rose?"

Rose walked down the turf slope towards the village without answering; she was too cross to discuss the question any further.

A new complication arose when they reached the rustic inn where Bob and the carriage had been left. One of Bob's shoes was found to be loose, and it was necessary to get it fixed before starting for home.

Rose drew Rhoda aside, and spoke eagerly to her. "Miss Sampson, would you drive home with Pauline? I could walk across the downs and be home in half an hour. I don't like to leave Aunt Lucy so long alone."

"Will you let me go?" Rhoda answered, as eagerly as Rose had spoken. "I know the way quite well. I would so much rather go, if you don't mind."

Rose could quite well understand that Rhoda must find Pauline's society unpleasant, even though Pauline now appeared bent on being agreeable to her. "Are you sure you know the way?" she said doubtfully. "But it is easy. You will see Woodcote when once you are on the top of the downs."

"I know the way quite well," Rhoda said, with a bright face. It was delightful to her to escape the drive home with Pauline.

She started at once, and was soon on the top of the downs, enjoying the breezy expanse of beautiful rolling country round her. Half an hour's

rapid walking brought her to the furzy common close to Woodcote woods. She had come down to it from the downs; and Tom, seated on his hillock, with his eyes turned to the road, did not become aware of her presence till she was quite close to him. He had been hidden by the gorse bushes from Rhoda till the moment before he started up. And she would have shyly hurried on without speaking to him if the sound of her step had not made him look round.

She hurriedly explained how she came to be there alone. "I don't think they will be back for an hour or more," she said, looking at the white ribbon of road Tom had been watching for so long. "The high road is much longer than the lane, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Tom briefly. He had forgotten all about the traction engine. In fact, he had hardly understood what Rhoda was saying. His heart was heavy within him.

They turned and walked down the sunny bit of slope, where the bees were busy among the golden gorse blossoms. Tom was not silent. He could not trust himself to be silent. He began to speak of the meeting he had just been attending at Croydon. He gave Rhoda a vivid account of it, which lasted till they got close to the house; then, with a hasty excuse of having forgotten to tell Jackson something, he left her.

Rhoda walked on to the house with a calm, even step. Wilmot, who met her in the hall, and told her that Miss Merivale was lying down and did not wish to be disturbed, noticed nothing unusual about her. She stood and talked some minutes with the old servant before going upstairs to her room. And she gave her a sunny smile as she left her. Even when she was alone, and had shut the door between her and the world, she did not fling herself down by the bed and burst into tears, as unhappy heroines so often do. She changed her dress, and carefully mended a rent the briars had made in the one she took off. Then she got Hamblin Smith's Arithmetic and her notebook, and began the hour's work she set herself every day. A tear or two did come--she could not keep them back; but she worked steadily on. She would not even allow herself to think how she could have offended Tom, or what the explanation of his changed manner could be. She picked out the hardest examples in Complex Fractions she could find, and concentrated her mind on them.

She was still working when Wilmot came to her door.

"Miss Rose and Miss Smythe have not come home, miss. Shall I send in tea? It is past six o'clock."

Rhoda opened the door. "I will go and ask Miss Merivale, Wilmot."

Wilmot looked doubtful. Her mistress had given strict orders that she was not to be disturbed.

"I will not go in," Rhoda said, as she saw her doubtful glance. "I will just knock softly. If she is awake, she might be glad of a cup of tea."

Rhoda's first knock was not answered; but when she tapped softly again, she heard Miss Merivale's voice telling her to come in. Miss Merivale was lying on the bed, with her face turned to the wall. She reached out her hand for Rhoda's, and clasped it tenderly, but did not turn round.

"My head is very bad, darling. Tell Rose I won't have any tea. I want to keep quite quiet."

Rhoda did not tell her that Rose and Pauline had not returned. She was afraid she might be alarmed. The deadly pallor of her face quite frightened her. She spoke to Tom when she went downstairs.

"Miss Merivale looks very ill," she said, "and she won't let me do anything for her."

Tom was sitting at the table before the hall window, busy making flies for his trout fishing. He was so intent on his work that he did not look up.

"She gets bad headaches. I should not be anxious. She always likes to be left alone."

Rhoda did not answer this. She went into the dining-room, where tea was laid ready, and sat down in the broad window-seat with some needlework.

If Tom had come in then, she would have been very cold to him. Her pride was up in arms. But he did not come near her; and for a miserable half hour Rhoda sat there alone, feeling as if all life's music had suddenly stopped, and winter had taken the place of spring.

Wilmot came in at last to urge her to have some tea. "Miss Rosie may be stopping to tea at the Rectory. It isn't any good for you and Mr. Tom to wait any longer."

Rhoda looked at the clock in some alarm. She had not been conscious of the lapse of time. "I don't think Miss Rosie meant to stop anywhere, Wilmot. But they ought to be home. I hope nothing has happened."

At that moment Tom entered the room. "It is getting very late," he said to Rhoda. "How long did Jones mean to take to put that shoe right? Not very long, surely."

"Miss Merivale thought they would be at home by six o'clock," Rhoda answered.

"And it is seven now," Tom said, glancing at the clock. "It will be dark in half an hour. They were coming by the high road all the way, didn't you say?"

"Yes; Miss Smythe did not want to go up the lane. But the high road is not very much longer, is it, Mr. Merivale?"

"About two miles longer. But it is a better road. They ought to be home by this time."

Rhoda was standing by the window, and he came to her side and looked out. He carefully avoided glancing at her, yet he knew that her face was very proud and cold.

"I think I will go down the road to meet them," he said. His voice shook a little. It was very hard--it was almost harder than he could bear--to let her go on misunderstanding him. Yet how could he explain?

"I wish they would come home," Rhoda answered. "Do go and meet them, Mr. Merivale. Miss Smythe wanted to drive, and I do not trust her driving."

"Bob doesn't want much driving," Tom answered. But as he spoke he suddenly remembered the traction engine crawling up the hill. For the first time he felt really alarmed. "I will go down the road," he said, moving quickly from the window. "Though I daresay I shall meet them almost at once."

Wilmot followed him into the hall. "Mr. Tom, where can they be?"

"Somewhere on the road between Bingley and our gates," he said lightly. "Don't alarm Miss Sampson or my aunt, Wilmot. But send Ann round to the stables to tell Jack to get my horse ready. If I do not see any sign of them on the road, I will ride towards Bingley."

He went off; and Rhoda, after watching him down the drive, crept upstairs to listen at Miss Merivale's door. But as she crossed the landing the door opened, and Miss Merivale stepped out, a black lace shawl framing the whiteness of her face.

"Rhoda, where has Tom gone?" she asked. "How still the house is! Haven't Rose and Miss Smythe come back?"

"Not yet," answered Rhoda lightly. "Bob's shoe got loose, you know. They were delayed at the village."

"But it is nearly dark. Something must have happened. Let us go down to the gate, Rhoda. I am frightened."

Rhoda could not persuade her to let her go alone, and they went together down the drive. Tom had just ridden off; they could hear the sound of his horse's feet on the hilly road. But when that died away, a long period of silence ensued. They went out of the gates and down the hill towards the station, Miss Merivale clinging to Rhoda.

It was after what seemed hours to them both that they heard a horse trotting rapidly towards them. Miss Merivale leant against the low stone wall that divided the road on one side from the common.

"Rhoda, that is Tom. I could tell Black Beauty's trot anywhere. Go on to meet him, dear. I cannot go any farther."

Rhoda went quickly on. It was Tom; he sprang off his horse on catching sight of her.

"Miss Smythe has been badly hurt," he said. "She is at the Rectory. Rose is with her."

"Your sister is not hurt?"

"A bruise or two. They met that traction engine; Miss Smythe was driving, and tried to make Bob pass it. The result was that Bob bolted down the hill."

They were walking quickly up the hill as he spoke. Rhoda told him that Miss Merivale was waiting for them, and a couple of moments brought them to her side. She refused to accept at first Tom's emphatic assurances that Rose had escaped with only a bruise or two, and begged him to take her to the Rectory. Tom would not hear of her going. "Rose did not want to leave Miss Smythe, or I would have brought her home, Aunt Lucy. She is perfectly well. Rose is a plucky little girl. She wasn't half as frightened as you are."

It was not till they got back to the house and he had made Miss Merivale drink the cup of tea Wilmot brought her, that he allowed her to know how serious Pauline's injuries were.

"They fear concussion of the brain," he said. "I have promised Hartley to telegraph for her friends. Can you give me their address?"

Miss Merivale hesitated. "I am afraid she has no near relatives, poor girl. I never heard her speak of any."

"But she is continually calling for 'Granny,' Mrs. Hartley says. Her grandmother ought to be here, if she has one. How could we find out?"

Rhoda, who had been sitting silent till then, now looked up and spoke. "Her grandparents live at Leyton, Miss Merivale. They have a shop next door to Aunt Mary's brother. Mr. Smith is a grocer."

Miss Merivale stared at her. "My dear, are you sure?"

"Quite sure," Rhoda answered. "I saw her photograph when I took little Hugh to his uncle's, and they talked a great deal about her. Polly, they call her. She writes to them constantly. They brought her up, and I expect she is really very fond of them."

"But--Rhoda, are you quite sure? Why has she never spoken of them? Do you think she was ashamed of the shop? It must have been that."

"She had no reason to be ashamed," Rhoda answered quietly. "They are dear, good people."

"Poor girl, poor girl!" was all Miss Merivale could say; but Tom, who had brought a telegraph form from the library, asked Rhoda to give him the address.

"I will send this off at once," he said, getting up. "She evidently wants to have her grandmother with her now. She calls continually for her."

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

When the twelve o'clock train stopped at the station next morning two passengers got out--a little old lady dressed with Quaker-like neatness, and a tall, grizzled, sunburnt man with a breezy, open-air look about him.

Tom and the Rector were both waiting on the platform, and hurried up to them. There was good news.

"Your granddaughter is better, Mrs. Smith," the Rector said in his kind voice. "But she may not know you. You must not be alarmed at that. The doctor is much more hopeful this morning, and she calls continually for you. We trust it may soothe her to have you near her."

The tears were streaming fast over Mrs. Smith's wrinkled face. "Polly would never have no one but me to nurse her," she said. "She was always like that from a baby. I came off the first minute I could. Mr. Smith wasn't able to leave the shop, but Mr. Harding came with me. I've never travelled alone in my life, and I'd have lost my way sure enough without him. Mr. Harding's from Australia, sir," she added, looking at Tom, whom she had identified as Mr. Merivale. "And he'd be glad to see Miss Sampson if she's still with Miss Merivale supposing 'twas convenient."

"I am going back to Woodcote now," Tom said, looking at Mr. Harding. He had started violently at the first mention of his name by Mrs. Smith, but he spoke coolly enough. "Will you walk back with me? My aunt will be very glad to see you. Miss Sampson is now at the Rectory, but I am going to fetch her and my sister after lunch."

The Rector's trap was waiting outside, and Mrs. Smith was soon comfortably settled in it. She was too simple and homely to be shy, and it was plain both to the Rector and Tom that her distress at Pauline's accident was largely mingled with delight at the prospect of having her to nurse. She spoke with eagerness to the Rector as they drove off of the time when she could take Polly back with her to Leyton.

"She's a good sort," Mr. Harding said, as he and Tom turned to walk up the hill. "I hope her Polly will soon be better. She is a governess, isn't she? Price told me she didn't spend much time with the old folks."

Tom did not feel called upon to answer this. He was determined to find out at once how much Mr. Harding knew about Rhoda's father and mother. "My aunt and I were talking about you yesterday, Mr. Harding, but we had no idea that you were in England."

Mr. Harding turned his keen black eyes upon him. "No, I only landed last week."

"My aunt has some reason to believe that Miss Sampson is related to her," Tom hurried on. "You knew her father well, I believe?"

Mr. Harding's answer was emphatic. "I should say I did, sir. Poor old Jack and I were boys together. Why, he married a cousin of mine, as good as a sister. And we should have been partners now if he hadn't died. Some people never understood Jack, and after Jenny died he got queerer than ever; but he and I never had a cloud between us."

Tom had stopped still in the road. The ground seemed to be swaying under his feet, and something caught him in the throat so that he could scarcely speak. "Was your cousin Rhoda's mother?" he asked.

"Yes; she was their only child. I knew she was safe and happy with the M'Alisters, or I would have looked after her more. I've no chick nor child of my own, and I mean Rhoda to have a big slice of what I've got to leave."

Tom did not catch the last words clearly. "My aunt's sister married a Mr. James Sampson," he hurried to say. "Was he related to Miss Sampson's father?"

"Ah, that was Jim. He got lost in the bush, poor fellow. He had his girl with him. Yes, he was Jack's brother. They lived close together in Melbourne. I fancy Rhoda was named after Jim's little girl. They were about the same age; but Jenny died when Rhoda was a year old, and Jack left Melbourne for Adelaide."

When Tom and Mr. Harding reached the house, he went hastily in search of his aunt. He found her in her own room, her eyes dim with weeping. She started up at the sight of his face.

"Oh, Tom, what have you come to tell me?"

In a few rapid words he made her understand. "You see how your mistake arose, Aunt Lucy. They both had the same name, Rhoda and Cousin Lydia's little girl. And Cousin Lydia must have given that locket to Rhoda's mother or to Rhoda's father for her when they left Melbourne. But come down and speak to Mr. Harding. There is no need for him to know the mistake you fell into. Let us forget it, Aunt Lucy."

At this, Miss Merivale's tears began to flow afresh. "Oh, Tom, I have told Rhoda."

"You told her? Why did you? I thought we had decided to wait till I had seen Thomson."

"Tom, I could not help it. She was so miserable, poor child. She tried to hide it, but she could not hide it from me. She thought she had offended

you. I do not know what she thought. How could you treat her so differently? Do you think you will get her to forgive you?"

A glimmer of a smile showed itself in Miss Merivale's eyes as she spoke. But Tom could not smile yet.

"Well, you told her," he said. "Did she believe you?"

"I don't know. But she declared that nothing would induce her to claim her rights if she had any. She said there were no proofs, and if she had them she would not produce them. She spoke very strongly, Tom."

Tom made no answer for a moment. "She has gone to the Rectory?" he said then.

"Yes, she was anxious to go. But she is going to walk home across the downs. I think she was anxious to avoid you, Tom. No wonder! How could you make her so unhappy?"

Tom did not point out that he had been far more unhappy, and that it was all Miss Merivale's fault. He looked at his aunt, giving her now back smile for smile. "Aunt Lucy, will you go and fetch Rose?" he said.

Rose was delighted to see her aunt in the carriage when she ran out to meet it.

"Rhoda did not think you would be able to come, Aunt Lucy. Were you very much frightened when you heard about it? Poor Rhoda looks quite ill. But Pauline is really better. She has slept since her grandmother came. She knew her directly, and has held her hand tight ever since. Poor old lady, she is so fond of her."

"I wish we could move her to Woodcote," Miss Merivale said. "I must speak to the doctor about it. I will go and see Mrs. Prance for a moment, Rosie darling. And then we will go home. Oh, my darling, I am so thankful!"

She held Rose close to her, and kissed her once or twice before she let her go. Till that moment she had hardly been able to realise her happiness in having Rose safe.

Rose began to talk again of Pauline as they were driving home. "How strange she could be so silent about her grandmother and yet be so fond of her, Aunt Lucy! Or do you think that she is only fond of her when she wants her? She was calling for her over and over again all last night."

"I expect she is really fond of her, dear. As fond as she can be of anybody. I don't wish to speak harshly of her, Rose, and we will do all we can for her. But you must not live with her again. Not because her grandmother is Mrs. Smith," added Miss Merivale quickly, afraid that Rose might misunderstand her. "It isn't that. Rhoda's people are in the same rank of life as the Smiths, yet Rhoda is a true gentlewoman."

"Aunt Lucy, I could not live with Pauline again," Rose said earnestly. "Besides, I want to live at home. I believe I shall loathe the thought of a flat as long as I live. Pauline has effectually cured me of my desire to live in one."

"She and Mrs. Smith must come to stay with us as soon as she can be moved," Miss Merivale said. "Perhaps this illness will make her see things differently, Rosie. Let us hope so."

"Rhoda knew all the time," Rose said, after a moment's pause. "Poor Pauline, how angry she would have been if she had guessed it! If I had been Rhoda, I should have told her."

"We should not have known where to telegraph if it had not been for Rhoda. Her uncle--Mr. M'Alister's brother, I mean--has a shop next door to Mr. Price. It was he who told Mr. Harding that Rhoda was with us. I fancy he was rather distressed to find that she was not with Mrs. M'Alister. But I think I have convinced him that we have taken good care of her."

Tom and Mr. Harding were outside the porch together when the carriage drew up. While Mr. Harding talked to Rose, Tom drew his aunt aside.

"Aunt Lucy, will you go up to Rhoda?" he whispered.

She gave him one shining look, and went quickly in.

Rhoda had heard the carriage enter, and was standing in the middle of the room when Miss Merivale softly knocked and entered. There was a tremulous, eager, anxious look in the girl's face. Happy as she was, she could not be quite happy till she was sure Miss Merivale was content.

But it was only a tiny shadow of doubt that clouded the brightness, and when Miss Merivale clasped her close, and kissed her as fondly and tenderly as she had kissed Rose a little while before, it nearly all fled away.

"My dear, I am delighted," Miss Merivale said, with happy tears in her voice. "Tom has always been like a son to me, and now you will be my daughter."

"And you are not sorry you asked me here?" Rhoda whispered. She felt she must ask the question once.

"Ask Tom if he thinks I am sorry," returned Miss Merivale, kissing her again. And this was answer enough. Rhoda doubted no more.

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